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## "Species Commons": Bishnupriya Ghosh in Conversation with Amit R. Baishya

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# “Species Commons”: Bishnupriya Ghosh in Conversation with Amit R. Baishya

## Introduction:

Bishnupriya Ghosh is Professor of English and Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her first two monographs were on cultures of globalization: *When Borne Across: Cosmopolitics in the Contemporary Indian Novel* (2004) and *Global Icons: Apertures to the Popular* (2011). She has also co-edited *Interventions: Feminist Dialogues on Third World Women’s Literature and Film* (1996) and *The Routledge Companion to Media and Risk* (2020). The latter represents a turn to thinking about media, risk, and globalization. Since this inaugural issue of *Critical Humanities* focuses on pandemics, the editorial board of the online journal felt that Professor Ghosh’s forthcoming book *The Virus Touch: Theorizing Epidemic Media* (2023) would be an important text for discussion and for an interview-cum-feature. While I haven’t had the opportunity to read the manuscript of *The Virus Touch*, this interview is based on five essays by Professor Ghosh that are congruent to the issues explored in the forthcoming monograph. These five essays are: “Towards Symbiosis: Human-Viral Futures in the ‘Molecular Movies’” (2016), “The Costs of Living:

Reflections of Global Health Crises” (2020), “Becoming Undetectable in the Chthulucene” (2021), “Of Liquid Images and Vital Flux” (2021), and “The Sanguineous Imaginary: The Afterlives of Blood” (2022). While Ghosh’s essays deal largely with the HIV/AIDS pandemic and its afterlives, they have a lot of relevance for an analysis of the current conjuncture where COVID, and now Monkey Pox, has had a global impact. In what follows, I will discuss the major themes that connect Ghosh’s essays and provides a peek into what we may expect from *The Virus Touch*.

In *Society Must be Defended*, Michel Foucault recasts racism as the element that serrates the field of biopower’s calculative rationality—“the break between what must live and what must die” (254). This key Foucauldian insight becomes the central node for Ghosh’s focus on “the distributive logic inherent in articulations of health security regimes as a modern form of power over biological existence” (“The Costs of Living,” 60). “Costs of Living” though shifts the focus from biopower’s calculative rationalities to consider how “*crisis* as the governing epistemology of health emergencies habitually reinforces that rationality” (60). This focus on crisis and the

serration in the field of biopower facilitates an interrogation of the narrative of a unitary human subject eternally at “war” against microbial hordes. The notion of “public good” is produced and reproduced by a distributive logic of security. To illustrate this point, Ghosh focuses on the case of Manipur in India’s northeastern borderlands. While India’s management of the epidemic has been lauded globally, Manipur remains in a perpetual state of exception, both in the continuation of a draconian state security law—the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act)—and in the distributive logic of global and national health regimes (Manipur has among the highest number of HIV positive cases in India).<sup>1</sup> Located in drug-trafficking routes of the Golden Triangle, a combination of the widespread availability and use of drugs, suspicion and surveillance of the local populations by both state and non-state sovereign entities, and the frequent interruptions of commodities (including antiretroviral medicine) from the mainland due to perpetually continuing conditions of low-intensity warfare leads to Manipur being in a permanent state of crisis, both at the levels of state security and of public health. For the socially vulnerable segments of the population, the continuation of this permanent state of crisis often means a foreclosure of the future. However, the permanence of crisis also enabled a different form of compensatory intervention and alternative imaginations of futurity by activist groups like MNP+ (Manipur Network of Positive People) and Care

<sup>1</sup>AFSPA is a state security law that was enacted in 1958 in Manipur, but has been used in other borderland spaces like Nagaland and Kashmir. As an emergency law, AFSPA merges military and policing

Foundation that enable a different sort of narrative configuration focusing on personal and communal losses emerging from the topoi and moments of crisis. Ghosh writes:

When this second “calculus” of personal and communal loss overtakes the first, we witness a shift in the terms in which we narrate crises. The ground of the “health crisis” is no longer *eternal microbial-human war* but willful politics of making die. The call is for policies and programs that ensure such thanatopolitics has no place in the future of public health. The re-narration of the HIV/AIDS epidemics has achieved just this in all kinds of fabulous ways all over the world. Those achievements are localized, often singular, and the interventions are not always portable. Yet they signal the horizon for what is to be done for communities living with HIV/AIDS. (71, italics mine)

Indeed, we can say that “re-narration” is one of the central tasks that Ghosh sets for herself in the essays. This is evident in her renarrativization of viral ontology.

“To live,” philosopher Emanuele Coccia writes, “is essentially to live the life of another... There is a sort of parasitism, a universal cannibalism, that belongs to the domain of the living: it feeds off itself, without realizing that it needs other forms and modes of existence” (7). Nowhere is this insight more applicable than the host-virus relationship which can simultaneously be one of parasitism (oftentimes deadly) and of sympoiesis. I italicized “eternal microbial-human war” in Ghosh’s paragraph above because popular discourse on viruses (Latin for poison) often

functions and suspends civil rule. See Baruah for detailed discussions of the AFSPA, especially in the context of Northeast India.

figures these “microontologies” (Hird) as absolute enemies against which society must be defended. However, Ghosh explores the complex ontology of microbial forms in her essays. I cite here a long paragraph from my essay “Gastropods, Viruses and Deep Time” that discusses the ambiguous ontology of viruses:

Viruses, strictly speaking, are not villains opposed to life but are symbionts that have “a semiautonomous relation to other life forms” (Van Loon, “Parasite Politics” 242–43). A kind of “membraneless DNA,” often enclosed in a protein or lipid cover, a virus cannot “reproduce itself without the participation of the host cell’s mass of membranes” (Hoffmeyer 32).

