

Wounded earth; Wounded bodies: Submerged Knowledge and Feminist Resistance in Oceanic Spaces

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Abstract

This paper examines the convergence of ecofeminist thought and the Blue Humanities to explore how women's bodies and marine environments are not only commodified under patriarchal and capitalist systems but also subjected to epistemic erasure and environmental dispossession. Drawing on the work of Françoise d'Eaubonne, Vandana Shiva, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, and others, it investigates how colonial and extractivist regimes suppress the knowledge systems and lived experiences of coastal women and marginalized communities, treating both water and the female body as mute, extractable entities. Through literary analysis, environmental case studies, and cultural critique, the paper demonstrates that the marginalization of embodied and localized knowledges sustains broader ecological and gendered injustices. It ultimately argues that a fused ecofeminist and oceanic framework offers not only critique but a mode of resistance recovering submerged epistemologies and reframing both marine and female bodies as sites of memory, agency, and ecological insight.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Blue Humanities, Epistemic Erasure, Marine Ecology, Colonial Extractivism, Gendered Environmental Injustice, Submerged Knowledge Systems*

Introduction

Voyager, chief of the pelagic world...
Toward dawn we shared with you
your hour of desolation,
the huge lingering passion
of your unearthly outcry,
as you swung your blind head
toward us and laboriously opened
a bloodshot, glistening eye,
in which we swam with terror and recognition. (Kunitz, *Wellfleet Whale*)

To begin with the whale is to begin with loss. Stanley Kunitz's elegiac whale, bleeding, stranded, and staring with a "bloodshot, glistening eye" invokes not just ecological grief, but a recognition of silenced suffering. The whale, like the ocean it comes from, and like women's bodies across

histories, embodies a deep symbolic presence; powerful and persistently ignored. These bodies are not merely exploited; they are spoken over, reclassified as inert, and rendered epistemically illegible in systems that prioritize conquest and control. Both marine environments and feminized bodies have long been positioned as mysteries to be mapped, penetrated, or subdued thus justifying their dispossession.

In recent decades, ecofeminism and the Blue Humanities have offered critical tools for interrogating the co-constitutive oppressions of ecological degradation and gendered violence. Yet, alone, each field leaves epistemological gaps. Ecofeminism, as first articulated by Françoise d'Eaubonne, links the domination of nature with the subjugation of women under capitalist-patriarchal structures. Ynestra King extends this connection by arguing that "eco-feminism is about connectedness and wholeness... [and] the devastation of the earth and her beings... is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies" (King 108). While potent, much ecofeminist analysis remains rooted in terrestrial metaphors, often overlooking oceanic spaces and fluid ontologies.

This gap is where the Blue Humanities enters. A growing field of inquiry, it foregrounds the ocean not as backdrop, but as a dynamic site of trauma, memory, and resistance. Scholars such as Elizabeth DeLoughrey have extended ecofeminist concerns into maritime critique, showing how oceans, like women's bodies, have been cast as spaces of conquest, extraction, and epistemic silence. DeLoughrey writes, "the ocean is now understood in terms of its agency, its anthropogenic pollution and acidity, and its interspecies ontologies," a shift that opens space for imagining what has been submerged both literally and metaphorically (DeLoughrey 34).

Similarly, Vandana Shiva's critiques emphasize that violence against nature and women often operates by silencing ecological knowledge. "These engineering and technological feats," she writes, "are part of the Baconian vision of substituting sacred rivers with inert, passive water resources" (Shiva 176). Shiva's concern is not only the loss of ecological health, but also the displacement of women's traditional ecological epistemologies, particularly in the Global South. "One does not readily slay a mother," she notes, but once nature is reclassified as dead matter, the violence becomes culturally sanctioned (Shiva 16). Shiva further explains,

This transformation of nature from a living, nurturing mother to inert, dead and manipulable matter was eminently suited to the exploitation imperative of growing capitalism. The nurturing earth image acted as a cultural constraint on exploitation of nature. 'One does not readily slay a mother, dig her entrails or mutilate her body.' But the mastery and domination images created by the Baconian programme and the scientific revolution removed all restraint and functioned as cultural sanctions for the denudation of nature. (Shiva, *Staying Alive* 16).

