



Photo: Courtesy of Dohee Lee

The Art of Ritual / The Ritual of Art WHISPERS FROM THE WILD:

Reflections on our Intimate and Ancient Relationship with Nature as seen
through Traditional Ceremony and Contemporary Ritual Performance

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Photo: Courtesy of Dohee Lee

“In order to cross the threshold... it is necessary to forego the sense that all mysteries can be explained if there's enough time to develop an explanation. It requires letting go of the idea that the world could be known in its entirety if there were just enough electrical wires strung across it. The electricity here comes from invisible wires strung across thresholds into the Other world of the ancestors. Looking through this threshold requires rediscovering the imagination that the West attributes only to children and madmen.” - Michael Meade (Intro to *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*.)

INTRODUCTION

My research for *The Art of Ritual / The Ritual of Art*, is motivated by the times in which we are living including: our current environmental crises, deep historic and shared wounds as well as a desire to acknowledge the ancient, medicinal potential found in Ritual. I recognize that this paper is a mere drop of water in the immense ocean of history of both the elders and contemporary artists of whom I speak. However, it is my intention to spark further dialogue within the academic construct on the subtle wisdom and lived experiences of indigenous elders as well as contemporary artists living in relationship to ceremony. This reflection is also a way to identify the overt influence of Western patriarchal domination or the colonialization of the mind within these educational

constructs that often seek to grasp, control, contain or even attempt to understand. When, in some cases, the humble acceptance of the *unknown* is exactly what is needed to create space for the re-emergence of the sacred, to be able to hear the quiet voice of the soul.

I am also interested in unpacking “environmentalism” in relationship to a current need to revive our ancient relationship with the divinities in nature and the intimate potential within the Art of Ritual for healing both this disconnect and ourselves. This paper is a quiet nudge or perhaps a more explicit instigation for further reflection upon the historic (and current) dismissed knowledge of indigenous people around the world and the lived experience of “the sacred” in artistic inquiry within academia. I am not planning to spend a lot of time deconstructing the domination of (what I have referred to as) “western thought,” but rather on my personal encounters with and writings of Eliot Cowan, Tsuarrikame of the Huichol tradition, Martin Prechtel, Shaman of the Tzuitzujil Mayan tradition of Guatemala as well as Malidoma and Sonbonfu Some, Ritualists of the Dagara tribe of West Africa. I will also delve into contemporary ritually charged performance as a potential site for the healing of individuals and community as seen through the works of interdisciplinary artists Dohee Lee, founder of The Puri Project, Amara Tabor-Smith, Founder of Deep-Waters Dance-Theater and Jose Navarrete, co-director of NAKA Dance Theater.

In 2008, I met Eliot Cowan, author *of Plant Spirit Medicine*, founder of The Blue Deer Center and Shaman of the Huichol tradition of Mexico. Cowan was apprentice to Don Guadalupe Gonzalez Rios, a renowned healer in Mexico for twelve years and is considered a *Tsaurrikame*, meaning a medicine man of the utmost respect. I sat by the fire with Cowan on many occasions while he spoke of the modern day struggle of

spiritual disconnect from nature and ancestral traditions. Cowan referred to the current “environmental crisis” as a problem that cannot be intellectually “figured out” or scientifically explained, a problem not simply of pollution and global warming, but rather, a serious spiritual epidemic of the modern day people. He described the environmental crisis’s visible impact as great, but the *invisible* impact as greater.

Malidome Some, Medicine man of the Dagara tribe of West Africa, writes in agreement, “What goes wrong in the visible world is only the tip of the iceberg. So to correct a dysfunctional state of affairs effectively, one must first locate its hidden area, its *symbolic dimension*, work with it first, and then assist in the restoration of the physical (visible) extension of it.”¹ Visible wrongs have their roots in the world of spirit. To deal only with their visibility is like trimming the leaves of a weed when you mean to uproot it. Traditionally, the action taken to uproot a problem is called Ritual. Ritual calls upon the spirit guides to work upon the invisible dysfunction.

