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## The Insertion of Cultural Identity and Ecological Recovery through a Critique of Materialism and Overconsumption in *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbor Totoro*

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### **Abstract**

Studio Ghibli movies enjoy immense popularity globally, and a special place in the hearts of movie buffs especially because of its aesthetic appeal, and the beautiful relationships portrayed between the characters. However, many critics have been dismissive of these movies because of their anime form which, according to critics, renders the movies less important than motion pictures and are only suitable for children. The suitability of anime for only children could be a potent area open for debate, but Ghibli movies do not only deal with seemingly unimportant problems. The article would argue with special focus on two of the Ghibli movies, *Spirited Away*, and *My Neighbor Totoro*, that the creators offer a critical lens that focuses on cultural recovery in an age of capitalism where American pop culture has invaded every home, and how the movies offer ways of reconnecting with nature and environment.

### **Keywords**

Studio Ghibli, capitalism, cultural identity, ecology, consumption

The remarkable brainchild of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, and the dreamlike space that Studio Ghibli conjure up is perhaps one of the few things that provide empirical evidence of the conjugal relationship between cinema and art; although, the West has mostly looked down upon anime, or rather animation, as being suited only for children, and by means of association we can assume what it means is that anime or animated movies are something that is yet to be developed intellectually and falls short of the category of art that qualifies a movie as a good movie, and since the Western cinema is blinded by the glamour of Hollywood which without a shadow of doubt does produce excellent, thought-provoking-with-a-social-message movies, the artful brilliance, the complex characters, the space, the human experience portrayed in the Studio Ghibli movies more often than not get easily dismissed as being too simplistic. Studio Ghibli movies, of course, will subvert any of the banal assumptions of the West for it manifests the maxim that cinema is art. Ghibli movies not only provide sustenance for the soul, but the movies themselves also contain multitudes of an ideological, historical, political, scientific premise for rich academic debates, and opens up new sites for multivalence and contestation. Academic globally have started to take interest with the movies especially since the advent of ecocosmopolitanism, ecocriticism, transmorphism in literary theory and literary studies. The globalised world especially with the invention of various social media platform has facilitated solidarity among the fans of particular cult firms or even genres. A quick search will lead us to hundreds of fan pages created to honor Ghibli movies and further to facilitate dialogue from fans residing in various parts of the world. While Ghibli movies have been contrasted with that of the Disney franchise, and how the former comes with a firmer and unshakeable feminist perspective, some have lauded the sheer artistic brilliance of the anime. Discussions around anime food are rampant. One of the themes that run across almost all of Ghibli movies is how the characters relate to nature, and navigate that interaction both in a pre and post-apocalyptic Japan in ways that defy anthropocentric reasoning and investigation." Apocalyptic imagery is a staple of much of Japanese animation..." writes Susan Napier in the introduction to *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art* (2018) but the ecological and technological threat that looms over the culture of Japan is interspersed with moments of love, friendships, more importantly, an understanding of the nature of impermanence that flows through the narrative of the movies which creates what Bhabha has termed 'the third space'. Although the assimilation is not of the colonial forces, in almost all of Ghibli films there reside nostalgia for a more traditional past, and as is the case with nostalgia, the regression too is tinged with the promise of a 'purer' past. This paper would attempt to analyse how the Ghibli movie *Spirited Away* imagines that return to a purer, more traditional Japanese past in the face of a threat from capitalist overconsumption; furthermore, the paper would also compare the ecological concerns portrayed in *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) and *Spirited Away* (2001). Historically tracing the boom of anime in the U.S. in the 1980s, and its impact on the overall culture of the American cinema and its consumers and how it further facilitated the popularity of the Ghibli Studio in other parts of the world too would be an investigation worth undertaking; however, this is beyond the scope of this paper.