This paper brings ecofeminist and Blue Humanities frameworks into dialogue to examine how oceanic environments and feminized bodies are not only materially extracted, but discursively erased their voices, knowledge, and rhythms overwritten by capitalist and colonial epistemologies. From myths that associate femininity with oceanic danger to development policies that erase fisherwomen's expertise, the stakes of this convergence are epistemic as much as ecological. Only by reading the ocean and the body together: as archives of memory, resistance, and relational knowledge can we imagine sustainable alternatives to systems built on conquest.

Ultimately, this paper argues that a blue ecofeminist framework is essential not simply for confronting exploitation, but for recovering what has been epistemically drowned: the submerged wisdom, histories, and agencies of both water and women.

Naming and Knowing

The Enlightenment era marked a pivotal shift in how nature and women were perceived and treated. Carolyn Merchant, in *The Death of Nature*, elucidates how the mechanistic worldview of modern science transformed the Earth from a nurturing mother into a machine, thereby justifying its exploitation. She explains that this shift in worldview enabled the legitimization of nature's exploitation, encouraged unchecked economic growth, and established a social system that placed women in a subordinate position.

This transformation wasn't merely metaphorical. Francis Bacon, a key figure in the Scientific Revolution, employed female metaphors to describe the subjugation of nature, asserting that nature must be bound into service and made a slave to human ends. Such language reflects a broader epistemic framework that sought to dominate and control both women and the natural world. Merchant further argues that the shift from an organic to a mechanistic worldview was instrumental in facilitating this domination. Prior to the Scientific Revolution, nature was perceived as a living, nurturing force, often associated with the feminine principle; Mother Earth which sustained life and required respect. However, with the rise of mechanistic science and capitalism, nature came to be seen as an inanimate machine, a resource to be dissected, controlled, and exploited for human gain.

This mechanistic view not only justified the exploitation of nature but also reinforced patriarchal structures that subordinated women. The same ideological framework that viewed nature as inert and passive extended to women, reducing them to reproductive and domestic roles. Ecofeminists argue that the exploitation of nature under capitalist systems is intrinsically linked to the oppression of women. In *The Second Sex*, French feminist Simone de Beauvoir articulates this connection, observing that

Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings nature inspires in man. He exploits her; and she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will; Nature is a vein gross material in which the soul is imprisoned, and he is the supreme reality; she is contingency and Idea, the finite and the whole; she is what opposes the Spirit, and the Spirit itself (de Beauvoir 144).

While patriarchal systems often exercised dominance without explicit intent, the categorization of the environment facilitated its exploitation. The very act of naming and classifying played a pivotal role in this process. Enlightenment thinkers, by framing nature and women as passive and subordinate, constructed a hierarchical worldview that positioned white, European men at the top. This form of epistemic violence not only legitimized exploitation but also erased alternative modes of knowledge and existence especially those grounded in Indigenous worldviews and matriarchal traditions.

The legacy of this shift continues to influence contemporary environmental and gender discourses. Recognizing the intertwined histories of epistemic erasure and environmental dispossession is essential for developing more equitable and sustainable frameworks. By

challenging the dominant narratives that have historically silenced both women and nature, we can begin to reconstruct a worldview that values interconnectedness, reciprocity, and respect for all forms of life.

Gendered Cartographies

The act of mapping and naming has historically functioned as a tool of domination. Colonial cartography often depicted uncharted territories as *terra nullius*, or nobody's land, suggesting that these spaces lacked human presence, knowledge systems, or sovereign claims, and were therefore available for occupation. This rhetorical erasure not only legitimized colonial expansion but also constituted a broader form of epistemological violence that extended to bodies, particularly feminized bodies, which were similarly rendered mute, empty, and undefined. Both landscapes and bodies were reinscribed within imperial grammar and rewritten to reflect the desires of conquest.

In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray critiques the masculinist construction of women as defined by lack and absence. "The female sex has been traditionally defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the male," she asserts (Irigaray 796). Just as the "undiscovered" land is framed in colonial rhetoric as inert and available, so too is the female body represented as a passive terrain awaiting inscription by the masculine gaze. This spatial logic of conquest, penetration, and control is central to both patriarchal and imperial epistemologies.