Biologist Luis Villareal summarizes the ambivalent positioning of viruses between life and nonlife and its status as parasite:

Viruses are inherently nonautonomous symbiotic molecular parasites. . . parasites inherently challenge our views of autonomy. Viruses are parasitic to essentially all biomolecular aspects of life. Thus. . . we might conclude viruses are simply nonliving parasites of living metabolic systems. But life can also be thought of as a potential for continued life, not simply ongoing metabolism. A metabolically active sac, devoid of genetic potential for propagation, is not considered alive. Thus, a seed might not be considered alive but might be considered to have maintained in a “nonliving” state the potential for life. This potential is itself born from a living cell. However, a seed can also be destroyed or killed. In this regard, viruses resemble seeds more than live cells. They have a certain living potential, and they can be killed, but they do not attain the more autonomous state of life. Some have referred to this situation as a “kind of borrowed life.” (ix)

Although there are debates about the role that forms of “borrowed life” play in the evolutionary process, the study of these

entities has shifted focus to symbiogenesis. As in the paradox of parasites, viruses can have both positive (a symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship between “host” and “guest”) and negative (the pathogen matrix) connotations. In “Parasite Politics,” Van Loon writes that viral symbiosis has an ambiguous quality. Taking place at the level of “genetic coding,” it changes the “coding of its hosts; those whom it protects, as well as those whom it destroys” (245)

Ghosh’s exploration of this ambiguous ontology in her essays has ramifications both for discourses on the Anthropocene and for multispecies scholarship. These features come out clearly in “Becoming Undetectable” and “Towards Symbiosis.” In terms of the deep timescales of the planet, viruses can be viewed as “residues” from distant pasts where they had “replicated and saturated their hosts” (“Becoming Undetectable,” 168). Viral emergencies are “complex multitemporal planetary events” that occur when planetary disturbances are spurred by anthropogenic activity. In such cases, zoonotic viruses skip species barriers and cause widespread pandemics such as HIV or COVID. Viruses thus are like “subterranean Chthulu” (a term Ghosh borrows from Donna Haraway) that forge new multispecies relationships. However, because viruses are obligate parasites, it is not in their interest to completely saturate their hosts. As Ghosh writes: “In reservoir hosts, they find a biological balance; in others, therapeutic technological interventions predicated on “living with” viruses make vital mediums mutually sustainable for host and microbe. The viral load test (for HIV) that monitors human and viral distribution of

matter modifies the impact of disturbances for both species” (169). A focus on saturation, thus, enables understanding of “phase changes in matter” (177). Media technologies like the viral load test make elemental substances like blood readable and assist in the management of the virus—a form of living-with or what Ghosh calls “multispecies accommodation” (175). Contrary to popular accounts of the “conquest” of the virus-as-enemy (Ronald Ross heroically conquering the malaria virus, for instance), managing the pandemic is more a case of multispecies accommodation. We are hopefully witnessing COVID-19 going the same way.

One important way in which multispecies accommodation in the sense discussed above can be imagined and achieved is via visualization through media. In “Toward Symbiosis,” Ghosh looks at “molecular movies”—3-D visualizations of microbes and molecules borne out of the collaboration academic researchers, biotech corporations and digital animators. Ghosh calls these “molecular movies” instances of “sustainable media” as they can help repair unsustainable human-virus relationships. Molecular level repair allied with the regeneration of the host’s vital capacities can have both short and long-term benefits. In the short-term, it enhances a patient’s chances at living longer; in the long-term, it can alter organismic relationships in terms of multispecies accommodation. Through such digital visualizations, the virus can be “disarticulated into biological substrates to be altered, cut, snipped, and manipulated; it is no longer a foreign submicroscopic particle to be destroyed and eradicated” (238). Pathogenesis could possibly

give way to symbiosis. While Ghosh tantalizingly provides a fleeting trailer of coming attractions in *The Virus Touch*—“the ecological conception of the virus marks an epistemic shift toward living symbiotically with microbes that has been underway in the last thirty years” (242)—she ends the essay with a strain of cautious techno-optimism, as she addresses the question of the Anthropocene:

Thinking at the close of the Anthropocene...that has radically interrupted and refashioned natural processes, microbiologists and evolutionary biologists are more than ever aware of the need to arrest destructive practices (e.g., the introduction of invasive plants that lead to biotic homogenization) and to repair, even engineer, sustainable ecologies, wherever possible (e.g., the bioengineered restoration of coral reefs). The hope is that such technological intervention will slow down the destruction of planetary systems, from the geologic to microbiologic. Seen in this light, the molecular movies are one stage in the biomedical and biotechnological repair of human-virus relations, processes of mediation constitutive of human intervention into pathogenesis. As sustainable media, they work toward symbiotic futures: at best, mutually beneficial partnerships, and, at worst, uneasy truce with hitherto pathogenic viruses. (243-44)

The focus on mediatic images of viruses is extended from a consideration of sustainability to that of the marvelous in “Of Liquid Images.” Consider, for instance, the iconic image of SARS-COV2—a spiked orb circling host cells. This is a molecular visualization that enables us to apprehend what remains invisible or unseen. These malleable and evolving “liquid images” of COVID or of HIV constitute speculative endeavors at visualizing virus-host relationships. Ghosh says that such “moving images are vital media whose irreducible vitality is most evident in

their *liquid* character” (174). Such technical-aesthetic mediations syncopate vast amounts of data into a comprehensible image and makes such data “cohere as a single insight, a process that statistician and artist Edward Tufte...named ‘de-quantification’” (174). Borrowing from Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska, Ghosh argues that in such mediations, “life” appears as “life itself.” These mediations are actually “cuts” or a snapshot in the vital flow of living processes. But just as the liquid image syncopates a vast amount of data, it also provides an apprehensible snapshot of vital life processes. Adapting Akira Mizuta Lippit’s concept of the “optical fantastic” (for instance, the visualization of the splitting of the atom), Ghosh describes such images of virus-host emergences the “molecular fantastic.” As she writes: “With advanced imaging technologies, in scientific edutainment, we are in the domain of the marvelous: a molecular fantastic...” (174). Her study of molecular visualizations of viral macromolecules gives us a taste of the “epidemic media” that she explores in the forthcoming book, *The Virus Touch*. Virus images objectify and distil *one* multispecies relation—such as Sars-Cov2 and human—so as to prepare it for targeted intervention. In this way, epidemic media direct and shape our responses to epidemics as multiscalar cascading crisis-events.