From the very outset, *Spirited Away* could be read as the flag bearer of the traditional 'authentic' Japaneseness if it is overtly seen through the imagery of the

Bathhouse around which the narrative of the movie is structured. Miyazaki has termed the film as a coming of age story of a vulnerable young girl, and her tumultuous adventure which paves the path for and shapes the edges of her personality into being what E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) has termed a 'round character'. However, at a deeper level the film seems to contrast, or rather the conflict between, the two sides of capitalist modern Japan as a whole, namely the collective 'otherness' that the Japanese civilization underwent postwar, and that of the Japanese cultural identity of a past that seems to be always elusive. Could this film be after all the recovery of what Paul David Grange has called, a "deterritorialized community" (3) in the face of globalization which, in many cases, has been equated with the consumerism and internalization of American popular culture? The en masse adoption of a foreign Western culture resulted in the seemingly opposing forces of "*kokusaika* (internationalization) and *furusato* (native place or old hometown) (Napier 88). The imagery, the foundation, the function of the bathhouse in the movie further implements and solidifies these two opposing forces of modernity. The bathhouse operates for the cleansing of the filth of the Japanese gods who bring in the pollution with them into the bathhouse. The bathhouse is emblematic of what Anthony Cohen in *Symbolising boundaries: identity and diversity in British cultures* (1986) has argued as having clear cultural boundaries that are endangered- as already possessing a certain way of life that is under threat from the outside. The bathhouse itself is under threat from the intrusion of the outside pollution. The bathhouse itself with its Bakhtinian carnivalesque atmosphere perhaps works as the agent or machination of purification in which the sojourn of the characters would ultimately lead to the assimilation with the authentic Japanese cultural identity, the authentic self. The concept of authenticity is open to multiple scholarly debates, especially in an age of globalised capitalism, in the sense that the very idea of the 'authentic' is multivalent and contested while also being garbed under the murkiness of regression and stagnation. The bathhouse's operation relies solely on water, and the building itself is surrounded by a massive water body. All this water imagery must mean something. The abundance of water and the spiritual function it serves could interestingly also be tied up or associated with the story of creation that dominates the Western Christian imagination. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and as per *Genesis* 1:2, "...the spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters". Even in the indigenous Native American creation myth water occupies a similar position, in that water is the basis of all creation. It would somewhat be antithetical to link the water of the Bathhouse to that of the Bible or any other creation myth, but to deny water its function of being the harbinger of creation, for all things come from or at least are associated with water, would simply point to being ignorant. After purging what is polluting or filthy with the help of the bathhouse workers, the customers of the bathhouse who are the Japanese gods, transform into their original, perhaps even pure, form, thereby, creating, or rather recreating the origin; water, in this sense, definitely heralds a more natural Japanese cultural identity. Seeing from an industrialized, capitalist perspective, it would be interesting to associate the abundant water imagery with the environmentalist cause for the need to protect nature from falling prey to the ruthless grip of capitalism that always points to the erasure of the natural world. Although nature conservation is in vogue now, its purpose almost always

serves an anthropocentric agenda as is also the case with *Spirited Away* since the purification through water implies the development of a more authentic identity in the face of internationalization.

The filth or the pollution that has been discussed what is the nature of it? As in, what does the filth indicate or point to? Where does the filth come from in such magnanimity that leads to the need for the establishment of the bathhouse in the first place? To try to answer these questions we would look at two scenes/events from the film. Chihiro, the protagonist of the movie, known as Sen inside the bathhouse is given the task of bathing and cleaning a very stinky, extremely filthy god as her first undertaking as an employee of the bathhouse. While this assigned insurmountable task could be seen as a classic example of ‘staring down’ an employee on their first day of work, her success only gives her the affirmation she needs to overcome any possible hurdle she might face in the future; in the face of extreme adversity, relentless persuasion yields positive outcome through the beauty of commitment. Coming back to the Stink God whose condition appeared abominable to even the most seasoned worker of the bathhouse is purged of its stink only when Chihiro discovers what she calls a thorn lodged somewhere inside the filthy mess that surrounds the god. With the collective help of the bathhouse workers and Chihiro, the thorn is dislodged and is later discovered that it was actually a bicycle handlebar. The detachment of the handlebar from the body of the god serves to the disentanglement of countless other manmade junk that accumulated over the years on the body of the god. The body of the god becomes the site for pollution perpetrated by industrialization, by means of association, it also pollutes the body and the psyche of the collective Japanese civilization. Simon Harrison's "discourses of cultural pollution" would be an interesting perspective to analyse this scene. Harrison argues that one way of constructing cultural identity is to present ample threat by means of "invasion and replacement by others" (13). It is only after a conscious acknowledgement, correct identification, and affirmative action undertaken collectively that this filth is addressed, and later unburdened. The spirit says, “That’s good!” and disappears after giving Chihiro her due in form of magical food. Commenting on the reidentification of the river god, Napier provides one of the succinct analyses available of the significant scene. She writes:

We may read the scene with the river god as a successful attempt at recovery on a variety of levels. It suggests cultural renewal by the fact that the threatened pollution is not only cleansed away but is found to contain within it a symbol of traditional Japanese culture, the *nō* mask. On a socio-cultural level, this success is underlined by views of the bath attendants cheering and waving fans with the Japanese rising sun imprinted on them. Finally, on a mythic level, the episode's structure of misidentification followed by revelation, while typical of many archetypal myths concerning a disguised god, is also evocative of a specific Japanese miracle story in which the Empress Kōmyō bathed a thousand lepers to discover that the final one was the Buddha in disguise. (Napier 304)

This concept of correct identification especially of the identities that have been refracted plays another part in case of Haku, Chihiro's rescuer. Working for Yubaba, the owner of

the bathhouse Haku too has forgotten his original name for to enter the bathhouse each individual has to give up a part of themselves to Yubaba, in this case, their original name. The same goes for Chihiro who comes to be known as Sen in the bathhouse, and gradually her memory about her origin, her life, and her parents start to erase themselves. To name something is to give it power, and the journey of coming to power begins with the correct identification of the self, by remembering their own names. Water again plays an integral part in the correct self-identification. Haku whom we also encounter in a dragon form turns out to be a river spirit who had been forced out of his dwelling due to the rapid industrialization of Japan whose growth is often meted out on water bodies. The theme of cultural pollution is much more prominent and takes on the form of an immediate apocalypse in the story of No Face. No Face too is misidentified at first as one of the benevolent gods cloaked under a white long mask and long flowy black garment. No Face lures the bathhouse attendants with more and more gold to procure him food, and consuming that he grows in size to the point of being uncontainable inside the bathhouse, and transforms into nothing short of a beast that devours the bathhouse workers. In this sense, No Face lives to consume things, not for the purpose of sustenance but only for the sake of consumption. No Face, or rather No Face's penchant for consuming things threatens the existence of the bathhouse; at one point, it even seems, the spirit might successfully swallow the whole of the bathhouse. No Face's voracious hunger for consumption could be equated with Deleuze and Guattari's view of capitalism, "Capitalism is defined by a cruelty having no parallel in the primitive system of cruelty, and by a terror having no parallel in the despotic regime of terror" (Deleuze and Guattari, 373). The reaction of the bathhouse dwellers and workers seem to prove the point that No Face's attack on the bathhouse was somewhat unprecedented and unparalleled, plunging the spectators into a state of hysteria and terror. Miyazaki unconsciously also perhaps critiques the Japanese government's decision and the subsequent action taken for the construction of huge projects all through the country in an attempt to pull Japan out of the economic decline and recession. Post the government's decision every street of Japan was invaded by the fast-food counters, retail shops, etc. at the expense of Japan's natural geography. When Chihiro first encounter No Face, the entity (it would be wrong to categorize No Face either as a he or a she since most of the characters in the film exhibit gender fluidity, including Haku who is given feminine physical appearance) was voiceless. Unable to articulate its needs or desires, the only way to express itself was through gesture and the voiceless promise of getting gold and riches in return. No Face swallows others in order to take their voices and to speak for itself. It seems to signify the hollowness of the capitalist consumers of Japan who do not have a strong sense of their selves, and have lost their true identity and along with it their voices to articulately express themselves; subsequently, the mindless and endless consumption of capitalist products and American popular culture lead the collective to articulate what both of those foreign notions allow them to articulate which results from the complete erasure of the identities which flows and survives through a deep and meaningful bond with nature, and overall, with the glorious past of Japan and consciously assigning value to its traditions.