Indeed, the metaphorical and literal mapping of women and oceans share common tropes: vastness, mystery, danger, and seduction. The feminization of the sea has long been a feature of Western thought and literature. From *Homer's Odyssey* to maritime exploration narratives, the ocean is both feared and desired, often portrayed as an untamable feminine force. In Greek mythology, sea deities such as sirens lure sailors to their doom with enchanting voices, embodying both erotic allure and mortal peril. During the Age of Exploration, European travelogues frequently referred to the ocean as a capricious mistress, unpredictable and wild, yet necessary to be conquered for imperial glory. Melville's *Moby-Dick* invokes the ocean's "mystical and unfathomable" nature, linking it to a feminine sublime that resists rational control. Similarly, Hélène Cixous, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, observes how Western discourse positions women as "the dark continent," a Freud-derived metaphor that echoes colonial fantasies about Africa and other colonized geographies (Cixous 875). Such comparisons collapse geographic and bodily spaces into feminized "others," subjected to the same controlling impulses. The ocean, like the female body, becomes a site of projection, fear, and desire; mapped, mythologized, and mastered within patriarchal and imperial frameworks.

As Elizabeth DeLoughrey explains in *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, oceans are often made legible through imperial and masculinist lenses that disregard Indigenous and matrilineal maritime epistemologies. She contends that the sea has traditionally been viewed not as a space of interconnected knowledge and cultural memory, but rather as an empty expanse, one that acquires significance only through imperial practices of traversal and designation. Framed as a "Blue Revolution," the Law of the Sea continues to reshape how we understand spatial and temporal boundaries, fostering an ongoing and vital conversation around ocean governance. As Hau'ofa suggests, it provides a vision of "oceanic identity [as it] transcend[s] insularity," yet this vision cannot be disentangled from terrestrial territorial claims.

While the sea is often celebrated as “our pathway to each other and to everyone else,” the frequent use of feminine fluidity as a metaphor can obscure the historical and ongoing violence associated with maritime crossings, including military surveillance of oceanic spaces. A fuller understanding of the ocean’s meaning must therefore reckon with its violences as well as its possibilities, recognizing that “the sea is our most powerful metaphor, the ocean is in us” (Hau’ofa 148). This mirrors how both the ocean and women’s bodies have been denied subjectivity until spoken for or through by patriarchal systems.

Furthermore, Enlightenment science, with its obsessive taxonomizing and mapping impulses, extended its reach into both geographic and bodily terrains. As the natural world was subjected to Linnaean classification and Baconian experimentation, so too were women subjected to gynecological scrutiny and regulation, increasingly treated as anatomical puzzles to be solved rather than holistic beings. The Cartesian separation of mind and body further entrenched this logic, as rationality became equated with masculinity, and corporeality with all its “messiness” with the feminine. As Silvia Federici notes in *Caliban and the Witch*, the rise of modernity and capitalism depended on the “disciplining” of women’s reproductive labor and the regulation of their bodies (Federici 94). This logic persists in contemporary global development practices, particularly in coastal and oceanic contexts. Policies that frame oceans as “blue economies” often erase the labor and ecological knowledge of coastal women. For example, in India, fisherwomen play a crucial role in post-harvest activities, yet government policies fail to prioritize their needs. As one study notes, “India’s draft blue economy policy hardly mentions women’s employment, despite them forming nearly half of the marine fisheries workforce” (Kowshik, 2025). These women, who sustain fishing communities through foraging, net-mending, and tidal knowledge, are often pushed into insecure informal labor when coastal commons are enclosed or access is restricted. A fisherwoman interviewed in Tamil Nadu remarked, “We work in the sun all day drying fish, but they [authorities] never count us when talking about fisheries development” (UN Women, 2020).

Similarly, research in the Indian Ocean Rim reveals that “despite their contributions, women are largely invisible in policy and governance frameworks” (UN Women, 2020). These technocratic, male-dominated models of marine governance reflect a broader trend. Capitalist globalization frequently disguises structures of domination inherited from colonial systems by presenting them as forms of neoliberal progress and empowerment. As a 2021 policy paper argues, “blue growth is often promoted as inclusive and sustainable, yet its implementation risks reproducing existing gendered power structures” (Bennett et al., 2021).