Besides intervening in analyses of global biopolitics, microontologies, the Anthropocene, sustainable media and multispecies scholarship, Ghosh’s work also engages with recent considerations of biomedica and elemental media. I already mentioned how Ghosh draws on the pioneering work of Kember and

Zylińska (and Eugene Thacker’s *Biomedica*). She also draws on the pathbreaking work of John Durham Peters in *Marvelous Clouds*. Peters argues that elemental substances like water and air become storehouses of readable data and that technical media enable an interface with elemental substances that can, in turn, enable readings of human, nonhuman and inhuman traces. Consider here how geomorphological instruments enable a reading of the lithic record, a point emphasized by Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor in *Anthropocene Reading*. The two key essays where Ghosh reads bodily fluids, especially blood, as “planetary media” are “The Sanguineous Imaginary” and “Becoming Undetectable.” As she writes in “The Sanguineous Imaginary”:

Arguably, bodily fluids—blood, semen, saliva, vaginal/rectal secretions, and now respiratory mucosa—made by the molar bodies have restricted circulation. Blood cannot survive for long outside the body, for instance. But almost always, these fluids exceed the molar boundaries whether by human habits (sex, breathing, eating) or ecosystems actors (mosquitos, ticks). The COVID-19 pandemic management’s struggle to establish a standardized spatial boundary of six feet around droplets in our breath has brought home the circulation of body fluids as uncontainable *planetary* media. (43-44).

While human-virus cohabitations reveal that an individuated body is actually an ecosystem, such circulations of vital mediums like blood also shatter the imaginary of the autonomous, self-contained body—a shibboleth so central to the liberal imagination—and replaces corporealities “within social and ecological relationalities” (43). This focus on corporeal permeability and ecological

relationality also enables Ghosh to move beyond considerations of the biopolitics of “making live and letting die” which was the central focus of “The Costs of Living.” Juxtaposing the blood paintings of Robert Sherer and laboratory processes of blood storage outside the body as forms of technical-aesthetic mediation, Ghosh writes:

My goal is to illuminate multispecies distributions through the transit of blood beyond its original site of production. The processes of technical mediation that enables blood to live on outside the body locates us in structural relations that may not be readily evident in discrete painting or sample. But if we take a closer look at how technological apparatuses and cultural techniques detect and compose blood, we encounter the inimical transitivity of blood. That transitivity places us in social and ecological relations that traverse the permeable space of the molar body. (47)

This breakdown in the imaginary of self-contained molar bodies is most evident during pandemics when mediums like air or blood become almost palpable, perceptible and visible, as viral transfers breach the boundaries of bodies (54). In this respect, blood that is denatured in the laboratory and archived as a vital medium becomes a repository where we can read a history of human-viral interactions. Concomitantly, the afterlife of blood in aesthetic productions like Robert Sherer’s paintings also function as archival records and repositories of memory. As Ghosh writes luminously: “As works of mourning, Sherer intentionally mounts a collective archive of HIV+ and HIV– blood as a “species common” that is constantly permeable. The bursting seeds, the tumid plant organs, and the insect swarm (all subjects of Sherer’s paintings) all index planetary circulations of

vital mediums” (18, emendations in brackets mine). The medium of blood as a “species common” or as Ghosh says in the interview “planetary connective tissue”—this, for me, is a resonant and powerful way of practicing planetary thinking.

**Questions (This interview was conducted via email):**

**Amit R. Baishya (ARB): Your first book was on literary cosmopolitics in Indian fiction. The second book was on visual popular culture and the global. What drew you to your third project on viruses and media? Do you notice any connections that link your three projects?**

Bishnupriya Ghosh (BG): When I started my graduate studies at Northwestern University, postcolonial criticism and theory, forming alliances with black feminism, critical race studies, and Marxism was beginning to explode: the *Critical Inquiry* “Race, Writing, and Difference” issue (1985), for example, contoured a new game plan for literary studies. My early writings were about postcolonial English, vernacular literatures, and national cultures. But by the time I was writing my first book (*When Borne Across*, 2004), it had become impossible to write about “Indian literature in English” without looking at the literary markets afforded by India’s trade liberalization of 1991. This literature was a global commodity along with its celebrity authors. Nor were novels primarily in the hands of reading constituencies. *Satanic Verses* was read from the pulpit, *Beloved* mediated by Oprah’s book club. The multimodal global

circulation of literary products initiated an abiding agenda in global media studies, and this has remained at the core of my research until today: my current book, *The Virus Touch: Theorizing Epidemic Media* (forthcoming 2023) tracks how epidemic media from blood tests to imaging the virus shapes and directs what we understand to be a global pandemic.

But your question is: how did I get from the study of literature to the study of viral epidemics? I'd say that, at every stage, pushing against certain limits of textual analysis and historical research has led me towards increasing interdisciplinarity. Moreover, if from the start, postcolonial studies embedded scholars in macro-historical forces (empires, capital, migration, etc.), my work as a humanist compelled me to consider how differentially situated communities "experience" large-scale global processes such as India's trade liberalization, the global "war on terror," or the HIV/AIDS pandemic. What was the shaping role of media in encountering the global? How does the global become medially apprehensible?

In imagining political communities, postcolonial literary studies always questioned the limits of elite forms of writing and their production of social imaginaries. In my first book, I engaged the vernacularizing of English by Indian writers as a *situated cosmopolitanics* deeply cognizant of writing in the colonial language. Writing about Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra and others already meant I had to chart the thorny question of literary celebrity, placing

me at the interface of the high literary and popular culture. At UC Santa Barbara, a multiyear collaborative project (the Subaltern-Popular) deepened my interest in the *popular iconicity* of figures like Roy, and the force of their affective and sensory charge. The medial capacities of these icons placed me at the edge of the written word: world-making was not only "in" these texts but orchestrated "through" them in the lively media cultures. Pursuing the limits of writing, I found fertile home among scholars not confined to their discipline—scholars in visual studies, media studies, feminist studies, queer studies, postcolonial studies, all those formations that, in seeking the illegible, the partial, the repressed, looked beyond the written word. Thinking along with Feminist South Asia scholars (another UC-based collaborative network), I moved more surely into the study of global media cultures in my second book, *Global Icons* (2011). The world-making project that was ever the preoccupation of postcolonial studies directed the research question: How did global icons like Mother Teresa and Arundhati Roy mediate practices of political community? What was the role of affect in encountering these media? This line of thought remains resonant in my current research on the global as emergence: my collaborator, Bhaskar Sarkar and I launched the "Global-Popular" project in 2016, and the workshops have yielded a special issue of *Cultural Critique* on "global-popular cinema" as frameworks for thinking media practices of the global South. I continue to write on populism, affect, and media with two research networks: the Global Emergent Media Lab, Concordia University, directed by Joshua

Neves and the Center for Transnational Studies, Northwestern University directed by Dilip Gaonkar—both focused on media theory and politics.

