

Toshi Yoshida's *Sacred Grove* in Twentieth-Century Japanese Visual Culture

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Abstract

We examine the personal, historical, and political contexts of Toshi Yoshida's woodblock print, *Kami no Mori* ("Sacred Grove"), 1941, and argue that it is best understood and appreciated from the perspective of romantic nationalism. During this period, many Japanese artists were co-opted by the state to produce *saikan hokoku*, or "art in the service of the war." At the same time, the Japanese Romantic School was emphasizing the renunciation of modernity and a return to classical Japan by attempting to resurrect cultural and ethnic foundations on which to build a new Japanese national identity. *Sacred Grove*, we argue, was part of that effort. This can be shown by juxtaposing it with Hokusai Katsushika's iconic *Kanagawa-oki Nami Ura* ("The Great Wave off Kanagawa"), 1831. *The Great Wave* published shortly before Japan was forced to open itself to the outside world, and includes a massive wave appearing to tower over and frame Mt. Fuji. The wave has been asserted to represent the *irresistible force* of foreigners and foreign influence on Japan, threatening to inundate and wash away traditional Japanese society and culture. In contrast, *Sacred Grove* published shortly after Japan began forcing itself on the outside world. The viewpoint of the image is looking into sacred and secluded core space, and the shrine among the towering trees is a metaphor for the endurance and solidity of traditional Japanese culture in the face of external influence. In that light, Yoshida's print reflects a radical shift in the Japanese self-image in that it conveys a message of strength and inspiration from the ancient, enduring, unifying, and *immovable object* of divine origin and blessing supporting and defending Nihon and the "Children of the Sun." However, whether Yoshida's effort to advance romantic nationalism was meant to support or repudiate the imperialistic state is unclear.

Keywords

Toshi Yoshida, *Sacred Grove*, Woodblock Print, *Shin-Hanga*, Japanese

Romantic Nationalism

1. Introduction

We examine the personal, historical, and political contexts of Toshi Yoshida's (1911-1995) Japanese woodblock print, *Kami no Mori* ("Sacred Grove"), 1941, and argue that its significance is best understood and appreciated from the perspective of romantic nationalism. Though it may be tempting to interpret this work as straightforward realism, doing so would fail to fully consider these contexts. Artistic realism reflects phenomenological positivism and is, by definition, metaphysically exclusive. *Sacred Grove* is not simply an objectively accurate depiction of a noteworthy scene but is, instead, rich with metaphysical significance. The viewer experiences not just a realistically rendered shrine among a few large trees but experiences a quintessentially Japanese scene of a traditional Shinto shrine solidly embraced and bolstered by a bulwark of ancient trees deep within the physical and spiritual core of the nation, with clear ontological implications. At the very least, Yoshida's image is more appropriately approached from the perspective of romantic realism, i.e., a form of realism that also expresses a romantic attitude or meaning (Goodrich & Baur, 1961: p. 121), but we believe that *Sacred Grove* can only be fully understood and appreciated as a work of romantic nationalism, i.e., an appeal to national unity through ancient and enduring cultural connections.

The harnessing of art to the service of particular causes has a long history, and Toshi himself acknowledged that "[until] the beginning of the seventeenth century, the art of woodblock printing in Japan was used for no other purpose than that of religious propaganda" (Yoshida & Yuki, 1966: p. 19). Between 1937 and 1945, many Japanese artists were, willingly and unwillingly, co-opted by the state to be active agents in wartime culture by producing *saikan hokoku*, or "art in the service of the war" (Kaneko, 2013: pp. 309, 311). At the same time, the Japanese Romantic School, which was established in the late 1930s, was emphasizing the denial of modernity and a return to classical Japan (Hirata, 1998: p. 523). Yojuro Yasuda, a poet, described his fellow Romantics as adopting the spirit of the German Romantic School to develop a theory of art that grasps the past in ways that historians had failed to do (Doak, 1996: p. 91). For the Japanese Romantics, the problem confronting Japan was how to resurrect cultural and ethnic foundations on which to build a new Japanese national identity (Doak, 1996: p. 93). *Sacred Grove*, we argue, was part of that effort.