At a public talk at CIIS in 2007, Malidoma Some continued this conversation. He addressed the essential problems found in the “western” view of what it means to “be educated,” our removal from our own ancestral traditions and how that has directly impacted the natural environment. He spoke of the flawed hierarchal view (in academia) of the logical mind over spirit and also of the marginalization of the voice of the heart. Malidoma Some shared the dire need for people to wake up to the importance of paying attention to, what he called, the “sign language of the soul.” Some addressed the modern-day amnesia towards ancestral wisdom traditions where the nature beings and ancestors are recognized and honored as those *who sing us into life*.

¹ Some, Malidoma. *Of Water and The Spirit*. (NY: Penguin, 1994)

He also reminded us that the traditional role of the Shaman is as a bridge or communicator between the people, their specific deities and ancestors in order to keep balance and good relationships with their invisible counterparts. Some was emphatic that *Ritual* was and *continues to be* essential to the health of a community and the environment.

I remember one day Sonbonfu Some (Malidoma's ex-wife) mentioned that in her view there are still regular public rituals and ceremony in the west, but they are found in "hidden places." From her prospective, much of today's folk rituals are found, for example, in sports- like in football games when people get dressed up, paint their faces and chant with a huge emotional release. Personally, I have found fragments of these "hidden places" for contemporary ceremony in the arts.

I have found that while many modern folks are being pushed towards spiritual amnesia about our vital connection with nature and ritual, some contemporary artists have stayed awake. I am curious about those modern artists who continue to walk on the threshold of spirit, waking the public about our essential connection with the environment and one another through ancient myths, courageous politics and ritual remembrance. It is this meeting place- between ritual and the contemporary arts, which draws me further into this research. I am particularly motivated by San Francisco Area based interdisciplinary artists: Amara Tabor Smith (New Orleans/SF) of Deep Waters Dance Theater, Jose Navarrete codirector of NAKA Dance Theater and Dohee Lee (South Korea/SF) founding director of The Puri Project.



:Courtesy of Amara Tabor-Smith

“Mostly, when grieving and when performing grief, we are a representation of a person grieving. But if we push it and stay with the representation, there will be moments where what “we are” disappears into the empty bed, or our bodies take up the expanse of an alleyway or a dance studio, or we lose our “selves” inside the egungun. Those brief, glimpsing moments are the instances where we are not just representations of grief or spirit or ecstatic memory: we actually are Grief. We are Spirit. We can be Memory, too. And more. And then it is gone. That is good work.”

-Whitehead, Response to Amara Tabor-Smith’s *He Moved Swiftly*

AMARA TABOR-SMITH: *GRIEF LISTENER*

While countless artists today make art that imitates or reflects the cold aesthetics found in modernity, Amara Tabor-Smith’s work often breaks us open with grief, stirring ancestral memories of that which we may have forgotten. An African-

the San Francisco Bay Area

American choreographer born in ~~New Orleans~~, Tabor-Smith was one of the founding members of the world-renowned, New York-based Urban Bush Women and now performs her own work as director of Deep Water Dance Theater. Her work is “...rooted in ritual and explores the issues facing people of color and the environment.” She draws from the folklore of the African diaspora and states that, “she is committed to creating dance-theater that promotes healing from environmental, sexual and racial oppression.”²

In OUR DAILY BREAD (2011), Amara Tabor-Smith “explores how food shapes our cultural identity and whether to preserve or let go of food traditions that are no longer healthy or sustainable.” This includes the way food is farmed and also the mistreatment of migrant farmworkers in the United States to this day. The audience sees a news clip (projected onto a large screen) where a distraught husband speaks to the camera about his wife, a pregnant migrant worker from Mexico, who has just died from being overworked in the heat of the summer. On stage, a dancer flails on the floor in grief and then lays still. A group of women ceremoniously cover her with a wooden kitchen table and then, a quilt. The image becomes a poignant ritual in living memory of the dead mother. The colorful quilt references a rich patchwork of the intimate collection of stories found in the oppressive history of farming culture (and slavery) in the United States.

Tabor-Smith speaks to the process that the dancers undergo while working with her. “Much of our creative process revolves around an internal ritual and practice that enables us to gain mutual understanding and respect amongst ourselves, and thereby supports each member to develop as an artist and cultural activist committed to social

² <http://www.deepwatersdancetheater.org>

change through art making.”³ From this prospective, the stage becomes a small “village” of dancers who come to trust one another and are willing to confront aspects of themselves and the world through the deepening and encouragement of these relationships.

