

M. C. Richards I Am Dancing with These Words around You

By 1956, M. C. Richards has earned a PhD in English, taught poetry at Black Mountain College, gotten married (and divorced) twice, dedicated herself to pottery, helped found an artists' cooperative alongside creators like John Cage, and become deeply romantically involved with avant-garde musician David Tudor. Tudor is often on the road, but luckily Richards is an incredible letter-writer. In her notes to him, she plays with language and sends messages of love, all while keeping Tudor up to date on his business as a touring musician, which she often seems to be managing, and on life back home.

Although Richards is relatively unknown today, she was a key connector in a circle of some of the most impressive artists, dancers, and musicians of her day. Her letters paint a picture of a lively and magnetic individual. She would go on to write a groundbreaking book on her philosophy of craft that continues to deeply influence contemporary artists.

In this episode of *Recording Artists: Intimate Addresses*, host Tess Taylor illuminates this vibrant and underrecognized artist, highlighting the many ways in which she was a woman ahead of her time. Anna Deavere Smith voices the letter. Potter and art historian Jenni Sorkin and potter and dancer Ashwini Bhat, both of whom have been inspired by Richards's philosophies of craft and approach to life, share their insights into her life and work.

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Transcript

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Anna Deavere Smith: I am dancing with these words around you, you are like a fire in the center, and I am dancing around you.

Tess Taylor: How do you find your voice, your medium, and your path when you live in a community with other boundary breaking artists? What might you need to change so you can shine your light in the world?

Welcome to Season 2 of *Recording Artists*, a Getty podcast dedicated to exploring art and artists through its archives. I'm your host, poet Tess Taylor. In this season, called *Intimate Addresses*, each episode examines one letter by one artist, looking deeply at what it means to make a life in art. Anna Deavere Smith performs the letters as we travel the globe and the twentieth century. You listen as makers collaborate, fight for justice, ask for money, work through pain, and affirm their resilience. What emerges is a sweeping panorama of artists in dialog with one another, and six distinct portraits in creativity.

Today's letter is from someone you probably haven't heard of—poet and potter Mary Caroline Richards, who went by M. C. A year ago, I'd never heard of her, either. Yet as I learned about this Black Mountain poet and her groundbreaking philosophy of craft, I savored her visionary meditations on the nature of creativity and transformation.

Now, to our letter. It's July 16, 1956. Richards is 40 years old. She lives at an intentional community in Stony Point New York, alongside other artists including composer John Cage.

On a pale blue aerogramme with a red airplane on the ten-cent stamp, Richards is writing to her beloved, avant garde musician David Tudor, who is growing famous around the world for playing Cage's music. This time, Tudor's address spills off the page: c/o Dr. Wolfgang Steineke, Kranischsteiner Musiksinstitute/ Roqutteweg, 31, Darmstadt, Germany.

Here's Anna Deavere Smith:

Deavere Smith:

Monday, July 16

Dearest merman, green-lit; dearest moonman, blacktop; dearest and most distant relation, I have returned from my jaunt and await your pleasure—that is to say, await my pleasure, in you. I left Friday morning in the MG with P-V-S-J, dropped the children in Connecticut, and sped on to Jacob's Pillow, arriving in time for the matinee. Merce's new dance, to the Satie Nocturnes, is just marvelous and amazing and mysteriously exact. Or vice versa. All in white costumes, the men have painted faces, the women in and out of head-dresses. Viola has a fantastic and touching duet with Merce, she in a kind of nunish head-gear with side veils. The set is a 10-foot skrim, upstage left, behind which strange and marvelous things happen, images appear, lit and shaded...

Carol's duet with Merce in the Suite brought me to my feet in a spasm of goose-pimples. Lordy, lordy, how lucky and blessed I feel to know these people and to experience these splendors and joys and acts of precision.... I slept in Carol's car, ate and consorted with the company at a lovely homey brook-side lodge, with swimming pool, home-cooking, ping pong, shuffleboard, dogs, swallows feeding their young on the verandah, etc. In other words, I had an excellent time....

You have recieved a note from Borge Saltoft of the Copenhagen radio, saying that there is no chance of a session there this season, as their quota of foreign artists for that period has already been disposed of.

The carrots are 4 to 5 inches long now, yesterday I ate the first zucchini, I must get to my weeding for the heavy rains have changed the garden-scape again.

I think of you always, with your face of fruit and your eyes of black blood sausage and your hands that are alive like animals or birds and all of you—I am dancing with these words around you, you are like a fire in the center, and I am dancing around you. All my love dearest David—and all my deepest wishes for your enjoyment and success where you are and do.

M. C.

Jenni Sorkin: It's a beautiful letter. It's beautifully written. It makes me sad that these letters were never edited and published, her letters to him. His are not quite as effusive.

Taylor: This was Jenni Sorkin's first impression of the letter. She's an art historian who teaches at UC Santa Barbara and writes on gender and material culture. She's published extensively on M. C. Richards.

Ashwini Bhat, a transdisciplinary artist who, like M. C. Richards, transitioned to working primarily in clay, had this to say.