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2. Artist's Biography

Toshi Yoshida was a Japanese printmaker associated with both the *shin-hanga* ("new prints") and *sosaku-hanga* ("creative prints") movements, and is

considered to be “a preeminent figure among Japanese printmakers of the 20th century” (Wanczura, 2021). He was the eldest son of the *shin-hanga* artists, Hiroshi and Fujio, and he was trained in painting and printmaking by both parents (Skibbe, 1996; Wanczura, 2021). Taken together, the extended Yoshida family of artists, whose artistic efforts can be traced to the Edo period (Skibbe, 1996: p. 33), were so prolific and influential that they have been characterized as a “one-family art movement” (Statler, 1956: pp. 168-169), though as individuals they varied greatly in style, subject, and theme (Brown, 2002a: p. 9). Toshi’s father, Hiroshi (1876-1950), is regarded as one of the great *shin-hanga* artists and is particularly known for his landscape prints. In 1925, Hiroshi hired a team of carvers and printers, and established his own studio. By closely supervising the print-making process, Hiroshi combined the *ukiyo-e* (“pictures of the floating world”) collaborative system of print production with the *sosaku-hanga* individual system of self-drawing, self-carving, and self-printing, and effectively formed a hybrid third school (Skibbe, 1996: p. 37; Statler, 1966: p. 13).

“[Toshi’s] father was a true cosmopolitan and passed on this worldview to his children” (Wanczura, 2021). In 1930, Toshi accompanied his father on a trip to India and, later, to Southeast Asia. While travelling, they made sketches that they transformed into woodblock prints when they returned to Japan. During the 1930s, Japan became heavily militarized and art was censored, and Hiroshi was producing “romanticized images of Japan” that appealed to “nationalistic Japanese” (Brown, 2002a: p. 12). Similarly, in the early 1940s, Toshi produced oil paintings that depict factory workers and civilians engaging in war-time production. However, while Toshi produced some paintings and prints that are nationalistic in character, some of his other works have been interpreted as rejecting nationalism (Brown, 2002b: p. 74). Following the war, Toshi produced prints emphasizing “eternal Japan” through temples, statues, and gardens (Brown, 2002a: p. 12). He also travelled extensively to the U.S., Canada, China, Korea, India, Africa, Australia, and even Antarctica. Many of his prints focus on the landscapes and animals he encountered, examples of which are shown in **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**.



Figure 1. Toshi Yoshida, *Monument Valley*, 1971.

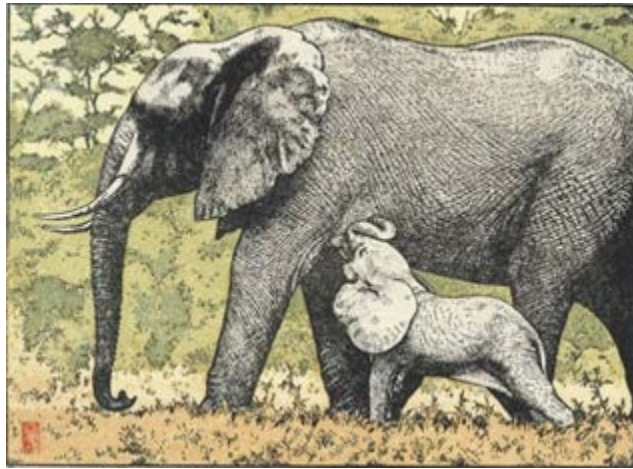


Figure 2. Toshi Yoshida, *Elephants*, 1987.

While an apprentice in the Yoshida family system, Toshi had little, if any, artistic autonomy from his father (Brown, 2002b: p. 73). Hiroshi died in 1950, after which Toshi began practicing a more expressive style, and in 1952 Toshi began experimenting in abstract art (Brown, 2002b: p. 73; Skibbe, 1996: p. 51). “Toshi’s artistic career often became a struggle between fidelity to his father’s legacy and freedom from it” (Brown, 2002a: p. 10; see also Skibbe, 1996: p. 40, stating, “[Hiroshi and Toshi] lived in different worlds, had entirely different temperaments, and eventually created works of art out of entirely different artistic visions”). His father disapproved of non-figurative art (Brown, 2002a: p. 9; Skibbe, 1996: p. 51), and it may be that Toshi delayed this artistic shift out of respect for his father’s views (Wanczura, 2021). Toshi’s reason for pursuing abstraction is unclear, but it may have been “a strategic adaptation to post-1945 market trends” (Wanczura, 2021). Toshi produced several hundred non-figurative woodblock prints from 1952 to 1975 (Skibbe, 1996: p. 61), examples of which are shown in **Figure 3** and **Figure 4**, before returning to figurative art. From 1971 to 1994, he worked almost exclusively on animal prints.