Tabor-Smith also works with site-specific performance, meaning art that is created in direct relationship with place. Site-specific performances require co-creation with the environment as they are made in communication and in partnership with the unique textures of spirit and place. This kind of sensitivity and body wisdom is often *bull-dosed* over in modern times, but Tabor-Smith shakes that up in *He Moved Swiftly*. In this piece, she dedicates her work to the life of African American, choreographer, Ed Mock, and invites the audience to walk through some of the places where he lived, recognizing the memories held there. Traveling with a cast of 35+ artists through multiple locations in San Francisco, Tabor-Smith conjures the spirit of Ed, a black, gay artist whose untimely death from AIDS in the 1980’s. Ghosts of his time dance with the living as the audience is invited to walk the streets in honor of his life and those whom he touched.

Amara Tabor-Smith’s work challenges the audience to think and see life as a story to be witnessed, as art. Her performances evoke a sense of cultivated community between the performers and the audience facing injustices. Her work is a glimpse at what is possible- a temporary experience of the human potential of what it looks and feels like to support and be supported through the multi-dimensional experiences of being alive through times of grief and celebration.

³ (<http://www.deepwatersdancetheater.org>)



Photo: Courtesy of Jose Navarrete

ON GRIEF AND WATER

While Amara Tabor-Smith acknowledges that grief is a medicine, in modern times grief is more often seen as an illness that requires suppressive medications that create further amnesia about where that pain comes from. However, the significance of expressing grief is not overlooked by many ancient, indigenous cultures. In my studies with Martin Prechtel, medicine man of the Tzuitzil Mayan tradition, he spoke to the vital importance of grief. He shared that the word for alcohol in Tzuitzil was translated as “tear listener” and that in his village when someone was drunk it was considered a sign for the people to go and listen. It was widely acknowledged that the waters of grief could actually drown a person, if they were not properly attended. The grief-stricken were often literally submerged in water only to emerge for more, and then finally pulled out by the community to welcome him/her home.

In 2010, I participated in several traditional Grief Rituals with Sonbonfu Some, of the Dagara tribe of Burkina Faso, whose name means “The Keeper of the Rituals.” Sonbonfu was destined at birth to carry her purpose to those in the west who have forgotten the importance of regular ceremony in order to keep the deities in Nature “well-fed” and the people in balance and sane. She would sometimes smirk and say her job was, “to give people grief.”

Sonbonfu usually started the Grief Ritual by “showing” the group an example of the “level of grief” considered “acceptable” for the upcoming ceremony. She wanted people to feel comfortable to access the very depths of what was often hidden or suppressed inside modern-day properness and years of holding our breath while waiting quietly in lines at the supermarket. Sonbonfu would run to the altar, wail at the top of her lungs, slap the floor and flail herself in dancing convulsions. If the participants were new to ceremony, some would laugh in discomfort or (the more conservative participants) would look at one another, as if to say, *Uh, oh- what did I get my self into?* However, the majority of the people felt a palpable sense of relief, perhaps with the conviction (or at least hope) that their own burdens would soon be lessened or in some cases, completely relieved.

The ceremonies lasted for two to three full days. Even though there was not a single participant who had grown up in the tradition, it worked. People shook in the arms of new friends and old sorrows were courted through the doors of liberation. Unlike in Some’s village, most of us were strangers and therefore required to access our humanity or compassion for one another without much, if any, knowledge of our past personal stories. This was a challenge, for some greater than for others, that pointed us once again towards the modern need for deeper community.

Sonbonfu often told stories of her homeland where grief is considered a healing elixir for a broken heart and warned that it is *also* deemed a dangerous poison, if held in the body for too long without being fully released. Sonbonfu plainly stated that the main reason there are so many wars in modern times is due to the extreme suppression of grief and our disconnect from our own nature and ancestral homes. She said that in Burkina Faso ceremonies were held regularly, as much as necessary, in order to cleanse the entire village with healthy, transformative emotion and visitations from the other side. Sonbonfu spoke of the signs of today's disconnect from nature as seen in the common use of anti-depressants and other drugs to numb grief. She challenged us to reclaim our authenticity and create community where there was genuine support through the difficulties of life and also in times of celebration.