The emptiness of the contemporary soul of Japan is also expressed through the characters of Chihiro's parents, and the opening scene of the movie through the display of

specific images signify the inner hollowness of the characters while at the same time portraying them as victims of overconsumption, materialism and capitalism. Chihiro's family is moving from one home to another the reason for which remains unknown. We as the audience do not get an answer as to why the family is moving to a place the road to which is not conventional, in the sense that it would be easier to drive off course. Chihiro's father is seen driving an Audi which immediately establishes the class status of the family and the spread of materialism in a way that needs to be shown off to society. Chihiro is seen riding in the backseat utterly disconcerted, bored and dissociated from the scene unfolding outside the car. Upon coming across a dark tunnel, and crossing which leads to an abandoned theme park, the action of the movie picks up the pace. Inside the dark tunnel, Chihiro, a child, clings to her mother only to be reprimanded by her mother for doing so. The emotional starvation on the part of Chihiro and her mother's words chastising her not to cling too much to her, thereby literally maintaining the gap between the parent and the child is the unsavoury by-product of materialism. Upon arriving at the abandoned theme park, the parents' dependency on credit cards comes out, so does their need to immediately consume something through monetary help. Falling prey to the aromas wafting out of the various empty yet fully operational eateries, the father convinces the mother to take part in the eating fiesta because "It's okay. I've got a credit card". Chihiro later discovers that her parents have literally transformed into two enormous pigs. Although Miyazaki has agreed that the transformation into an animal, a pig, is completely random; the parents might as well have turned into giraffes, but it would be difficult to bypass what we signify pigs as. In Anti-capitalist discourses, capitalists have been referred to as "capitalist pigs" as slang and insult. The animals have been associated with filth and pollution, and for overconsumption in the popular psyche. This coupled with Chihiro's parents' temperament shown off through their German car, flaunt of wealth reduces their individuality into poor victims of capitalism, and by means of association with the unethical consumption that has been globalised through American popular culture, erasing the identity of Japaneseness. Chihiro too is not left completely out of the criticism; as a youth, the future of a nation, Chihiro and her generation have fallen victim to the cultural pollution, and to some extent, they are also responsible for the rapid spread of the pollution among the young generation of Japan. With their impressionable minds, the generation of Chihiro is more interested in dissociating with their surroundings, unbothered by the destruction taking place around them than partake in appreciating what Japan has stood for and protecting its own heritage by understanding its importance. This perhaps is too much of a burden to carry for someone as young as Chihiro, but Miyazaki offers a rite of passage that redeems Chihiro's outlook. Haku, the river god, saves her from the verge of literally disappearing and sets her on the path of a sojourn for self-discovery which would only be achieved through arduous quotidian toil which incidentally has immense value in the Japanese tradition. The value of hard work and teamwork have been beautifully described by Napier who argued,

The world of the bathhouse initially appears to stand in contrast to the deterritorialized modern world of consumption and materialism. Its structure and organization, a vertical hierarchy based on teamwork, suggests prewar Japanese social structures, such as the *ie* or extended

household (as well as modern Japanese corporations). But the bathhouse may evoke other associations. The fact that it is ruled by a woman who resides at the top of the bathhouse hints at links to the matriarchal culture of early Japan, out of which came the indigenous Shinto myth of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, the progenitrix of the imperial family (301).

Chihiro begins to remember her name, the very basic block of her identity when Haku offers her the rice balls. Food offers pathways into accessing the rawest memories, that of childhood, of pleasant times, the connection shared with other people as well as trauma. Henrietta Moore says, "Forgetting and remembering are forms of aesthetic judgment since they connect to what the individual feels good or desirable about themselves" (70). The rice balls act as a catalyst for her into accessing her forgotten memories, "The *onigiri*-eating episode thus becomes a classic representation of cultural boundedness, constructed as a vision of the restorative powers of eating pure, homey food to stand as counterpoint to the scenes of excess consumption that follow" (Napier 308). The ending of the movie is ambiguous yet fulfilling, almost cathartic. It is not clear how much of what they retained during their time in the bathhouse would successfully be applied to their lives, but any experience is bound to change the outlook of people. The people who emerged out of the dark tunnel after experiencing life-altering experiences would never be the same as the ones who journeyed through them.