Figure 3. Toshi Yoshida, *Meditation*, 1966.



Figure 4. Toshi Yoshida, *May*, 1973.

In total, Toshi produced approximately four hundred and fifty woodblock prints in various styles (Skibbe, 1996: p. 29). “Over the years, [Toshi] honed his distinctive style. Notably, his use of colors and expansive areas exhibited a boldness that set his prints apart from those of his father” (Wanczura, 2021). His “art exudes a sense of the spiritual,” his aesthetic reflects “unity, order, and harmony,” and his work “is about the tranquility of nature—and the nature of tranquility” (Brown, 2002b: p. 73). In 1979, Toshi renamed his existing studio the International Yoshida Hanga Academy for printmaking, which was attended by many international students (Skibbe, 1996: p. 78). The Yoshida Studio in Tokyo, founded in 1925, closed once Hiroshi’s and Toshi’s original wood blocks became too worn to produce acceptable posthumous prints (Blick, 2024). Today, the Yoshida family licenses the images for commercial reproduction (Blick, 2024).

3. Sacred Grove

Toshi Yoshida’s print, *Sacred Grove* (Figure 5), which is less commonly translated as “*Forest of God*” (Team Wakon, 2024), was self-published in 1941 (the Showa era) in vertical *chuban* format by the Yoshida Studio. Toshi’s wife, Kiso, carved portions of the blocks for this print (Japanese Arts, 2024). *Sacred Grove* is a product of the *shin hanga* movement that modernized techniques and approaches while pursuing a pre-urbanization, pre-modern, and pre-Westernized nostalgic aesthetic. The image is of a small Shinto shrine nestled deep within a forest of ancient, towering *sugi* trees (*Cryptomeria japonica*, or “Japanese redwood”). No people or animals or other sources of movement, transformation, or change are shown, which imparts an impression of solid, unchanging timelessness. “It is easy to get lost in this calm place, among the trees, in a moment of silence” (Fujiarts, 2024). “The depth created with the many layers of color in the forest is a good

example of what made the *shin-hanga* movement so effective at revitalizing the woodblock printmaking industry” (Mokuhankan, 2024).



Figure 5. Toshi Yoshida, *Sacred Grove*, 1941.



Figure 6. Hiroshi Yoshida, *Temple in the Wood*, 1940.

Hiroshi created a similar work, *Temple in the Wood* (Figure 6), 1940. However, Hiroshi’s image does not emphasize the larger trees and includes animal life (perhaps meant to invoke Basho’s provocative and invigorating frog?), and so conveys a very different impression than Toshi’s version. The lighting is also very different: Toshi’s image is matte, muted, and heavier, while Hiroshi’s image is brighter and

lighter, which further supports the very different impressions. Hasui Kawase (1883-1957), a contemporary competitor of Hiroshi, created a less similar, though no less beautiful, image of a country shrine, *Snow at Inokashira Benten Shrine Precinct* (Figure 7), 1929. These and similar works provide further examples of the romantic zeitgeist.



Figure 7. Kawase Hasui, *Snow at Inokashira Benten Shrine Precinct*, 1929.

4. Historical and Political Contexts of Sacred Grove

4.1. Ko-Shinto, State Shinto, and Shrine Shinto

Places of great natural beauty, such as the sacred grove, have been associated with a “primordial ‘nature worship,’ supposedly similar to ancient Shinto,” a traditional Japanese religion (Rots, 2019: p. 298). Interest in such sites of supposed spiritual power drives the relatively recent focus on “powerspots” (Rots, 2019: p. 298), which has led to changes in worship practices at both Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, and some have recast the trees surrounding their sanctuaries as “sacred groves” (Carter, 2018: p. 152). This conjunction of interests in Shinto and powerspots has given rise to notions of ancient animism and nature worship associated with a pure form of Shinto referred to as *Ko-Shinto* (Carter, 2018: p. 153; Rots, 2019: p. 306). In particular, Japanese forest shrines are thought to have evolved from prehistoric Japanese shrine worship, which was similarly centered on trees and sacred groves (Rots, 2019: p. 306). They are thought to represent “the shape of things as they were in the beginning’ and as they had once been throughout the entire Japanese archipelago” (Rots, 2019: p. 306, quoting Morris-Suzuki, 1998: p. 31). Such a deep-time connection to the “true” Japan is an important component of both romanticism and nationalism.

