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Letters As Living Trees: Reading Tagore's Correspondence Through The Lens Of Ecological Aesthetics

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Abstract

Man's life is bound up with the grasses under his feet and the sky that arches above him. In this ashram, trees and humans share one breath. (Tagore 1909, 112)

Through these words, Rabindranath Tagore articulates a profound philosophy of life, highlighting man's deeply entwined relationship with the natural world, which contrary to the exploitative nature of our times, helps convey a sense of mutual interdependence, breath, and belongingness. Furthermore, when read, through the lens of ecocriticism, the present paper interprets Tagore's letters not only as major historical artifacts, but as living documents of environmental consciousness. The paper, therefore, wishes to interpret a selection of Tagore's letters as texts that grow naturally like trees, and are in turn shaped by a humanitarian philosophy, which seeks to envision a harmonious embracing of both Man and Nature. The present paper reads into Tagore's depiction of rivers, seasons, trees, and rural life not just as literary devices, but rather as active instruments of ecological thought. Drawing inspiration from his letters written particularly during his years at Shilaidaha, Shantiniketan, and Kalimpong, the present paper wishes to unfold how a sustainable ecological vision through the metaphor of "tree" that depicts letters intimately connected to the natural world. Additionally, the paper also proposes to argue how patterns of slow growth, renewal, and organic decay, found in the green world of trees, find subtle mirroring in Tagore's letters as if the letters themselves carried within them a pulse of earth, a spirit of '*Jeevan Devta*'[1], the immanent divinity of life itself. In doing so, the paper also draws on concepts of 'ecological humanism'[2], postcolonial environmental thought, and aesthetics of slowness, putting Tagore's writing in dialogue with the environmental philosophies of Arne Naess, Val Plumwood, and Wendell Berry. Finally, the paper also wishes to demonstrate how Tagore's letters are not mere personal reflections of Tagore's feelings and emotions alone but are also highly pedagogical. The paper offers us a space where aesthetics, environment, and ethics converge, inviting us to reimagine his letters as a part of our spiritual ecology in an estranged, environmentally deteriorating world.

Keywords: Agrarian Humanism, Deep Ecology, Ecological Aesthetics, Environmental Humanism, Harmony with existence, *Jeevan Devta*.

Introduction

> *Man's life is bound up with the grasses under his feet and the sky that arches above him. In this ashram, trees and humans share one breath. (Tagore 1909, 112)*

These words, penned by Tagore, have a charm of their own. It is not merely a decorative phrase, but expressions of a worldview deeply rooted in the philosophy of interdependence, connection, and shared life. At a time when modern industrial societies are continuously eroding the foundational elements of our natural world, Tagore envisions a world where both man and tree, thought and earth, soul and season can live together in harmony. In the age of climate change and environmental crisis, Tagore's reflections are not just poetic ornaments but necessary lenses through which we rethink and reshape our relationship with the natural order.

Scholars have often noted Tagore's poems, essays, and fiction as embodiments of his aesthetic and environmental sensibility. However, his letters, a part of his ecological imagination, also play a crucial role in depicting the natural world around him. His letters, written particularly at Shilaidaha, Shantiniketan, and Kalimpong, capture the natural beauty of riverscapes, landscapes, and the transition of seasons, reverberating through all forms of nature. However, rather than just being literary depictions, these letters often function as living ecological beings, breathing with life, death, and renewal, as they reflect his profound philosophical engagement with the natural world and his belief in the interconnectedness of all living things. These qualities align his letters with what most environmental thinkers describe as "ecological aesthetics"[3] (Berleant 1992).

In his letters, Rabindranath Tagore consistently returns to the image of trees, giving them a significant role as both a natural element and a powerful metaphor. Similar to a tree that grows slowly from the earth and remains deeply rooted, Tagore's letters are imbued with the same ecological process, which, though fragmentary, is vibrantly alive. This paper will explore the tone, vision, and form of Tagore's ecological humanism, a philosophy that regards nature not as a mere resource but as a close relative, a living participant in our moral, social, and spiritual existence. Furthermore, the divine spirit immanent in all life, that Tagore conceptualises as his "Jeevan Devta," comes into close connection with the philosophical ideas of Arne Naess "Deep ecology,"[4] Val Plumwood's "Logic of domination"[5] and Wendell Berry's "Agrarian Humanism,"[6] revealing how Tagore's ideas anticipate and enrich these discourses. Thus, Tagore's ecological philosophy exhibits him not only as an admirer of nature but a thinker of ecological balance. His letters, like trees, grow slowly, offering us wisdom in times of unprecedented environmental crisis and climate change.