This process continues to sideline and silence communities that have long been excluded from dominant narratives, rendering their experiences and knowledge systems invisible within global discourse. Without intentional inclusion and recognition, the “blue economy” risks becoming a euphemism for blue injustice.

Gendered cartographies reflect more than metaphorical parallels; they reveal deep structural alignments between how bodies and territories are known, regulated, and erased. Feminist and decolonial critiques compel us to reimagine these maps not as fixed representations of truth, but as ideological instruments of power. To redraw these maps is to reclaim space, voice, and agency for both women and the oceanic worlds they are so often metaphorically and materially entwined with.

Oceanic Memory and Submerged Knowledge

Beyond their physical vastness, oceans harbor layered histories and intergenerational memories that have long been submerged beneath dominant historical narratives. Oceans are not blank spaces but archives, fluid and often unreadable within the frameworks of terrestrial historiography. Elizabeth DeLoughrey introduces the notion of “submarine memory” to capture these submerged histories, particularly the transoceanic experiences of colonialism, slavery, diaspora, and resistance. She argues that “the ocean is now understood in terms of its agency, its anthropogenic pollution and acidity, and its interspecies ontologies all of which suggest that climate change is shaping new oceanic imaginaries” (DeLoughrey 34). This shift allows us to think of the ocean not as an inert backdrop but as an active participant in historical and ecological processes.

The Middle Passage, one of the most traumatic events in the transatlantic slave trade is a stark example of what the ocean conceals. Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic*, describes the Atlantic as a “counterculture of modernity,” where identities and histories were forged in movement, violence, and resistance (Gilroy 1993, p. 16). The ocean in this context becomes both grave and womb: a space of death and origin. Yet mainstream historical narratives have largely despatialized these watery routes, focusing on land-based empires while overlooking the fluid geographies of pain and survival inscribed in the sea. To engage with submarine memory, then, is to re-read the ocean as a haunted, historical space saturated with silenced voices and fractured genealogies.

Parallel to this erasure is the marginalization of women's ecological knowledge, especially in coastal and Indigenous communities where women have traditionally served as vital custodians of marine and environmental wisdom. Vandana Shiva critiques the epistemic violence of development paradigms that reduce women's work and knowledge to invisible labor. In *Staying Alive*, she observes that “[these] engineering and technological feats are part of the Baconian vision of substituting sacred rivers with inert, passive water resources,” thereby displacing traditional ecological stewardship often held by women (Shiva 176). The violence here is not merely environmental but epistemological; it obliterates modes of knowing that are relational, embodied, and often gendered.

In many coastal societies, women possess intimate knowledge of tidal patterns, fish migration, and sustainable harvesting practices. This ecological literacy, developed over generations, is often transmitted orally and through practice forms of knowledge not easily codified or validated by scientific institutions. As such, it is frequently dismissed as anecdotal or folkloric. Yet scholars such as Barbara Neis and Marilyn Porter have documented how women's roles in fisheries, particularly in Atlantic Canada and Southeast Asia, are central to both ecological balance and community resilience. Despite this, global fisheries policies often fail to account for these gendered contributions, reflecting what Donna Haraway calls “the god trick” the illusion of neutral, objective knowledge that is in fact deeply situated and exclusionary (*Situated Knowledges*, 1988, p. 581).

Moreover, these submerged knowledges are not merely passive remnants of the past; they are active sites of resistance. As literary texts and oral histories increasingly reclaim oceanic and gendered archives, we witness a resurgence of counter-memories that defy dominant paradigms. For example, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* centers the brackish Sundarbans as a

site of both ecological precarity and epistemic resistance, wherein the protagonist Piya, a diasporic cetologist, must reconcile Western scientific methods with Indigenous knowledge systems carried by local boatmen like Fokir. The novel dramatizes the tension and possibility of epistemic cohabitation between empirical and embodied ways of knowing the sea.