State Shinto was both the de facto state religion of Japan and the ideological basis for the ideal, unified state from the Meiji Restoration (1868) to the end of World War II (1945) (Shimazono, 2009: p. 100; see also Michiaki, 2011), and, as such, it was a major component of Japanese nationalism (Fridell, 1976: p. 547). During the “State Shinto period” (1868-1945) elements of Shinto came under overt state influence and control as the Japanese government systematically co-opted shrine worship as a force for mobilizing imperial loyalty on behalf of

modern nation-building (Fridell, 1976: p. 548). Shrine Shinto was a social system in which shrines were used to indoctrinate the populace into Japanese nationalism (Michiaki, 2011: p. 127, citing Isomae, 2003), and it became a core component of State Shinto (Shimazono, 2009: p. 98, citing Murakami, 1970) which was, in turn, part of *Kokutai*, a national structure or essence that included every aspect of Japanese life (Fridell, 1976: p. 552; see also Michiaki, 2011). Murakami (1970) referred to a final stage of State Shinto from the Manchurian Incident through the end of World War II as “the period of fascist state religion,” during which “State Shinto found a secure place as the state religion” and the “doctrine of State Shinto...supported the foreign military ventures” (Shimazono, 2009: p. 97, citing Murakami, 1970; see also Shimazono, 2009: p. 101, referring to this final stage as “the fascist period”).

4.2. Romanticism and Nationalism

Romanticism is a reaction against modernity and rationalism (Cranston, 1994: pp. 1, 21). It seeks “the recovery of an uncorrupted subjective core” (Moggach, 2016: p. 665, referencing Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who has been referred to as “the first of the Romantics” (Cranston, 1994: p. 1). Morrow’s (2011) discussion of nineteenth century European romanticism illustrates the close relationship between romanticism and nationalism that often resulted in the former being employed to support the latter. The Romantics believed that humans possess affective, moral, and religious potentialities that cannot be captured by enlightened rationalism and that can only be realized within historically-anchored, unified communities reflecting the interdependence of their members and embodying values that correspond with the requirements of their natures. (Morrow, 2011: p. 39). The Romantics grappled with the social relationships necessary to forge humans into such communities rather than live as mere aggregations of individuals (Morrow, 2011: p. 75).

The Japanese Romantic School (*Nippon Roman-ha*) was established in the 1930s, and emphasized “the denial of modernity, the return of classical Japan, and an aesthetic of death” (Hirata, 1998: p. 523). Yasuda Yojuro (1910-1981), a nationalist and leading figure in the movement, described his fellow Romantics as looking to the German Romantic School to provide the tools for producing a new concept of the Japanese nation based on ethnic community (Doak, 1996: p. 90). Romanticism was particularly appealing as a means of mediating the dilemma between East and West, tradition and modernity (Lim, 2011: p. 115, citing Doak, 1996: p. 102). For the Romantics, the problem confronting Japan was how to negate the false identity resulting from Westernization since the Meiji Restoration and to resurrect its “eradicated history” and reveal the cultural and ethnic foundations for a new Japanese national identity (Doak, 1996: p. 93). The Romantics were concerned with producing a new historical perspective that would redefine the Japanese people based on a more populist concept of the Japanese nation (Doak, 1996: p. 95). In particular, the Japan Romantic School sought to develop a

perspective incorporating intense subjectivity, an idealistic spirit, and an intellectual character that was lost in vulgar realism (Doak, 1996: p. 94, citing Kamei Katsuichiro, “*Romanshugi no imi*,” in *Kamei Katsuichiro zenshu*, Vol. 3, pp. 323-324).