The Stream of Life that runs through Tagore's view of the Natural World

> The Padma's current flows through this land just as my blood flows through my body — we share the same rhythm, the same endless song. (Tagore 2011, 34)

In his letters, Rabindranath Tagore offers a glimpse into his vision of life, one that profoundly emphasises the fundamental interconnectedness of humans with the natural world. Written during his stays in the serene countryside of Bengal, these letters radiate a deep sense of humanity, recognizing no separation between man and Nature, as Tagore portrays human life to be as rooted in the natural world as a tree that grows and thrives in close harmony with both the soil and the human soul.

Contrasted against an increasingly industrialized, mechanized, and ecologically detached world of our contemporary times, Tagore's letters exemplify the same philosophy that is found in another of his celebrated work, namely *The Religion of Man*[7] (1931) where he argues that humanity's unique distinction lies in the "surplus in man"—a wellspring of creative energy that extends beyond the mere needs of survival. This surplus is what allows us to seek not just existence, but meaning, not just utility, but beauty. It is this same force, this spiritual surplus, that drives his letters, transforming them from simple observations into a living testament to a deep ecological consciousness—a philosophy that sees nature not as a resource, but as a sacred partner in our shared journey toward a more unified and complete spiritual existence.

This profound surplus, which finds its voice in poetry, music, and art, is the very core of Tagore's humanism, as it embodies the fundamental human impulse to connect the individual self with the universal, to merge the finite with the infinite. This longing is what he calls the "Creative Principle of Unity," a cosmic urge that manifests in every act of creation. The trees, rivers, and landscapes of his letters are not merely a backdrop for human life but are themselves an active medium through which the human soul can realize its connection with this unifying principle. His letters, therefore, are more than literary depictions; they are a direct engagement with the universe, a spiritual dialogue with the very fabric of existence. They are the living record of a philosophy that seeks to transcend the boundaries of the individual self and find wholeness in a loving, reciprocal relationship with all of creation. This is the goal of his vision: to move from an isolated, material self to a universal, spiritual being, a journey made possible by embracing the natural world as a co-creator and a divine companion[8].

Shilaidaha, Shantiniketan, and Kalimpong — Tagore's Epistolary Landscapes as Ecological Textures

Shilaidaha, a lush village located on the banks of the river Padma, in present-day Bangladesh, was the rich soil where Tagore's ecological imagination first took root. His letters from this period (collected in *Letters from a Young Poet*) view Nature not as mere objects of observation, but as active participants in articulating human emotions and thought. The waves of the river, the lush paddy fields, and the boats gliding on the Padma under the vast open skies all become infused together to reflect the inner mind of the poet.

What makes his letters from Shilaidaha crucial for an ecological reading is that Tagore tries to dismantle the boundary between the world of human beings and the natural world of non-humans, as: "[t]he Moonlight drowns the sky tonight, and the river lies still, as if dreaming. Its murmuring flow is the earth's own breath, rising and falling in sleep" (Dutta and Robinson 1997, 45).

This phrase depicting the river as '*dreaming*,' is not merely decorative but highly metaphorical, as in doing so Tagore attempts to humanize the landscape, imbuing it with inner life. The use of personification is significant not for poetic embellishment but for its ontological nature. The words in the quoted extract — "earth's own breath" — collapse the boundaries between biological and geographical difference, articulating nature as a subject that is alive, and much like a human being can be perceived to be "dreaming and breathing." The syntax of the phrase too shows the free flow of sentences without hard punctuations, mirroring the fluid interconnection and integration of earth, water, and sky.

Letters written from Shilaidaha's lodgings of the poet are also the early saplings of Tagore's ecological humanism, and from here, the metaphor of the tree starts becoming

more prominent. Tagore's stay at Shilaidaha plays a fundamental role in shaping the ecological philosophy of Tagore, as he often observes how nature serves a purpose beyond its utilitarian role as it seeks a reverential, kin-like relationship with human beings.