We will continue our exploration of the cultural recovery and the evils of materialism through the lens of the 1988 Ghibli movie *My Neighbor Totoro*, a film that strikes a chord with both the young audiences and adult ones, and which recently turned fan favourite. The mixture of phantasm and realism in *Spirited Away* also comes alive in *My Neighbor Totoro*, however, the appeal of the movie banks on childhood centred nostalgia, something left behind. It is no surprise therefore that the movie's promotional catchphrase on posters was "We are returning to you something you have forgotten". The film not only takes the audiences back to a simpler time when everything appeared to be magic with its illusion surrounding life, but the film also takes the audience back to a national past, seemingly untainted with the pollution showered in by the advent of globalization and the subsequent materialism. In 1988 when the movie came out in Japan the nation experienced an economic boom for the first time after the world war. The economic boom brought with it the glitz and the glamour of the movie stars while also plunging the civilization into a hollow and deep existential crisis devoid of any organic connection. "Beneath this splendid materialism, however, ran a countercurrent of unease at the environmental destruction and spiritual corrosion that were by-products of economic and industrial expansion" writes Susan Napier in *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art*. Miyazaki does not strictly impose on his films a clear and substantial ecological evidence; however we may read his movies, it will eventually open up a discussion about the environment especially since his movies are full of the aesthetic quality of nature, from wind softly blowing the grass in the backyard as in the movie *Arriety*, or a snail slowly walking on a flower as seen in *My Neighbor Totoro*. Even the smallest animals exist in Miyazaki's world in an attempt to respect everything that is part of our "pale blue dot" to, in the words of Roderick Frazier Nash, make "a gesture of planetary modesty" (81). What the movie also does is to deal with loss, a loss of innocence, loss of cultural identity, and

the film calls for, as per the critic Hikaru Hosoe, a recovery of innocence. The characters begin their healing journey through an intimate connection with nature and its non-human inhabitants. Like *Spirited Away*, in *My Neighbor Totoro* too, the family is depicted on the move, relocating to their new house which is linked to the mother's illness of tuberculosis. The absence of the mother in the lives of the two children, and their constant yearning for and worry about the health of their mother takes central stage. However, that vacuum left by the absence of the mother has been filled, to some extent and not fully, by a deep shared connection with nature. Moving to a new home coupled with the absence of mother would be an emotionally difficult task to do for a child, but the fact that upon their arrival, the children, Mei and Satsuki, discover little fluff balls of soot and suddenly engaging with an empty new space becomes jovial and adventurous. Kosuke Fujiki writes, "Although Granny looks after the two girls in the absence of their parents, it is nature in the guise of the supernatural creatures that are able to enchant and excite the two sisters, delivering joy and wonder at moments wherein stress and anxiety might normally threaten children" (155). It is not surprising therefore that the two girls encounter the phantasmic figure of the supernatural creature Totoro while both of them are waiting at the bus stand for their father. During moments of adverse situation, it is the supernatural creature Totoro and its cat-bus that provide solace and company to the children.

As mentioned before, the bubble economic boom of Japan left its mark on its people, and in an attempt to get their cultural identity back Miyazaki tries time and again to portray that Japanese people are in some way bound and indebted to sacred natural places. Mei discovers that Totoro lives inside a large camphor tree, and here the politics of space, of Totoro's residence, becomes quite clear, and it seems to be pointing at the numerous other sacred places that Japan had not lost for the sake of inching towards the material driven market. The strategy adopted by and highlighted in the movie is evocative of Kopytoff's concept of 'inventories' which he describes as practices, symbols, dress, languages, ritual or other types of symbolic content conceived as distinguishing one group from another. The presence of Totoro and offering prayers to the camphor tree which happens to be the dwelling place of the creature is something that distinguishes traditional Japanese culture from that of the western globalized power. Gossin argues, "Culturally and historically, Miyazaki is also sensitive to the fact that important aspects of the Japanese peoples' ethnic past and identity are intimately tied to a sense of sacred natural places ("cultural identities")..." (7).