But how did I get to viruses? In the early 2000s, while finishing *Global Icons*, the war on terror preoccupied postcolonial theorists struggling to make sense of new modes of racialized Islamophobia. Central to these modes was a *risk calculus* that sorted and segregated populations, criminalizing particular bodies in the name of security. Surveillance technologies were critical to this risk distribution and new imperial forms constantly exacerbated global inequities. Strikingly, while risk as coming harm, as the capture of futures, was everywhere in the social sciences, not much had been done in the humanities. In 2005, Bhaskar Sarkar (who had a background in economics) and I convened a project on risk, uncertainty, and speculation: we convened a residency, “Speculative Globalities,” at the University of California Humanities Institute to analyze *mediations* of risk—this was the basis of a co-edited volume, *The Routledge Companion to Media and Risk*, 2020. For my contribution to *Speculative Globalities*, I was looking at “biological risk” as it constituted the epidemic experience—specifically, the experience of living chronically with HIV/AIDS in the United States, South Africa, and South Asia (three nations/regions with the highest toll early in that pandemic crisis). One might recall that my generation had lost many before the antiretrovirals appeared in 1995. What began as an essay on HIV/AIDS global media soon became something else as I started to dig

deeper: how did people across the world “encounter” HIV infection? What did the political adage “living with HIV” really mean for different communities with uneven access to therapeutics? Since epidemics are only apprehensible medially, what “epidemic media” constituted living with HIV?

Since the nineties, the anthropologists, political theorists, and historians (especially those writing in the influential *Public Culture* millennial volumes) had deeply shaped my thinking. So, for the new book, I started on familiar ground by reading global cultural anthropology and cultural criticism—scholars like Melinda Cooper, Kaushik Sunder Rajan, Stephen Collier, Andrew Lakoff, and Priscilla Wald, all relevant to encountering viral emergences. It was 2009-2010, and little did I know I would have to finish the book amid another global pandemic. As I began to research “living with HIV,” I fell deeper into the three sciences of the virus (virology, immunology, and epidemiology) to understand better the question of mediation: what exactly did it mean to live with HIV? In the post-retroviral era, HIV infection had become a chronic disease lived in the privacy of the doctor’s office, and the normative global history of AIDS was one of biomedical triumph. But from my postcolonial optic, I remained invested in differentials—this time, in the global biomedical project of pandemic management. Looking at viral ontologies, I asked how these were “lived” medially: for example, what was the status of blood test results? As epidemic media, blood tests tell us we have  $x$  viral particles in  $y$  ml blood. Such mediation plucks the virus from the greater relations and processes that constitute it, rendering it

as epistemic object at clinical scale. How does this technical-aesthetic compositions direct the epidemic experience? These questions inspired my current work on epidemic media.

**ARB: The essays that you have written on viruses required fieldwork. You went to Manipur in Northeast India. You also interviewed molecular cell biologists like Janet Iwasa and artists like Robert Sherer, besides doing participant observation in the Retrovirus Lab at the University of Washington. You are primarily a literary, media and cultural critic—did fieldwork pose any major challenges for you? Did you train yourself specifically for that as fieldwork depends on certain protocols that are different from close reading or literary/cultural history? How do you see these different disciplinary protocols interact with and complicate each other?**

BG: Anthropologists—from Melinda Cooper to Anna Tsing—have been inspiring as guides and interlocutors, but I am not formally “trained” in ethnography as such. My situated research which includes informal interviews rather than deep ethnography became a habit because my research sites are the global South. For *Global Icons*, I had very few formal archives; more often than not, I found I had to marshal my own, drawing from multiple, fragmented sources, even as I analyzed them as archival finds. For instance, I went to the Mother House in Kolkata to dig further into the (partially obscure) history of Mother Teresa’s departure from the Loreto order. I found leads—people knew people knew people—through interviews and conversations.

The interviews were crucial textual forms as were the media sources that interviewees directed me to in the absence of formal archives. For *The Virus Touch*, I had embarked on tracing how people “lived with AIDS” differentially despite the streamlined implementation of antiretroviral therapies by global institutions (the World Health Organization, UNAIDS), NGOs (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) and national programs (India’s National AIDS Control Programme or NACO, for instance). I found that the successes of HIV/AIDS control habitually relied on the social trust garnered by small-scale, community-based, sometimes grassroots, organizations because of the stigma attached to HIV infection. These organizations had no archives, and fewer records of their contributions to implementing life-saving antiretroviral compliance. How then could I track the epidemic media of such organizations especially since they serve socially vulnerable communities?

The Manipur research was an early entry point into the complexity of the Indian story. As you know, Manipur (like Kashmir) has been under emergency rule for decades, and as a border state (with Myanmar) it had one of the highest rates of infection nationally. HIV infection was predominantly related to drug use; and, as I have written elsewhere, the HIV infected often chose not to disclose their sero-status fearing repercussions from insurgent groups and the Indian military. So, I chose to interview a few grassroots organizations (through activist networks) to get a sense of what “living with HIV” looked like on the ground. Some were willing to talk media, of course, but thought—as many others I

interviewed in the project—that “media” meant public safety messaging about HIV/AIDS. MNP+ told me that, since many of their constituencies flew under the radar, “media” was word-of-mouth or underground digital channels. This was precisely the media condition *not trackable* without onsite visits, without interviews, without observation. You could say, my approach has always been to *find my way into mediascapes* that do not circulate widely but that engage global norms and protocols, institutions and infrastructures. In part, the book has taken awhile to write because I have crafted an archive driven by the commitment to community-based organizations that have made the projected “end of AIDS” possible. The book’s architecture represents these intentional politics yoked to the massive distributed endeavor of “living with HIV.”