Tagore's letters from Shilaidaha can also be observed to often confer a picture of riverine solitude, almost sensuous and immersed in the rhythm of exotic nature. However, it was first at Shantiniketan that this ecological closeness developed into a philosophy of life and education. Unlike the pristine and serene images of natural beauty, illustrating the lapping of the river against its bank or the dancing of the wind which sets a ripple across the rice fields, Tagore at Shantiniketan[8] tried to re-conceptualize man's relationship with nature as an organic bond, by laying down the foundations of the Shantiniketan as an "ashram" that revolved around the idea of seeking education not away from the lap of natural surroundings, but instead under open skies, adjacent to trees and earth. Tagore writes:

Here in Shantiniketan we live under the tree, our classes held in the open air […] The Children learn not about life but through life […] Education must not be confined within walls; it must be breathed in with the air of nature. (1909, 47)

Thus, the passage reveals a radical pedagogical ethos, one that became the cornerstone of Rabindranath Tagore's groundbreaking educational experiment at Shantiniketan. This philosophy fundamentally rejects the dualism between the learner and the landscape, reimagining education as a 'relational act'—a dynamic and living process where the natural world becomes an active participant in the very act of knowing. The oppressive rigidity of the traditional classroom is replaced by a curriculum that unfolds with the rhythms of the seasons and the organic flow of nature. Here, trees are teachers and open skies are classrooms, inviting the student to engage with the universe not merely as a subject of study, but as an inseparable part of its living, spiritual rhythm, fostering a holistic and empathetic connection to all of creation. The new curriculum envisioned an eco-centric vision of life whereby human beings were taught to live together with nature, learn from nature, and grow alongside it.

In today's contemporary era marked by devastating ecological degradation and climate change, the educational philosophy envisioned by Tagore in laying the foundation stones of the Shantiniketan ashram stands out as a prophetic experiment, a visionary model of eco-centric pedagogy, an epistemological reorientation, where both nature and humanity are not in contradiction to each other but are closely connected as participants in their shared life.

Like a tree whose life spans different soils, Tagore's letters find their roots in the fertile landscapes of Shilaidaha, grow under the open skies of Shantiniketan, and finally reach a spiritual maturity amid the misty hills of Kalimpong. This body of work, scattered across these distinct terrains, offers a deeply meditative and spiritual picture of nature. Here, the slow-floating clouds, calm tall pines, and ethereal misty mountains all kindle a profound sense of awe and humility, blurring the line between life and death, as "[i]n these mountain mists, one feels the presence of the infinite where the soul meets eternity, and all boundaries dissolve" (Dutta and Robinson 1997, 231).

Expound in detail, Tagore does not romanticize this sublime feeling of unity with the universe but sees it as a philosophical state brought about by living in close harmony with the natural world, whereby existential binaries such as life and death, soul and body begin to dissolve. In his writings, nature is never a mere setting for human experience; it is a co-participant in spiritual and existential inquiry, turning the ethereal landscapes of

Kalimpong, Shilaidaha, and Shantiniketan from a trivial geographical place into profoundly philosophical spaces. Herein, the human mind realizes its kinship with all forms of being, and the soul feels it has met eternity, as Tagore suggests, that to 'die with nature' is not a death at all, but a sublime integration into a divine spiritual essence, which he calls '*Jeevan Devta*'.

Through his correspondence with figures like Indira Devi Chaudhurani, Maitreyi Devi, and Nirmal Kumari Mahalanobis, Tagore's letters illustrate how a meaningful relationship between humans and nature can be cultivated, not by the principle of dominating or preserving it in a detached sense, but by believing that we share the same destiny and must accept each other without resistance. Thus, Kalimpong completes the philosophical journey that began at the fertile riverbanks of Shilaidaha and matured under the open skies of Shantiniketan. His letters, evolving like living trees, absorb the spirit of each place in their roots, reminding us that human life is not isolated from the natural world but is infused into a single, breathing reality.