Bhat: Poets write the best letters. I just love her interest in the quotidian and just the zest for life. It really comes through. And the way she gives us slightly not-so-good news, that there's no chance for a session at the Copenhagen Radio. And then she follows it up by talking about the carrots.

Taylor: When I first read M. C. Richards's letters, with their zest and their vegetables and their love of wordplay and dance, I wondered why I'd never heard of her. After all, Richards was an interdisciplinary artist in the circle of Cage and Cunningham, an educational reformer who'd taught at Black Mountain College, a social practice artist who built her moment's countercultures. Was it because she was a woman? Was it because of her non-traditional artistic output? What would we recover by revisiting M. C. Richards today?

But first, the basics. Richards was born in 1916 in Weiser, Idaho, a farming community on the border with Oregon. We don't know much about her early family life, but by high school she made her way to an Episcopal girls' school in Portland, and then attended Reed College. When she graduated in the late 1930s, she wanted to become a translator of Chinese poetry. At the time few women pursued advanced education. She enrolled in a PhD program at UC Berkeley. But with nobody to mentor her in Chinese language, she wrote a dissertation on irony in Thomas Hardy instead. She received her diploma in 1942.

Richards was living against the grain in her personal life as well. She lost her first academic job because she was living with her partner out of wedlock. At some point, she seems to have married this man and moved to New Mexico, where he drove a taxicab, and the marriage fell apart. Richards remarried shortly thereafter, this time to Bill Levi, a philosopher at University of Chicago. She took a teaching post at University of Chicago also but found its culture dry and constraining. The couple moved to the mountains of North Carolina and took up posts at the famed Black Mountain College.

Sorkin: Black Mountain really looms large in the history of the American avant-garde arts and literature. It's a space that really doesn't run very long. It's established in 1933, on the heels of the closure of the last iteration of the Bauhaus in Berlin.

It's basically in the woods, and it doesn't have the same kind of brick-and-mortar campus. It seems like summer camp.

Taylor: High in the Blue Ridge, on the edge of Lake Eden, Black Mountain College had been founded partly in the gathering shadows of World War II, by avant-garde artists who'd been fleeing the Nazis. Inside bare-bones cabins, the college was a site of experimentation not only in art, but in the structure of education itself. Students taught classes, and teachers became students. The curriculum was suffused with art workshops. Students and professors alike also spent 15 hours a week chopping wood, cutting corn, driving the tractor, or working in the office. Black Mountain was, perhaps most importantly, a place where everyone dared to leap across artistic languages. Composer John Cage made watercolors, dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham made etchings, sculptor Ruth Asawa drew inspiration from dancing under Cunningham.

At Black Mountain, Richards also began to transform. She thrived as an academic, which was rare enough for a woman in the 1940s. For a time, she chaired both the English department and the entire faculty. But she also began using more of her body and spirit in the classroom and beyond. She taught poetry and began translating French avant-garde theater. Like the other artists around her, she explored new mediums: in 1951 Richards began working in clay.

Here's Ashwini on this turn to pottery:

Bhat: She came to form her own identity within clay so immediately. Almost like she brought the spirit of the poetry into the clay. And that's fascinating to me, that there was that space for experimentation from early on. But within all these experimentations, she developed a unique language which can be identified as her own.

Taylor: Richards later described her move from poet to potter this way: "It seemed strange to me, as to others, that, having taken my PhD in English, I should then in the middle of my life, instead of taking up a college professorship, turn to the art of pottery. During one period, when people asked me what I did I was uncertain what to answer; I guessed I could say I taught English, wrote poetry, and made pottery. What was my occupation? I finally gave up and said 'Person.'"

Working with clay provoked a deep, physical awakening in Richards. Centering—the first step to throwing pottery on the wheel—particularly captivated her. Here's Jenni:

Sorkin: Finding form through material, rather than through words, is a way of literally recentering her in her own body. You're working against gravity, you're working against moisture, you're working against time, in all ways, when you shape and mold and form clay. I think it's an enormous challenge to her. And it becomes the kind of metaphor for thinking about reshaping her own life story going forward.

Taylor: Seen from nearly a quarter century after Richards's death in 1999, her most lasting work is not poetry and not pottery, but a book about relationships between the two, and a book about making itself. It has a long title—*Centering: Poetry, Pottery, and the Person*. But Jenni and Ashwini just call it "the book." Richards published *Centering* in 1964, over a decade after she first learned pottery at Black Mountain, and about five years after the letter to David Tudor that starts this episode. *Centering* is a magnetic treatise on opening oneself to the vulnerability of art. It would also help Richards reshape her own life.

But I'm getting ahead of the story. Let's go back to 1951.

In 1951, the same year M.C. Richards started working with clay, the experimental musician David Tudor arrived at Black Mountain to give a concert. A critic of the time described the music Tudor played this way: "what arrives on paper looks like a mixture of blackstrap and soot, applied with a defective spray gun." It was music designed to shock and upend.