Sonbonfu said that in the Dagara Cosmology grief ceremonies are actually water ceremonies and that the ancient relationship between water and grief is considered inherent. Therefore, the actual physical health of the water is directly related to the expressed health of the people and their ability (or inability) to grieve. For the Dagara, as well as many tribes around the world, the health of people is literally linked to the spiritual and physical health of the land and the elements. The human body and nature's body are highly refined, sensitive, intelligent organs and intrinsically linked to one another. She reminded us that in order to be true "environmentalists," we would need much more than good recycling programs and intellectual discussions on how to "fix" problems. We would need to remember our humanity, celebrate with beauty to feed the holies in nature to keep them alive and also, grieve together.



JOSE NAVARRETE: *GESTERS OF A SACRED JESTER*

In contemporary artist, Jose Navarrete's recent work *ATLACUALO* (Water Ceasing), he reinterprets ancient Mexican mythology and iconography to address pressing ecological issues around water rights and shortages. In one section, the Aztec God Tlaloc, God of Rain and Chalchiuhtlicue, Goddess of the Rivers, are dressed in full ritual regalia made of plastic bottles. They jabber to one another about our current situation as humans, "Yes, there will be no more water to drink... Hahaha! These humans don't realize it yet. Hahaha!"... Navarrete was born in Mexico City and is the co-founding director of NAKA Dance Theater. His work is often focused on environmental issues with a sense of at times tragic humor drawing from pre-Hispanic myths of his youth. He states, "Drawing from the poetry and didactic power of pre-Hispanic myths, the piece constructs a compelling discourse on the depletion of our natural resources in a production that combines movement, performance art, new music composition, visual art installation, and video."⁴

⁴ www.nkdancetheater.com

In The Revenge Of Huitlacoche (2007), “Navarrete explores issues on a worldwide scale: migrations, natural disasters, war, the environment, and concepts of alienation and community, in a set of vignettes with decidedly Mexican images and iconography.”⁵ Huitlacoche is a black fungus that grows on corn and is considered a culinary delicacy in Mexican cuisine and a pest in the United States.

In one site-specific video, Jose is dressed as the God of corn and runs along the US/Mexican border close to the wall that separates the two countries. As the videographer peers through the fence observing the immigration officers in their police vehicles, the God of corns leaps and runs wildly from fence to fence. Jose states, “The choices we have made to fulfill our urban lifestyles have resulted in unimaginable consequences where we have abandoned our responsibility to work with nature, and instead are putting ourselves in danger as we push the limits of the earth.”⁶



Photo: Courtesy of Jose Navarrete

⁵ www.nkdancetheater.com

⁶ www.nkdancetheater.com



DOHEE LEE: *SHAPESHIFTER*

The Tzejtel tree is “never a refugee and always at home... If that were not enough, the tree himself is a dreamer and a creative being that is in no way threatened by having to adapt, but is actually invigorated by any adversary thrown his way. Addicted to changing his shape, but in such a very particular way that what really matters to such a plant is never lost to him in that he remains a perfect calendric measure, while given to flights of peaceful defiance of all that would destroy him.”⁷

In this quote from Martin Prechtel’s most recent book, it is evident that Prechtel is not only speaking of this particular tree but rather reminding us of our current human need to be adaptable without losing our indigenous souls or our own subtle nature. Traditional artists of today are being called to this kind of adaptability, while others are in search of their true identities or “home” in a time when much ancestral knowledge has been covered over, submerged, lost or, even, destroyed.

Dohee Lee, founding director of Puri Project, has shape-shifted her identity as a migrant artist from Jeju Island in South Korea, now living in Oakland. Lee grew up in a

⁷ Prechtel, Martin. *The Unlikely Peace at Cuchumaquic* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2012)

strictly Christian family, but was surrounded by a culture and ancestry with strong shamanic traditions. In her research, she found that in her homeland of Jeju Island, the ocean is considered the dwelling place of Mago, the Goddess of Creation and mystery central to the practices of the mudang⁸,

Lee's latest work is entitled *MAGO*, in honor of these ancient stories of her people. Mago is an interdisciplinary ritual performance that integrates music, dance and animation surrounding the ancient Korean mythology of the ocean Goddess interwoven with Lee's personal story. Lee states, "The legend of Mago is woven throughout the piece focused on the interconnectedness of dreams and reality... The work itself is a cleansing/purging ritual, an intensely personal journey of birth, self-discovery, confrontation, action, and re-birth..."⁹