From 'Jeevan Devta' to 'Deep Ecology,' Tagore and Arne Naess' 'Arboreal Ontologies'

As industrialization has increasingly taken hold and environmental degradation has become more apparent, many innovative environmental philosophies have emerged, shaping contemporary ecological thought. Among these, the philosophical contributions made by Arne Naess (1912-2009), a Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer, are significant. In his seminal article *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement*[4] *(1973)*, he dissects ecology into two forms, terming them Shallow and Deep ecology. 'Shallow Ecology' concerns nature in a detached sense: primarily with pollution and depletion of resources. Whereas Deep Ecology, a term coined by Naess himself in 1973, is a fundamental reorientation of human identity and its relationship with the natural world. It sees Nature not as a mere resource but as a *self*, a living presence with an intrinsic value: "The equal right to live and blossom is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom[…] their own ecological forms cannot be quantified against the industrial paradigm"(Naess 1973, 95-100).

This philosophical framework finds a striking resemblance in Tagore's ecological vision. Despite predating Naess by several decades, the ideas of both thinkers appear similar — as if they were spiritual cousins — erasing the artificial boundaries between human and non-human world. Like Naess, Tagore too believes in the interconnectedness of all life. His experimental school, Shantiniketan is an embodiment of this interconnectedness, focusing on education imparted in the lap of trees, rivers, and open skies. In a letter he writes, "[H]ere at Shantiniketan, we live under the trees, our classes held in the open air [...] The children learn not about life but through life, with the sky as their schoolroom" (Tagore 1962, 47).

Tagore describes the way in which students are educated in Shantiniketan resonates with Arne Næss's call for a lifestyle that advocates "simple in means, rich in ends" (1989, 107), thus asserting a decentred self not above or outside of nature but a life deeply embedded within an interdependent ecological web. Furthermore, as for both Tagore and Naess, the true ecological harmony is a sacred presence, a space where the boundaries between body and soul dissolve. As a mountaineer himself, Naess often mentioned the sublime silence of the heights as a space where the individual merges with its surroundings, as the sublime serenity of high altitudes diminishes the individual ego before forces unknown to humankind. Thus, in a letter from Kalimpong, Tagore writes: "In these

mountain mists, the soul stands bare before eternity. The boundaries we draw between life and death, between self and the boundless, melt like morning dew" (Dutta & Robinson 1997, 231).

In this powerful letter, Tagore's description of the soul standing "bare before eternity" in the mountain mists captures the dissolution of dualities—a state where the boundaries between life and death, self and the boundless, simply melt away. This is not a mere poetic ornamentation but a profound philosophical and ecological reality. For both Tagore and Næss, nature is not a passive backdrop; it is a sacred presence, a living site where human life is inextricably linked to the cosmos itself. In their view, this direct experience of interconnectedness stands as the foundation for a deeply ethical and holistic relationship with the world.

Pioneering a Reciprocal Pedagogy: Breaking the Logic of Domination

Best known for her groundbreaking work in the field of ecofeminism, green theory, and critique of Cartesian dualism, Val Plumwood (1939-2008) is one of the most prominent environmental thinkers of the late 20th century. Her foundational work, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), critiques the dualist nature of Western philosophy and questions the legitimacy of binary oppositions: man/woman, reason/emotion, culture/nature, where the first term is privileged over the other. This disproportion, she argues, gives rise to a 'logic of domination,' a hierarchical framework that justifies the subordination of women, nature, and other oppressed groups by the elevation of masculine, colonial, and marginalizing ideals. This leads to a construction of 'master identity'[5], as Plumwood calls it, which reinforces ecological exploitation and social oppression by positioning nature as passive and inferior, an Other. Contrary to the 'master identity,' Plumwood proposes an ecological rationality, a form of reasoning that is relational, non-hierarchical, and grounded in interdependence, as she writes: "The denial of dependency on nature and the attempt to hyper-separate the human self from the more than human world is a dangerous illusion" (2002, 102).

Plumwood explains that this refusal to acknowledge our dependency on nature and attempting to hyper-separate the human self from the more-than-human world is a dangerous illusion. To overcome this, Val Plumwood argues that the world can only survive if we fundamentally reconfigure our identity, shifting from a detached observer to an active participant in an ecological relationship built on the principles of reciprocity, connection, and mutual care.