A second part of informal interviews and participant observation has been to train myself in the fields of study salient to viral emergence. The Latin root for “emergence” (*emergere*) signifies something *new* (unprecedented) and something *that appears*. My lab visits, for instance, gave me a chance to understand how the epidemic *made an appearance* as molecular or clinical event, how images are technically made, how blood was processed. As a media scholar, the technical-aesthetic dimensions were more my comfort zone. In this sense, my training is evident in my analytic focus. My study of blood, for example, is not an ethnography of a lab; there is great work of this kind in anthropology (e.g. Janet Carsten’s *Blood Work: Life and Laboratories in Penang*). For the interviews, I wrote

whatever could be published without human subjects training: nothing confidential, all published and circulated materials. As faculty in Global Studies (in the Social Sciences Division at UC Santa Barbara), my students have to undergo human subjects training before venturing into fieldwork. So, my situated studies are of a different order: they are to make archives and to learn from trained professionals rather than to report and interpret what I see. Media—the image, the medium, the movement—are still at the heart of my analyses of epidemic media.

**ARB: In “The Sanguineous Imaginary,” you write—“My exploration of technical-aesthetic mediation as it inscribes and fabricates vital mediums draws on expansions of the media concept in science-and-technology and environmental media studies” (44). Could you tell us a little more about the affinities that your work shares with the “expansion of the media concept,” especially since elements like water (Melody Jue), clouds (John Peters), technofossils and geological matter (Jussi Parikka) etc., and also bodily corporealities, like those of insects (Jussi Parikka) and cetaceans (John Peters), are now being considered for their properties and qualities of mediation? How does your work on “vital mediums” like blood draw upon and diverge from these critical trajectories?**

BG: As I have been suggesting, the impetus of the book was to look at the uneven distribution of biological risk across the world (the US west coast, Mumbai, Cape Town as the sites). But as I probed deeper into the

technoscientific capture of viral emergence and the abiding problem of the perpetual pandemic, I knew I was looking at an environmental disaster. One of the main arguments in *The Virus Touch* is to pose epidemics as not “health events” that galvanize short term solutions—be those therapies and prophylactics, pesticides or herbicides, the post-World War II “DDT strategy” whose consequences are well documented; but to understand epidemics as environmental crises whose drivers are anthropogenic. Changing land use, deforestation, extractive mining, illegal wildlife trading, for example, increase human-wildlife encounters to create the “conditions of pathogenicity,” the conditions for zoonotic spillovers that account for 71.3% of disease emergences/re-emergences. (There are new reports that track COVID to the wet market in Wuhan and its unregulated trade that flouted safeguards put in place post-SARS). This modality of planetary health positions epidemics (slow or acute) as ongoing and perpetual “catastrophes” for large parts of the world. What had started as a book on bio- and medical media became a study in environmental media.

Here is where environmental media theory becomes foundational to the question of epidemic media. Even when composed at clinical scales, epidemic media are far more than their technical-aesthetic compositions—the viral image, the numeric distribution—suggest. The current expansions in the media concept that you mention were crucial inspirations. A new virus interfaces with a new host because of the elemental and vital mediums that carry it, for viruses do not have locomotion; they must hitch a ride on media.

*Interview*

To think of epidemic media, then, is to think of air and water, blood and breath, alongside their technical mediation in aesthetic forms (visualizations of sneezes, for instance, in the early months of COVID-19). Like no other, the COVID-19 pandemic brought home the *intensive* movement of air/breath *within* molar bodies, before the exit of droplets, drying as aerosolized particulates, drifting in the air *in-between*. As the vital medium (respiratory mucosa) transmuted into an elemental one (droplets and particles in air), air/breath’s endemic transitivity made it perceptible as the premiere risk environment for the current pandemic experience. In posing epidemic media as both infection’s ontological milieu as well as all the technical-aesthetic composition of the milieu into a risk environment straddles environmental media and science-and-technology studies: I engage scholars like Yuriko Furahata, John Durham Peters, Melody Jue, Rahul Mukherjee, Jussi Parrika as well as Sarah Kember and Johanna Zylinska, Stefan Helmreich, Hannah Landecker, Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour. There are many others, especially the medical anthropologists, but I’ll keep to the media theorists to address your inquiry.

It is worth mentioning that, in environmental media studies, there is a rather orthodox take on the place of the biological. No doubt the geological holds pride of place in the crucible of climate change. In contrast, the biological is seen to privilege “life” at the cost of “non-life,” with deadly consequences; such differentiation further cuts against the grain of larger planetary processes and relations. And yet the biosciences, as Stefan Helmreich has maintained, has virtually abandoned

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biological individualism on a planet where organisms eat, excrete, digest, mingle, and merge constantly. As a border object, a dormant form that “comes alive” when it perceives the opportunity to replicate, the virus muddies the biological-geological divide: these are ancient forms living in planetary biogeological matrices. When we think of viral disease emergence, we pluck out “the virus”—*variola*, HIV, Sars-CoV2—from the larger ecological processes and relations that constitute it. We render it as “life” that threatens other “living species” (plants and animals). This is why epidemic media is environmental media. Epidemic media offers a conceptual apparatus for analyzing *how we make epistemic objects*, differentiating them as species, as the times and spaces of infection. What appears as the risk environment? Is it animal media? Is it soil or air? Is it blood or stool? When composed in technical-aesthetic forms, these media become biological targets of intervention. Thinking about epidemic media, then, opens us to how we experience epidemics in furious accelerated time—and how that experience consequently directs our actions.

**ARB: Let me begin with a quotation from the latter portion of “Cost of Living”:**

State-run Programs secure life as it determines economic productivity and political stability; the costs are unevenly distributed and that distribution is masked through the liberal fiction of the “people of Manipur.” The activist health-care networks, however, organize life around another kind of cost: personal and communal losses. The head of MNP+, for instance, started the outfit with five other HIV positive friends, one of whom did not survive the crisis. Here, too, the costs are

experientially uneven, but they cannot be split, sorted, and distributed; in short, they are incalculable. When this second “calculus” of personal and communal loss overtakes the first, we witness a shift in the terms in which we narrate crises. The ground of the “health crisis” is no longer eternal microbial-human war but willful politics of making die. The call is for policies and programs that ensure such thanatopolitics has no place in the future of public health. The re-narration of the HIV/AIDS epidemics has achieved just this in all kinds of fabulous ways all over the world. Those achievements are localized, often singular, and the interventions are not always portable. Yet they signal the horizon for what is to be done for communities living with HIV/AIDS. (71)