Also in the 1930s, “ethnic nationalism reemerged as an especially pressing issue” (Doak, 1996: p. 82). Nationalism is a central theme in the role, expression, and meaning of Romantic art and political philosophy (Leerssen, 2013). The Romantics were quickly yoked to the service of zealous nationalism in the 1940s, and some have asserted that they were complicit in supporting the militaristic ideology of the state (Hirata, 1998: p. 523). Nationalism is a process of psychological integration into positive identification with the nation-state, such that it becomes the core of social identity (Doak, 1996: p. 79; Pyle, 1971: p. 6). The function of a nationalistic movement is to construct a national identity that binds a population together, especially one that has been dispirited or fragmented by foreign influence (Lim, 2011: p. 115). In the early twentieth century, ethnicity became the focus for representing the Japanese people and nation, the concept of the ethnic nation (*minzoku*) entered Japanese political discourse, and ethnic nationalism took on new significance in Japan (Doak, 1996: p. 81) as a strategy to protect it from encroaching Western imperialism (Lim, 2011: p. 115, citing Doak, 2000).

4.3. Romantic Nationalism

“Romantic nationalism is the celebration of the nation (defined by its language, history, and cultural character) as an inspiring ideal for artistic expression; and the instrumentalization of that expression in ways of raising the political consciousness” (Leerssen, 2013: p. 9). Romantic nationalism often arises as a form of resistance to foreign influence and seeks to elevate the self-image of a population based on appeals to metaphysical superiority (Lim, 2011: p. 115). “In the encounter with the West, the Japanese...adopted the claims of Romantic nationalism to a national identity disguised as the myth of origin” (Lim, 2011: p. 115). More specifically, Japan employed its origin myth in support of a European-style romantic nationalist movement which began in the second half of the nineteenth century and drove an imperialistic and colonial agenda through 1945 (Lim, 2011: p. 112).

The 1930s, which have been referred to as “the dark valley,” were marked by social fragmentation resulting from “the onslaught of modernity” (Kaneko, 2016: pp. 69, 77) characterized by “rapidly escalating nationalism, social repression, and military aggression” (Brown, 2001: p. 65), including the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and war with China in 1937 and with the Allied Powers in 1941. In Japan, a primary function of nationalism was to support its own imperialism in order to avoid becoming a colony of Western empires (Lim, 2011: p. 115, citing Doak, 2000: p. 534). The Manchurian Incident facilitated this by “eliminating dissent, integrating the unruly ‘masses,’ and recovering national harmony” (Kaneko, 2016: p. 77). The military provided stories and the media and cultural industries delivered them to the public in the form of propaganda (Kaneko, 2016: p. 72).

Dissenting voices were “largely overshadowed by the storm of ardent war support and *bidan* ([“beautiful story”]) that flooded the news media and popular culture” (Kaneko, 2016: p. 70). Japan’s military excursions had widespread support among its citizens “who shared a sense of frustration and anxiety over Western-led modernization” and who saw them not as aggressive invasions but as legitimate battles for survival (Kaneko, 2016: p. 70).

Simultaneously, the Japanese Romantic School promoted ethnic nationalism and attempted to articulate a concept of the ethnic nation (Doak, 1996: p. 88). “For them, and for the Romantics, the most pressing issue was how to restore confidence in national culture when the very future of Japanese culture seemed threatened by the modern Japanese state’s internalization of Western culture for its own purposes” (Doak, 1996: p. 90). “Ultra-nationalistic ideology” was reflected in themes of war and militarism present “overtly nationalistic war imagery” in the visual arts (Kaneko, 2016: p. 69). For example, Fujita Tsuguharu (1886-1968), a painter and one of the highest-profile war artists, deftly combined war subjects with nineteenth-century European Romanticism (Kaneko, 2013: p. 318). Between 1937 and 1945, art organizations (*bijutsu dantai*) provided an important platform for spreading the nationalist message (Kaneko, 2013: p. 309). The Japanese Print Service Society argued that “the print could boost morale domestically, comfort soldiers fighting overseas, and help the citizens of Co-Prosperity Sphere countries better understand Japan so that they might trust its leadership” (Brown, 2001: p. 79). Further, “[p]rints reproduce the scenery, light, and spirit of the homeland,” symbolize the character of Japan, and embody Japanese uniqueness (Brown, 2001: p. 79, quoting language from an oath sworn by members of the Japanese Print Service Society). “[M]any landscape prints from 1937 to 1945 likely capitalized on the patriotic ideology that consecrated Japan as a divine land (*sumera no mikuni*,