Myths and rituals regarding the ocean were abundant where she grew up on Jeju Island in Korea. Jeju has a strong tradition of female free divers called "Haenyeo," women who risk their lives, diving to depths of up to 20 meters for seafood such as abalone and conch to sell in the marketplace. Lee's grandmother was one of these "Mermaids of Jeju Island." "MAGO is also a homage and mythical interpretation of the Haenyeo as beautiful mermaid warriors and wise protectors the ocean."¹⁰

Dohee Lee emphasizes that her work is a communication with the spiritual realms. For her, the ritual begins even before the idea is formed, as it is her way of life. She listens to her dreams and works in communication with her guides as an integral part of her creative process. Like traditional rituals, her Ritual Performances are often

⁸ Korean traditional path of a medicine woman/man.

⁹ www.doheeleee.com

¹⁰ www.doheeleee.com

interactive or hold an intention that she invites the audience to participate in. For example, in her seasonal ARA Gut Rituals, she invites the participants to explore water as a vessel to connect with their ancestors through singing. While in the Puri Project, she focuses on the release of suppressed or suffering spirits through her use of voice. Lee states, “I passionately believe by practicing and performing art we can commune and heal with people and spirits.” ¹¹

While Lee studied traditional Korean drumming, she reminds the audience that her work is a new form of performance that enfolds Korean traditional and contemporary art. As a woman no longer living in her own country, it is important to her to keep a connection with her traditions, but she also feels a strong need to address issues that relate to her life in a different land. She wants to give a voice to that which has changed in her own country. For example, the United States government currently occupies Jeju Island with a military base and has destroyed much of the ancient coral reefs by pouring cement for their construction. As an environmental artist, she states, “Art gives me the power of transformation to confront all these challenges, facts and issues creatively through performance ritual.” ¹² Lee re-imagines Ritual Performance as an act of cultural resistance.

Dohee Lee reminds us that in difficult times people have the tendency to congregate and find strength with each other and to free themselves from fear and doubts by participating in collective ceremonies. Rituals are complex and bring together different art forms into a cathartic experience. It carries the purpose of action and intention to form a link between the human, nature and spiritual realms. As a

¹¹ www.doheele.com

¹² www.doheele.com

migrant artist, Lee's changing landscape of her inner "home" transforms through her artwork and is in constant communication with her ancestral soul lineage through research and dreams.

ON DREAMS AND WAKING

In his book *Secrets of the Talking Jaguar*, Martin Prechtel reminds us that there are two simultaneous faces of reality: the world where we dream, and the world where we work. Prechtel states, "To a shaman, a dream is not a creation of the mind, psyche or soul. It is the remembered fragment of the experience of one's natural spirit in this world, that never ceases living, forming as it does a parallel continuum to the waking world. It actually forms one half of the substance of our lives."¹³ While a modern intellectual may dismiss this idea as merely "symbolic" or remove oneself from the experience by viewing dreams from a psychological perspective, he insists on the necessity for re-vision. Prechtel states, "Like the two opposing wings of a butterfly, the dream world is one wing and the awake world is the other wing. The butterfly must have both wings connected to the Heart in order to fly and function. Neither wing-dreams or waking- contains all of life. Real life occurs as a result of the interaction of the two. The life is the butterfly's heart, and both dreaming and awake working life are necessary to keep the heart alive. Our lives, like the butterfly's heart, are kept aloft by the two wings."¹⁴

¹³ Prechtel, Martin. *Secrets of the Talking Jaguar: Memoirs from the Living Heart of a Mayan Village* (NY: Penguin Putnam, 1998)

¹⁴ Prechtel, Martin. *Secrets of the Talking Jaguar: Memoirs from the Living Heart of a Mayan Village* (NY: Penguin Putnam, 1998)

Prechtel describes the other world similarly to Malidoma Some: “If this world were a tree, then the other world would be the roots—the part of the plant we can’t see, but that puts the sap into the trees veins. The other world feeds this tangible world—the world that can feel pain, that can eat and drink, that can fail; the world that goes around in cycles; the world where we die. The other world is what makes this world work.”¹⁵

Prechtel explains that there is a delicate and vital balance that must be cared for between the dream world and the awake, the other world and the physical. “The way we help the other world continue is by feeding it with our beauty. All human beings come from the other world, but we forget it a few months after we’re born. This amnesia occurs because we are dazzled by the beauty and physicality of this world. We spend the rest of our lives putting back together our memories of the other world, enough to serve the greater good and to teach the new amnesiacs- the children- how to remember.”¹⁶ I like to imagine a great spider of time, weaving between the two worlds. As humans, it is one of our roles to be certain that the strings are repaired when they are broken.