**I have two questions that focus specifically on two different narratives embedded in this quote. The first is the statist which is an unevenly distributed political rationality based on calculation. Furthermore, the metaphor of “eternal human-microbial war,” which is usually the public and very anthropocentric perspective on the virus as “enemy,” merges with what Achille Mbembe would call the toxic “concatenation of multiple powers: disciplinary, the biopolitical and the necropolitical” (29), in a state of exception like Manipur. You contrast this narrative with that of groups like MNP+ who shift ground to the “willful politics of making die.” You also go on to suggest that these achievements are “localized, often singular” but signal a certain achievable horizon for communities living with HIV/AIDS. Since I find this gesture towards alternative narratives one of the most productive dimensions of your work, could you elaborate about this initial contrast of narrative.**

BG: Thanks for this question: it returns us to the global politics of “living with HIV” that drove my research for *The Virus Touch*. There is a key contradiction in viral emergence obtaining between the levelling agencies of biological agents and the uneven social distributions of therapeutics and prophylactics. We know this contradiction well in its tragic replays during COVID-19. No doubt SARS-CoV2 is an equal opportunity agent; therefore, the return of the “invisible enemy” trope pitching “the virus” against “the human.” But it is equally clear that the most vulnerable human communities bear the greatest risk: in the sorry tales of uneven vaccine distribution, of failing health infrastructures, of the biopolitical purge of dispensable populations (exemplified in India’s million migrant march, April 2020) epidemic histories return as farce. These differences make nonsense of flat ontologies. In the “Cost of Living” essay I was getting at the necropolitical Indian state operations in Manipur vis-à-vis HIV/AIDS exacerbated as it is by the political exception of emergency rule. When the HIV/AIDS epidemic broke in the nineties, the infected and the so-called infected were rounded up and thrown into HIV cells. This why the HIV-affected underground—something that community-based organizations like MNP+ try to address in their outreach. Contra the state’s pathological narrative, these self-directed HIV+ organizers not only render access to antiretroviral therapies but provide means for lifestyle changes—exercise, diet, social networks. In doing so, they perform what decolonial theorist, Michelle Murphy characterizes as “life otherwise,” a point I’ll elaborate shortly.

Interview

ARB: I italicized “living with” in the previous question because it seems to me that you are moving to a different inflection of this term in essays like “Becoming Undetectable” and “Towards Symbiosis.” Let me quote another passage, this time from “Becoming Undetectable,” where this difference becomes apparent:

Parasitism with potentially deadly pathogens poses special difficulty to empathetic relations between species, an aspiration that dominates multispecies environmentalisms. Microbes are not large, charismatic animals, and aggressive parasites threaten social paradigms of kinship that underwrite the call to empathetic relations. The pathogenic parasite puts species survival on the table in no uncertain terms: the virus is that Cthulu-like thing, as Donna Haraway theorizes it in *Staying with Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene...* that has always already been in the earth’s geological matrices. Its suddenly intensified actions mandate artful symposiosis. As Anna Tsing and Haraway variously suggest, the artfulness of technological interventions is not “against nature,” but the necessary repair of biological, geological, and atmospheric damage. Amid blasted planetary ruins, even “the most promising oasis of natural plenty requires massive intervention.” The question is: Which natural and social disturbances can we live with? (164).

This, for me, is a key passage where you shift the gravity away from the metaphor of war and the virus as “enemy” to the more productive optic of thinking of living with viruses as a form of multispecies cohabitation, as “artful symposiosis” in Haraway’s terms. Could you tell us a little more about this inflection of living with microontologies as it comes back in various forms in

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**your essays—the control of saturation and the segment on the viral load test in “Becoming Undetectable,” the discussion of “sustainable media” in “Towards Symbiosis” and so on?**

BG: “Toward Symbiosis” was an early invited essay in which I was trying to work through the post-World War II “war on germs” strategy that has such severe consequences. Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is the obvious example as are the cancerous effects of pesticides. With the recent outbreak of monkey pox (hailing from the same *orthopox* family as the causative agent for small-pox), some scientists argue that the eradication of one virus might well open the door to others filling the niche. This throws a wrench in the story of global medical triumphalism in which the eradication of smallpox in 1978 holds pride of place. Against the wreckers and exterminators, viral emergence from the perspective of planetary health means we will have to live with viruses (we always have); what has changed are the aforementioned anthropogenic drivers of pathogenicity. Scholars like Eva Giraud, Jamie Lorimer, among others, have called for new strategies to “re-entangle” those “flourishing creatures” (pests and pathogens) that proliferate as their host wanes; entanglement is not an embrace of all creatures but a calibrated multispecies politics.

Ultimately, to address known conditions of pathogenicity is “artful sympoeisis,” in Donna Haraway’s terms. This can include everything from building buffer zones for wildlife to forage, reducing human-wildlife contact, to living on chronic medication (like

the HIV antiretrovirals) to ameliorate virulence. “Symbiosis” can signal evolutionary change, since it is not in the interest of viruses to kill their hosts; the most successful ones evolve toward an acceptable sharing of resources. (I suspect we will “live with” less deadly mutations SARS-Cov2 over time). But symbiosis can come with technological interventions. I make the case by looking at what it means to “live with HIV” as a creative collaboration between viruses and cells; nurses, doctors, and patients; healthcare workers, friends and lovers. An artful sympoeisis with viruses is to live life otherwise, altered and surviving.

**ARB: At various points in your essays, you talk about how viruses are not necessarily pathogenic, but become so “as a result of multileveled upheavals in coevolving systems” (“Toward Symbiosis,” 243). Could you guide our readers using this observation as an anchor? You can use the examples of HIV/AIDS that you have talked about extensively. But I guess that COVID will be on everyone’s minds now—so maybe you can discuss whether “living with” COVID may be the eventual result, instead of stereotypical heroic narratives such as those of a “lone genius” like Ronald Ross eventually “conquering” pathogens?**

BG: Again, a crucial point in the environmental understanding of epidemics. There is strong evidence that deadly viral infections arise from spillover events. Natural histories of cross-species transmission based on molecular phylogenetics establishes HIV emergence in the southeastern corner of