Similarly, Caribbean and Pacific Island literatures reclaim maritime memory through myth, folklore, and oral storytelling. In her work on Pacific epistemologies, Teresia Teaiwa reminds us that the ocean is not only a route but also a root place of belonging, genealogy, and spiritual significance. "We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood," she writes, asserting a profound ontological connection between human bodies and marine ecologies (Teaiwa 1994).

These alternative epistemologies often dismissed or overlooked by patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist frameworks represent what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls "epistemologies of the South." They invite us to engage with knowledge systems that arise from lived experience, ancestral memory, and ecological reciprocity, rather than abstraction and control.

By attending to submarine memory and submerged ecological knowledge, we challenge the epistemic hierarchies that have historically privileged land over sea, and reason over relationality. A blue ecofeminist praxis thus seeks not only to recover these erased histories but to foreground them as vital for imagining just ecological futures ones that honor the voices of water, women, and the worlds they sustain.

Resistance in Representation

Despite systemic erasures and centuries of epistemic domination, both women and oceans have found persistent avenues of resistance particularly through literature, mythology, oral traditions, and cultural production. These forms of representation challenge dominant frameworks by re-centering relational, embodied, and ecological modes of knowledge that resist commodification and conquest.

Hélène Cixous, in her seminal essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, argues for *écriture féminine*, a form of writing that emerges from the female body and experience. She contends that "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing... Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history by her own movement" (Cixous 1976, p. 875). For Cixous, the act of writing becomes a corporeal, political gesture, one that can dismantle patriarchal language and logic from within. When women write their bodies, they not only reclaim their voice but disrupt the phallogocentric ordering of knowledge itself.

This idea resonates with the sea as a metaphor and medium of resistance. Like the female body, the ocean in literature often signifies the unknowable, the excessive, the fluid qualities that refuse containment within the masculine structures of rationality and conquest. It is in this context that the ocean becomes a site not of absence but of potentiality, where submerged voices resurface in insurgent forms.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* exemplifies this convergence of gender, ecology, and resistance. The protagonist Piya Roy, a diasporic marine biologist of Bengali origin but raised in the United States, undertakes a scientific exploration of the Sundarbans. Her engagement with

the riverine ecosystem is initially framed through empirical observation. However, her growing alliance with Fokir, a local fisherman with no formal education, challenges her epistemological stance. Piya begins to recognize the value of embodied, vernacular knowledge that Fokir possesses, rooted in lived experience and intuitive understanding of the tide country (Ghosh 2004, pp. 194–198). The novel subtly critiques the authority of Western science and foregrounds the possibility of a hybrid epistemology, one that values both scientific inquiry and indigenous wisdom.

Moreover, Ghosh's portrayal of the mangrove landscape resists aestheticization and instead emphasizes the violence of development, displacement, and ecological disregard. The terrain is unstable, dangerous, and resistant to mapping qualities that mirror the unruly power of both the feminine and the marine. Oceanic and coastal spaces can be seen as powerful symbols that reflect the shifting dynamics of postcolonial identity, the movements and dislocations of diaspora, and the enduring strength of feminist resistance. In *The Hungry Tide*, the very structure of the tide becomes an allegory for non-linear, cyclical knowledge disrupting the teleological narratives of progress and conquest.

Other literary works similarly enact resistance by reclaiming silenced or submerged narratives. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* weaves myth and memoir to recover Chinese feminine figures like Fa Mu Lan, presenting them not as passive heroines but as warriors whose agency defies patriarchal interpretation. Similarly, in *Salt* by Nayyirah Waheed, the ocean recurs as a space of mourning, memory, and ancestral return: "you broke the ocean in / half to be here. / Only to meet nothing that wants you" (Waheed 2013). Waheed's minimalist poetry encapsulates the trauma of migration and diaspora through the image of the broken ocean, an act of resistance that reclaims oceanic space as both personal and political.

These representations are not merely literary tropes but are themselves epistemological interventions. They allow for the surfacing of submerged histories, the articulation of feminine agencies, and the decolonization of ecological and gendered narratives. In this sense, literature becomes not only a mirror but also a tool – a means of resistance against dominant cartographies of knowledge and power.