Figure 8. Hiroshi Yoshida, *Misty Day in Nikko*, 1937.

among other names)” (Brown, 2001: p. 70). Works such as Hiroshi Yoshida’s *Misty Day in Nikko* (Figure 8), 1937, featuring the mausoleums of the Tokugawa shoguns at Nikko, as well as other places associated with the divine founding of Japan, samurai culture, and imperial rule are “associated with the national polity (*kokutai*), the embodied space of the Japanese nation,” and can be interpreted as representing nationalistic ideology (Brown, 2001: p. 70).

In 1936, the Japanese government began restricting artistic work except for art used in propaganda (Skibbe, 1996: p. 45). As a result, artists became active agents in wartime culture and some produced “art in the service of the war” (Kaneko, 2013: p. 311). In some cases, their cooperation was coerced by censorship and group pressure and the threat of punitive sanctions (Kaneko, 2013: p. 309). Further, due to shortages and the rationing of art supplies, participation in the war effort was a way to acquire otherwise scarce art supplies (Kaneko, 2013: p. 310). In other cases, artists actively collaborated with authorities and even formed patriotic art collectives (Kaneko, 2013: p. 339). Most artists were forced to contribute to the war effort, but a number of them allied with the wartime government in their pursuit of artistic or political goals (Kaneko, 2013: p. 339). A relationship between the latter artists and the state arose “not only because of top-down control, but also because civilians internalized the dominant wartime ideology or else used it to pursue their own interests” (Kaneko, 2013: p. 311).

5. Interpretation and Conclusion

In light of these contexts, we believe that *Sacred Grove* can only be fully understood and appreciated as a work of romantic nationalism. This can be shown by juxtaposing it with Hokusai Katsushika’s (1760-1849) iconic *Kanagawa-oki Nami Ura*, (commonly translated as “*The Great Wave off Kanagawa*” or “*Under the Wave off Kanagawa*”), 1831. *The Great Wave* published shortly before Japan was forced to open itself to the outside world, and depicts a massive wave towering over several boats and framing Mt. Fuji in the background. According to Christine Guth (2011: pp. 468-469) waves symbolize dynamic forces bringing change, and Japan was in a losing defensive battle against such forces. Guth (2011: pp. 473, 481) interpreted Hokusai’s wave as representing the immanent and overwhelming cultural invasion of Japan. Thus, Hokusai’s image reflects the social despair and hopelessness of the time due to the overwhelming inevitability of the *irresistible force* of foreigners and foreign influence inundating and washing away traditional Japanese culture.

In contrast, *Sacred Grove* published shortly after Japan began militarily forcing itself on the outside world. Shrines such as this symbolize Japan’s traditional culture and connection to the divine, and while seemingly unremarkable, “we can find the true Yamato spirit in their ordinariness” (Kaneko, 2016: p. 77, quoting Ryosaku & Kurihara, 1932: p. 139, giving a nationalistic account of three Japanese war heroes). The viewpoint of the image is from within Japan looking into sacred and secluded core space, which suggests that the viewer has a truly Japanese

perspective. The shrine among the towering trees is a metaphor for the endurance and solidity of traditional Japanese culture in the face of foreigners and foreign influence, even as Japan transforms itself from victim to aggressor and invades the outside world in rejecting the role of the colonized and embracing the role of the colonizer. The trees are a static force resisting change—bulwarks surrounding and defending traditional Japanese society and culture. As such, Toshi Yoshida’s image reflects a radical shift in the Japanese self-image in that it conveys a message of strength and inspiration from the ancient, enduring, unifying, and *immovable object* of divine origin and blessing supporting and defending Nihon and the “Children of the Sun.” Whether this romantic nationalism was meant to support the state in its offensive war against the foreign other or to repudiate the imperialistic state as part of the foreign other is (likely purposefully) unclear. Considered together, Hokusai’s and Yoshida’s images reflect a massive change in the Japanese perspective with regard to themselves and foreigners and foreign influence—from succumbing to the irresistible force of the wave of foreign influence to standing firmly as the immovable object of Japanese culture and tradition.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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