Cameroon in the early twentieth century (possibly between 1921-1933, although some date it earlier). Phylogenetic trees trace evolutions of viruses, assessing probable outcomes for zoonotic spillovers based on viral traits such as DNA or RNA composition. Beyond phylogenetic trees, however, natural histories of viral emergence direct us to *changing multispecies relations*. These natural histories evaluate the viral richness in animal reservoirs such as bats, rodents, or wild primates. Some animal reservoirs teem with viruses that share similar traits; they exhibit great viral biodiversity. This richness implies the animal host provides adequate provision for similar viruses: for instance, several coronaviruses live in opportunistic tolerance with bats. In the case of spillovers into human populations, the same logic prevails. Viruses will try to find hosts which are phylogenetically proximate to the animal reservoirs they already occupy—it is a familiar environment for them. As we know, African wild primates carried SIVs (Simian Immunodeficiency Virus) which are the simian strains of multiple HIVs. Simian immune systems tolerated the virus so the SIVs were not highly pathogenic. Bats, too, can tolerate a diversity of viruses because their high metabolism provides them immunity from viral takeovers; they not only have high viral biodiversity but they can transmit viruses over large distances as the only mammals powered with flight. Their viral biodiversity along with their phylogenetic proximity to mammals increases the possibility of viral cross-species transmission from bats as reservoir hosts. Studying bat colonies since 2004, Chinese virologist Shi Zhengli, observed a natural genetic library for viruses in the bat populations of the Yunnan

province. Her work on coronaviruses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology has been the target of the lab leak theories that attempt to localize the spillover event. It is far more difficult to pin down origins of a zoonotic spillover. Not all zoonotic shifts into new hosts constitute an “emerging infectious diseases” outbreak. Epidemics must also take root in host populations through host-to-host transmissions; this is the second phased of transmission, the community transmission that preoccupies public health. The HIV-1 (group M) caused the global pandemic but HIV-1 (groups N, O, P) had far narrower reach; the HIV-1N was localized as endemic to the Cameroon. In short, viral emergences are multitemporal, non-linear events not trackable to a single origin, exploding the myths of patient zero.

Scholars like Stephanie Rupp argue that critical changes in hunting access, agricultural expansion, commercial rubber collection, and medical interventions, played a key role in the establishment of HIV-1M in human populations; and Tamara Giles-Vernick follows everything from the commercial production of coffee, cocoa, and timber to expanding transportation systems to changing sexual practices to reoriented mobility networks to blood transfusion practices as constitutive of this multitemporal event. They debunk the myth of the “cut hunter” as the progenitor of HIV-1M, typically projected as a lone male figure carrying the strain from the Sangha Basin to Kinshasa on a steamer (a new rendition of heart of darkness). There is no lone figure in the viral emergence story; not can there be a lone savior. It will take patience to research the natural and social

histories of COVID-19. It took four decades for some truths about HIV “origins” (if we can even call it that) to settle.

**ARB: Let’s turn to questions of aesthetics or rather the merger between the technical and the aesthetic which is an underlying concern of your essays and also, I would assume, of your forthcoming book, *The Virus Touch*. In “Towards Symbiosis,” you talk about the sustainable dimensions of the “molecular video.” In the conclusion of “Of Liquid Images and Vital Flux,” you write:**

We will have to inhabit the molecular fantastic of SARS-Cov2 for the foreseeable future, watching as this increasingly familiar orb circles and enters its new hosts, leaving cellular ruin in its wake. The liquid image is always at a lag for vital flux continues to exceed all synthetic transcription. Delving deeper, moving faster, these speculative images remain in hot pursuit of ever emergent virus-host vital relations. (181)

**Could you take us through some of the critical vocabulary you use here like “molecular videos,” “the molecular fantastic” and “liquid images”? Do you think your theorization of these image worlds goes back to your use of the epistemological concept of “crisis” in “The Costs of Living”—“an event that opens new pathways into the past (what went wrong?) and the future (what action is the best way forward)” (61)? To open a conversation with two other critics, would you call inhabiting “the molecular fantastic” a form of “crisis ordinariness” in Lauren Berlant’s terms? I am also interested in the way you deploy sustainability. Dipesh Chakrabarty distinguishes between**

**sustainability and habitability in the epoch of the Anthropocene. Do you find this distinction aligning with your use of the term or is it different?**

BG: I’ll try to be succinct here drawing on Chapter Two of *The Virus Touch*. Obviously, the “molecular fantastic” references the “optical fantastic” in Akira Lippit’s work, a concept that describes a new fascination with X-ray technology and nuclear fission in the twentieth century. After the mid-twentieth century genetic revolution, we are now habituated to thinking about molecular processes and movements. Watching molecules in action, molecular events as the cellular parting of membranes to make way for viral entry, are now depicted as marvelous adventures into bodily recesses. The marvelousness is hyped in “molecular movies” made for entertainment; some scholars name these wondrous voyages an asteroid aesthetics. You are right to ask what this newly penetrative gaze and media aesthetics might mean for epidemic imaginaries. The dissolving, morphing, dynamic images recast a crisis like cellular takeover by viral particles as a normative occurrence. The images embed the viewer/user in in what Henri Bergson characterized as lively flux, habituating us to our distributed subjectivity, our extensions into the environment. This necessarily scuttles the myth of securing bodies, populations, or species against “foreign” invaders. In this regard, yes, the molecular fantastic affords a biological-ecological perception of living with infection. If we think this way, if we apprehend ourselves as multispecies, then the onus is to learn how to live with viruses amid planetary

disrepair. Which natural disturbances can we “live with” (to echo Anna Tsing), and which must we mitigate or preempt? There aren’t sustainable futures; just habitable ones.

**ARB: One of the most striking segments of “Becoming Undetectable” is the conclusion where you talk about Robert Sherer:**

One among his early pieces stands out as a reflection on managed HIV: the portrait of two nestling bunnies, one painted in HIV-positive and one in HIV-negative blood. Titled *Love Nest*, the painting drew attention to the opacity of blood at surface appearances. Blood as ontological medium was incomprehensible; it had to be extracted, classified, and translated into data to become readable. Sherer’s bunnies were a response to the emergent molecular profiling of blood. He challenged viewers of *Love Nest* to slip into social profiling without technical mediation. When I interviewed him for my book on epidemic media, he said, rather wryly, that several viewers missed the point of the painting. They insisted they could differentiate the HIV-positive from the HIV-negative bunny! They missed Sherer’s portrayal of sero-discordance as a natural state, a “living with” viruses and with each other. An early portrait, love is multispecies accommodation: the possibility of living with Cthulu, but always undetectable. (178)

I am interested, of course, in the idea of “love” as multispecies accommodation. But I’d also like to ask you more about the role that Sherer’s “blood” artworks play in your work since you refer to him both in “Becoming Undetectable” and also discuss him extensively in “The Sanguineous Imaginary.” In the latter essay, I was very interested in how you discuss the insect imagery in “Hookups”:

This sense of distributed subjectivity is stronger still in Sherer’s insect paintings where swarms saturate the visual landscape, recalling disease vectors and multiplying microbial life. In *Hookups*, the insect-saturation indexes southern climates as well as natural fecundities across species...Sherer told me that the sexual connotation of *Hookups* was equally a response to televangelists who saw homosexual “promiscuity” as the fulcrum of contagion. (41-2).