As Stacy Alaimo argues in *Bodily Natures*, "the materiality of the body and the environment are deeply entangled in feminist science studies, offering an important framework for ecological ethics" (Alaimo 2010, p. 3). This entanglement reveals how representations of women and the ocean are never neutral; they are sites of contestation, memory, and future-making. Through literature, film, and theory, new vocabulary and imaginaries emerge ones that prioritize care, relationality, and resistance to extractive paradigms.

In reclaiming the ocean and the body as interlinked domains of experience and expression, these cultural texts offer an alternative cartography: one drawn not by empire or capital, but by interdependence, fluidity, and memory. Resistance, then, is not always overt; it often takes the form of storytelling, myth-making, and poetic invocation, subtle yet radical gestures that restore dignity to what has been drowned.

Conclusion: Toward a Confluence of Epistemologies

The intertwined histories of epistemic erasure and environmental dispossession reveal not only a pattern of domination, but also the structural scaffolding of modernity itself. To name, map, and exploit be it a body or a coastline is to assert a particular kind of knowledge as universal. As this paper has argued, both ecofeminist and Blue Humanities frameworks expose how women and oceans have been rendered as inert, passive, and knowable only through the lens of patriarchal and colonial logics. Yet within this erasure lies the potential for resistance, resurgence, and reimagination.

Ecofeminism, with its insistence on relationality, embodiment, and interdependence, offers crucial tools for resisting anthropocentric and masculinist paradigms that reduce both women and nature to mere resources. When expanded through a Blue Humanities lens, this critique extends into the oceanic realm, a space often neglected in land-centric feminist and environmental theories. The ocean is far from being a void; it is layered with meaning, memory, and complex material interconnections. Much like the human body, it holds beneath its surface a dense archive of stories marked by suffering, defiance, and inherited knowledge passed down through generations.

Bringing these epistemologies into dialogue uncovers submerged archives of what has been termed the “residence time” of violence within the ocean, the notion that water retains the memory of trauma long after it has occurred, even when dominant historical narratives choose to forget. In this way, the ocean functions as both medium and witness, holding within it the traces of dispossession, migration, and ecological rupture. Similarly, women’s knowledge systems particularly those grounded in Indigenous, coastal, and agrarian lifeways have long been subjected to systematic erasure through the discourses of modern development, capitalist expansion, and technoscience. These are not parallel processes of marginalization, but deeply intertwined forms of epistemic violence.

The ocean and the feminized body are both treated as extractable resources; mapped, named, and instrumentalized for the benefit of patriarchal and imperial structures. Their rhythms and wisdom are overwritten by logic of productivity and control. The silencing of embodied, place-based knowledge reflects a broader pattern wherein colonial modernity has sought to universalize particular ways of knowing while rendering others illegible. This convergence of erasures is not accidental; it is co-constitutive. The suppression of maritime memory and the marginalization of ecofeminist epistemologies arise from the same impulse: to sever relationality, to impose mastery, and to desacralize the very systems that sustain life.

Recognizing these entangled histories demands a shift in both discourse and practice—a move toward revaluing submerged knowledges and reimagining the ocean not as a frontier to be conquered, but as a living archive of resistance and relationality. Only by centering those voices that have been historically silenced those of coastal women, Indigenous seafarers, and oceanic ancestors can we begin to dismantle the imperial grammars that continue to shape our understanding of the sea and the body alike.

This confluence of ecofeminist and oceanic thought necessitates not just intellectual synthesis but also ethical realignment. If domination operates by naming and silencing, then resistance must emerge through practices of listening, remembering, and relational knowing. As Stacy

Alaimo suggests, "trans-corporeality," the intermeshing of human and nonhuman bodies, offers a framework for ethical engagement that is materially grounded and environmentally just (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, p. 2).

Ultimately, a blue ecofeminist framework does more than analyzing the past, it gestures toward the future. It invites scholars, policymakers, and communities to reimagine epistemology itself: not as a conquest of knowledge, but as a collaboration with the living world. To center oceanic and feminine epistemologies is to acknowledge what has been drowned, to hear what has been silenced, and to recover what may yet guide us toward a more just and sustainable world.

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