This reorientation of identity, ethics, and knowledge profoundly intersects with Rabindranath Tagore's idea of education, as epitomized by the Shantiniketan ashram he established in Bolpur. The establishment of the Shantiniketan ashram was a radical revival of the Gurukul system of education, founded on the principle that learning is best conducted within a natural environment, beneath vast open skies and amidst trees. Thus, here 'trees' are not mere 'objects of study' but are revered in the same way as teachers, offering students vital lessons in silence and the rhythm of life. Like Plumwood, Tagore seeks to dismantle the mechanical, oppressive, and alienating model of the colonial educational system. He insisted that spiritual growth and intellectual vitality should arise from one's close affinity with one's surroundings. This is not at all sentimental but a radically charged pedagogic alternative, one that strongly agrees with Plumwood's reparative model of education that focuses on responsiveness rather than mastery, attentiveness rather than control.

Despite belonging to different epochs and historical contexts, the most striking point of convergence for both Tagore and Plumwood is their vision of education as a

transformative process. Plumwood argues for an education that teaches ecological literacy, humility, and receptiveness to others, which seamlessly aligns with Tagore's vision of Shantiniketan, a living embodiment of eco-centric pedagogy. It is internalised through a holistic understanding of local cultural textures, outdoor classrooms, and aesthetic experiences. Learning, for both Tagore and Plumwood, is an exercise of care, kindness, and greater harmony. Together, they offer us a model of eco-humanism, a philosophy of ethics and education embedded deeply in ideas of interdependence, reverence, and unity between humanity and nature in an age of environmental collapse and climate change.

Affection and Kinship: Wendell Berry and Tagore's Agrarian Worldview

> The care of the earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all our most pleasing responsibility. (Berry 2002, 146)

This powerful assertion by Wendell Berry, a famous American farmer, poet, and environmental philosopher, through these words, delineates the basis of his agrarian philosophy, which is based on a worldview that reveres, cares, and emphasizes a connection with the land. In his seminal work *The Unsettling of America* (1977), he offers a profound critique of industrial agriculture, claiming that it has shattered the moral bond between human and nature, reducing fertile ground to dead capital, and transforming community-based connection to mechanized monocultures. His agrarian ethics envisions a world that sees nature with utmost attention, care, and kindness. The philosophy of a place-based connection between humans and nature by Berry finds a lyrical counterpart in Tagore's own ideas about nature and education. In a letter written from Shilaidaha in 1893 to his niece Indira Devi, Tagore laments the severe condition of the natural world due to colonial modernity. He writes, "the Padma, once our mother river, now lies bound by steamships. Her banks, once shaded by trees, are bare, her song is lost in the noise of engines" (Tagore 2011, 56).

This is not a mere nostalgia. Like Berry, Tagore regards the intrusion of industrial modernity as having fractured not just the ecology, but it's very ontology. The river Padma is not just a natural entity but stands out as a mother, a living being, silenced and subjugated by colonial and capitalistic forces.

Thus, both thinkers can be inferred to be lamenting over this collapse and thereby call attention to a relational ecology, a philosophy where land is not an object of ownership but a participant in the everyday life of man. It may be mentioned, in this regard that Tagore's idea of relational ecology aligns closely with Berry's notion of 'affection'. As explained above, Tagore conceptualizes his "Jeevan Devta" as the immanent life force that dwells in all living beings. Hence, expressing his philosophy through his pedagogical reflections, Tagore writes:

> We teach the children here that the soil is our mother's lap, not dead matter but living breath. Let them learn this truth not from books, but by lying on the earth and feeling its heartbeat. (Dutta and Robinson 1997, 113)

This is not merely a metaphorical allusion to the beauties of nature, but instead essentially captures Tagore's epistemological position. The soil has life, and the very act of learning demands immersion, empathy, and connection with the natural world.

Another aspect of the severed ecological bond between humans and nature is the commodification of land under colonial and capitalist regimes. In his *Unsettling of America* (1977), Berry condemns the reductionist logic of defining land as

mere "property" (1977, 43). This logic strips the sacred role of nature as "commonwealth of all living beings" (2002, 149). Berry laments the severed moral bond between people and the earth, highlighting how capitalist exploitation and industrialization have deeply disturbed the ecological balance. However, the idea of interacting with the natural world, not being devoid of 'affection,' lies in stark contradiction to the capitalistic exploitation; as well as in close contiguity to the Tagore's ecological philosophy, that advocates for a spiritual kinship between humans and nature, where land is not an object of ownership but an active participant in the moral and aesthetic life of an individual. These factors lead us to a comprehensive understanding of how nature is deeply rooted in the writings of both Tagore and Berry and how their ecological aesthetics is a return, not just a nostalgic retreat, but a radical conscious reconnection with our planet, with our community, and with ourselves.