In this essay, you talk about the “circulation of body fluids as uncontainable planetary media” and of “blood as the ontological medium that sustains humans and viruses and the technically altered medium that renders multispecies distributions perceptible.” Besides talking about the role of Sherer’s artworks, can you also elaborate on the following: a) if blood is a vital medium, are insects like mosquitoes, “interfaces”? b) the role of blood as a material medium and planetary media, and c) the afterlife of blood as a technically altered medium, both in Sherer’s artworks and also “the technical mediation of a life-form into life itself” in the laboratory. Can you also maybe talk about the notion of “afterlife” as a form of “altered life” in the way in which you end “The Sanguineous Imaginary”?

BG: Sherer has been important to *The Virus Touch* because his oeuvre spans the mourning works of HIV/AIDS to living with chronic infection in post-retroviral era. Apart from this historical importance, I was drawn to his situation of the epidemic in natural conditions (he was trained in botany). Growing up on his grandmother’s farm, Sherer was deeply aware of the topology of infection: in

this regard, insects are interfaces between vital and elemental mediums. Mosquitos carrying infected blood between hosts are animal media reliant on geologic and atmospheric mediums. In Sherer's paintings, they are planetary inhabitants aesthetically rendered and figurative forms: they symbolize the hypersex of all organisms, including humans, that breach bodily membranes.

I think of blood as a planetary medium because it is always perceived as dangerously transitive (hence, the infamous blood donation bans); it is equally banked as a necessary collective resource. To see blood as exclusively a vital medium is to stay with what Marx named the metabolic rift: the delusion that our blood is somehow separate from the environment in which we live—what we eat, who we fuck, what we breathe. To think life otherwise refuses the disconnection between natural and industrial processes. Enabled by scientific and technological hubris, such a rift separates and classifies non-human nature as the target of extraction. Instead of seeing the human as part of natural processes, capitalism sunders the connection, so that the human stands apart from non-human nature. The human appears not so much as part of energetic processes but as their master, capable of extracting energy as object/product, as coal or oil, and holding energy in reserve. Early theorists of the rift such as Alexander Bodganov drew attention to *social rupture* under capitalism that individualized and privatized vital mediums such as blood. Arguing for blood as natural/social commons, he went on to found the Institute of Hematology and Blood Transfusions in 1925-60. As crisis events, epidemics force us to imagine vital

mediums—even blood that survives outside its source of origin for a short period unless technically altered—as *planetary connective tissue*. Seeing animal media (the proliferating insects) topologically as they transport vital mediums restores “living with” non-human forces as constitutive of the human fabric. My next book has a chapter on “Mosquito Topologies” that builds on this idea of composing infection environments.

This embedding in natural and industrial processes is profoundly present in Michelle Murphy's “alterlife” as the condition of living in a toxic chemosphere. Even as molecular scales decenter any illusion of mastery over the environment, Murphy argues that colonial, racial, military, gendered, chemical, biological, and geological structures constitute molecular life. The drift of PCBs, hormones, and soils may be often analyzed at molecular scale, but these assemblies are made of structural relations: some bodies bear more PCBs depending on which neighborhood you live in. If one substitutes PCBs for viruses, some bodies are less capable of handling SARS-CoV2 because of long-term inequities (healthcare provision, food security, and housing, to name a few). Thinking of structures rather than molecules, Murphy argues, attunes us to extensive and entangled relations: “Studying alterlife requires bursting open the categories of organism, individual, and body to acknowledge a shared, entangling, and extensive condition of being” (498). Even as we speculate our chemical or microbial relations, alterlife reorients us toward the possibility of “life otherwise,” of another kind of future. In the essay on Sherer, I riff on alterlife as the “afterlife” of blood in his

modest repository: there, in his refrigerator, blood lives on as painterly medium. Afterlife suggests its technical alteration for aesthetic purposes as well the artist's commitments to mourning friends who left behind their vital remains. In blood become collective, blended, merging, mixing, there aren't pathological barriers within and beyond the social. If we can tell which bunny nestling in companionate bliss is sero-positive, then the joke is on us.

**ARB: Could you elaborate the distinction between “multispecies relationalities” and “multispecies distributions” for our readers, as it seems to me to be fundamental to your critique of conceptualizations of the undifferentiated human species and also, to adopt a more Foucauldian lexicon, the striation in the field of the population into species and sub-species—the former who are enabled to live while the latter made to “let die”? This, I think, can also help us tie up your essays on blood as media with the questions you explored about the spatial distribution of thanatopolitics in “The Costs of Living.”**

BG: This is an excellent reading, this tie-up that you highlight. “Multispecies relationalities” is an overarching term in environmental studies, and it is sufficiently broad enough to describe interactions or domains, assemblages or processes. The main idea is that no one species can be thought in separation from other(s). You are absolutely correct in interpreting “multispecies distributions” as something different. Distribution is an economic term that refers to sorting,

partitioning, measuring...placing multispecies relations within a calculus that norms (and therefore) pathologizes. And yes, distribution arrives from understanding risk as political logic that sorts populations, as Michel Foucault argued (especially in the *Security, Territory, Population Lectures*), a sorting that prepares ground for “letting die” some populations and protecting others. Technical-aesthetic epidemic media are often about distribution: blood tests compose virus-host relations as distributions to assess the damage to the host at clinical scale; animal movement patterns compose changing distributions of animal hosts in changing habitats to predict new human-wildlife contact zones. These compositions render viral emergences legible by quantifying biological and ecological processes: hence, they tell the story of multispecies distributions. The statistical notation indexes the attempt to institute norms by which viral emergence as infection or spillover can be contained.

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