¹⁵ “*Saving the Indigenous Soul: An Interview with Martin Prechtel*” The Sun Magazine. (April Issue 2001)

¹⁶ “*Saving the Indigenous Soul: An Interview with Martin Prechtel*” The Sun Magazine. (April Issue 2001)

“The main thing, as Chivalu had said, was to not only shy away from judging the forms the seeds and people took in order to survive strange conditions created by people who’d lost their seeds, but as a spiritual human of a truly indigenous core to simply keep growing the “seeds” in every sense, so they could have a place to direct their ever-ready magical manifestation. The Holy in the Seeds had to direct. We as people had to provide spiritual ground and physical fertile space and earth for the seeds to do what they already very well knew how to do. The seeds had always been there. The seeds had always been home. It was up to us to be at home keeping the seeds alive.”
(Prechtel, *The Unlikely Peace at Cuchumaquic*)

CONCLUSION:

At a young age, I was eager to find elders who remembered the old-fashioned ways, where authentic human heart connection could be found. The arts became my haven for spiritual and communal potential that was lacking in most of my formal public school life. Dance was a place for me to discuss the unspoken, explore other worlds, touch hearts, awaken minds; feel the beauty and grief of being alive with others. I was relieved to find that there were still places to jump across human divides, fall in and out of grace, dive, crash, catch and be caught. I was grateful to discover others who also questioned contemporary life through their art and yearned for something other than the modern isolation that is so often served to people on a silver platter of “advancement.” Whereas many were putting their grandparents (our own elders) away in old folks homes to forget and be forgotten, there was a counterculture of artists working hard to remember. Multi-generational companies such as Liz Lerman (DC) or Working Ground Dance Theater (VT) and intergenerational projects like *Familiar Movement* with David Dorfman (NY) set out with the intention to plant the seeds of multi-generational community.

These days, in a time when large corporations (such as Monsanto) are violently discouraging social movements that encourage community (and the rebirth of healthy,

indigenous seeds), creating technology such as the *Terminator* seed, there are artists who have found strength in their voice to speak the unspoken. Martin Prechtel might say that these artists *feed the holies with delicious words* and the world with their beauty. Lee, Navarrete and Tabor-Smith are just three contemporary examples of artists living in active communication with their ancestral cultures or Diasporas. I continue to be curious about the profound migration of their ideas and the cross-pollination of thought found in their artwork.

While it is important as humans to face the grief of what has been lost during this era of the “hollowness of modernity’s mechanical soul,”¹⁷ I also wish to pay homage to the unusual and wild “sprouts” of art that have grown in between the cracks of cement from the wild minds and hearts of courageous artists of today. They are comfortable in discomfort and seek beauty on the edge of the unknown. I have chosen only a mere sampling of each of their body of works as an introduction to their cultural influences and how they impact their work and role as environmental artists today. As Prechtel¹⁸ reminds us, *People are seeds and when we die, the sprouts of our lives “echo” the beauty that we have (hopefully) lived and offered during our lifetime.*

“Then and even greater and truly hopeful notion arose as I started to think about what this meant for the Indigenous Soul of humans: in every single seed I’d ever given away for the previous decade and a half, there inside each of those crazy over-crossed, mixed-up, unrecognizable, unpredictable seeds, seeds considered polluted and hodgepodge rejects by agro-science, there resided at least some tiny genetic particle of Tzutujil corn (one’s indigenous nature) that, at will, could re-find itself...”(Prechtel, *The Unlikely Peace at Cuchumaquic*)

¹⁷ Prechtel, Martin. *The Unlikely Peace at Cuchumaquic* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2012)

¹⁸ Prechtel, Martin. *The Unlikely Peace at Cuchumaquic* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2012)

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