Beyond Aestheticizing Ecology: Inherent Limitations in Tagore's Environmental Philosophy

While Tagore's Letters do articulate profound insights about ecological interconnection, a critical postcolonial, ecocritical reading reveals an embedded socio-political limitation inherent in his missives. His environmental philosophy often transcends material realities, engaging his readers in an aesthetic and spiritual realm. Yet his humanism unwittingly obscures the issues of power structure, material pragmatism, and limitations of eco-centric education (M. Bhattacharya 2025).

To expatiate vividly, Tagore's letters appear to be a lyrical fusion of human and non-human world, endorsing a biocentric ethic quite ahead of its time. Yet beneath its deep spiritualism lies an embodied power structure that needs revelation. As Postcolonial critic Ramchandra Guha (1999) has argued, it was the Zamindari statutes that allowed Tagore to aestheticize the banks of rivers while overlooking the exploitation of land by the colonial rulers. The riverscapes he perceives to be so romantic were also the sites of indigo coercion and steamboat monopolies. Those were the sites where subaltern[9] experiences were silenced and native agrarian communities destroyed. Thus, the transcendent nature of the letters conceals the injustices that happened to the common people (M. Bhattacharya 2025).

Both Tagore and Berry condemn the industrialization of natural landscapes, advocating for a pre-colonial ecological worldview as ideal for society. But, as economist Amartya Sen contends, dismissing technology altogether for ecological stability is problematic and self-sabotaging. Sen says if innovation is adopted with democratic principles and responsibility, it can alleviate poverty as well as ecological strain. Tagore laments over the commodification of the riverscapes, yet he offers no alternate pathways to reconcile nature with material progress. Thus, the letters romanticize nature yet neglect pragmatic pathways to socio-economic justice (Chotiner 2019)

Endnotes

1 'Jeevan Devta' (Life-Deity), a belief of immanent divinity in all beings, is an Upanishadic-inspired concept developed by Tagore. It is a foundational term in Tagore's environmental ethics, contradicting Western anthropocentrism.

2. 'Ecological humanism', as defined by Bookchin (1982), rejects the idea of 'nature' as a mere human resource and argues for a sustainable, interconnected relationship with the natural world.

3. Arnold Berleant's 'Ecological Aesthetics' (1992) constitutes a non-exploitative, participatory human-nature relationship in meaning-making discourses. It aligns with Tagore's non-dualistic vision.

4. 'Deep and Shallow Ecology' (1973) contrasts the shallow, detached environmentalism with deep ecological engagement of life. Tagore's letters, despite being penned decades before it, anticipate the philosophy that envisions the intrinsic value of all life.
5. Logic of dominance and Master Identity Val Plumwood (1993) highlights the Western model of binary opposition, projecting how Western philosophy is predominated by hegemonic and hierarchical ideas and identities.
6. 'Agrarian Humanism' centres agriculture as a moral practice, considers organic farming a necessary method both for soil conservation and human development.
7. The Religion of Man, a collection of philosophical lectures delivered at Oxford University in 1930, is deeply rooted in Upanishadic non dualistic belief that sees God's creation not separated from God itself but closely interconnected with each other.
8. See Chapter III of The Religion of Man, where Tagore introduces his ideas about the "Creative Principle of Unity".
9. Shantiniketan, an open-air pedagogical institution, is a pioneer of place-based education, decades before David Sobel's 'place-based education' (1996) and modern eco-centric education.
10. Subaltern is term used by Antonio Gramsci for the first time in his Prison Notebook to describe the social groups excluded from the hegemonic power structure. However, later theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha have exploited this term further, explaining an epistemic silence of marginalized communities by colonial and native elites.
11. Chakravarty, Gargi. 2005. Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal. Bluejay Books.
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