The broader debate that this film inevitably evokes is the question of environment and the presence, be it positive or negative, of humans. If we are to take Totoro as a symbol for animals, the message becomes clear, that we, the human species, have to be equally mindful and respectful of everything that lives and breathes, doing away with the anthropocentric view of environmentalism and conservation. Donna Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* has argued similarly that, "[dogs] are not an alibi for other themes: dogs are fleshly material-semiotic presences in the body of technoscience. Dogs are not surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with. They are here to live with" (2003, 5). Although Haraway suggests that animals exist for their own sake, and not for offering salvation to humans, Miyazaki's animals offer respite, here again bringing in the 'human value' of the animals, in that it

explains the co-habitation serves mankind in numerous ways, especially in the face of a foreign threat and from the threat within. The non-human experience which is central to Miyazaki's oeuvre which attempts at establishing a connection with the other world, that of nature, cannot be reproduced in terms of praxis, but can only be represented, thereby rendering the work as symbolic, as means for questioning the existing ways of globalised life that, more often than not, feeds on popular culture devoid of environmental significance. The movie evokes what Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* (1999) has called "sympathetic imagination" (35) on the audience's part to relate to the characters of Mei and Satsuki and their relation with Totoro and other phantasmic characters hidden in the lap of nature. Miyazaki, the creator's own views about the sudden boom in Japan is tinged with frustration and sadness and longs for a Japan where the nature flourishes while the developers go bankrupt.

Mei and Satsuki's first encounter with the catbus while waiting for their father to return home is a scene that solidifies Totoro's protective and compensatory role in the absence of both the ill mother and the father. Shortly after the catbus departs, their father arrives and is surprised by the excitement exhibited by both his children and they walk towards their home all the while the towering figure of the camphor tree looms in the background giving the entire scene an intimate appeal unparalleled in the entire movie. The realm of magic comes alive in the seed growing episode which required hard work and labour on part of the children and Totoro to transform the seedlings into saplings which then grew into a large leafy tree claiming space under the moonlit night. Napier comments

With the help of Totoro, Mei and Satsuki have created growing things, an expression of newly found skills and their connection with the land itself. Their willingness to trust Totoro allows them to gain a new and nearly godlike perspective over their daily world; they transcend the vicissitudes of daily life in their flight above the countryside. Significantly, Satsuki hesitates before leaping onto Totoro's stomach, indicating the increased self-awareness of older childhood. Once airborne, however, both the girls delight in the merging of human, natural, and supernatural. At one point the girls are inspired by Totoro to roar along with him into the sky, symbolically finding their "voice". Toward the end of their flight, they even exclaim, "We are the wind!" (122)

Both the movies posit transitory otherness achieved through the characters of young girls, a theme that preoccupies also Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Killing Commendatore* where the boundaries between the real and the supernatural, waking-life and the dream become blurred, transcending beyond the boundaries of human and animal. In another movie, *The Wind Rises* opens with Paul Valéry's "Le vent se lève! . . . Il faut tenter de vivre!" which translates to "The wind is rising!...We must try to live!" offers a potent message to slow down and take a moment to honour the life lived essentially around the whole of the earth and nature with its trees, grass, animals, even insects. This reconnecting with the roots could be a way for the disgruntled civilization to find their way back to the lost 'authenticity'. The idealistic message may fall short of praxis, especially when the capitalist powers rule the world, Miyazaki perhaps is evoking

a third liminal space that offers a perspective into local action which often turn out to be effective in the face of global crisis. The questions that arose in *Spirited Away*, that of the refracted identities and a lost generation dominated by overconsumption and materialism perhaps get a reply in *My Neighbor Totoro* where the filmmakers offer a utopian critique which could be viewed simply as unrealistic. Kaplan and Wang point out, “modernity...has shattered the...inherited ground of experience, and the intimate cultural networks of support and trust that humans hitherto relied on for a sense of security and meaningful life” (16). *Totoro* allows that space for recovery of what has been lost, albeit momentarily, the joys and the curiosity that are found only in transitory moments. The ending of *Spirited Away*, on the other hand, redeems what Alexandre Kojève has termed the “animalizing postmodern” by allowing its characters to re-establish the lost connection with everything Japan stands for, and with their fellow human beings. I would conclude this article by quoting Napier, “Again digging into his subconscious, he [Miyazaki] creates a vision that is not quite escapist, not quite sublime, but suggestive of a therapeutic progression into the depth of the soul” (218).

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