Tudor came to Black Mountain at Richards's invitation; that invitation was the first letter she ever wrote to him. On Black Mountain letterhead, it is a prim form letter explaining that the college is unable to offer Tudor payment for his concert, though perhaps he'll make enough money to cover his bus fare home. Even so, six months later Richards writes Tudor as her "dearest one under the moon," and he calls her a poem in his heart.

Jenni explained the attraction:

Sorkin: I think Tudor, for her, was the exact, diametrically opposed model of a man than Bill Levi, and I can only imagine, maybe her first husband, too. Tudor was sensitive and dreamy and an artist, and she fell hard. Because she, too, was sensitive and dreamy, and an artist.

Taylor: But by this time, in the early 50s, Black Mountain College was unravelling—diminishing into a series of summer programs, then disbanding entirely. Richards and Tudor left in 1952, unmarried but committed to experimentation in life and art.

By 1954, hoping to extend the communal life they'd begun at Black Mountain, Richards, Tudor, Cage, and other friends from the college—including millionaire Paul Williams, the "P" in M.C.'s letter—helped found a new intentional community in Stony Point, NY. It was called Gate Hill Cooperative, but they just called it "the land."

And that is roughly where we meet the M.C. Richards who wrote the 1956 letter that began our episode. She's a woman in love with her artist friends, a woman at the hub of a great network of creativity and creation.

From their modest slab and stone cottages in the woods, Richards and her studio mate Karen Karnes worked on stoneware pottery to use and sell. Tudor and Cage traveled to tiny festivals around Europe, playing music designed to shake the postwar world. On tour, Tudor played alongside Fluxus artists including Benjamin Patterson and Nam June Paik.

It is during one of these tours that Richards is writing to Tudor. He's on the road in Germany and she's helping coordinate his engagements from New York, relaying some bad news from an innovative radio station in Copenhagen. She is also sharing her news of what must have been an extraordinary day. She has driven to see the Jacob's Pillow performance of Merce Cunningham's dance to the Satie Nocturnes.

Deavere Smith: Merce's new dance, to the Satie Nocturnes, is just marvelous and amazing and mysteriously exact. Or vice versa.

Taylor: Eric Satie was a post-impressionist French composer who'd invented a spare new melodic syntax on the piano. Robert Rauschenberg had designed the minimalist white costumes that so impressed M. C.

Yet for the most part, while Tudor was globetrotting, and Cage and Cunningham accrued accolades, Richards stayed home, making pottery, cooking for Merce

Cunningham's dance troupe, making caramels for John Cage's birthday party. She made pottery for everyone, even producing a set of dishes for Cage. And she faithfully tended the garden.

Deavere Smith: The carrots are 4 to 5 inches long now, yesterday I ate the first zucchini, I must get to my weeding for the heavy rains have changed the garden-scape again.

Taylor: As she wove her community through craft, Richards thought deeply about connectivity, interdisciplinarity, and art. Her 1956 letter to Tudor leaps across lines of its own. It moves from the sound play of moorman, moonman, and merman, green lit and blacktop—as if she's staging her love in a strange netherworld—to a description of her own fertile garden. The end of letter moves through a wild and surreal summoning of birds, fruit, and sausage. She ends with a passionate description that reads as if Richards—her language, her very self—is the clay being fired in the gaze of Tudor's regard.

Deavere Smith: I am dancing with these words around you, you are like a fire in the center, and I am dancing around you.

Taylor: This letter is joyful journal of experimental life. Other letters to Tudor continue this way, reporting on kiln explosions, painting a cedar closet, harvesting peas, the cats. Her words are alive with crayon drawings and longing: "I'm in the soup without you," she writes, "mended your underpants tonight out of sheer love." "I miss you like it was my stomach."

One pencil poem on yellowing construction paper reads:

For David
stone brown gaze
and your
stone ground hair

In some ways this 1956 letter reveals a woman at the center of a network, a woman deeply in love with her partner and her brilliant friends and their collective social experiment.

But Richards was also in a strange spot. As a twice divorced woman without children, partnered but unmarried amid queer men in an intentional community in 1956, she was far outside the typical heteronormative life of her era. She loved contributing to a new world in the making. But moving in this circle did not guarantee being seen on equal terms. Jenni teased out this difficult dynamic:

Sorkin: M. C. probably had a much different, or open awareness of alternative sexualities, alternative lifestyles, because of the circle of queer men that she surrounded herself with. But she doesn't have female friends. I think, the deep despair of her generation, is women who were artists self-identified as male. The only way to be an artist, to be a serious artist or to be a serious writer, was to be in a circle of male peers.

It's hard for me, also, not to see the really problematic gendered role that she's contained within. She doesn't get to be an artist. She's kind of beholden to this community of male makers around her.

Taylor: For all the radicalism of this community, it left her in a housekeeping role. While Tudor and Cage were inventing avant-garde art, she was inventing a great deal of what would become avant-garde American craft. However, her labors and her sector were feminized.

Meanwhile, at key moments, members of this community did not extend to her the same support that she showed them. At a crucial point, Cage chose not to help Richards publish her poems. Tudor was often gone, but even when he was there, he could be sexually aloof.

With less critical recognition, throughout the fifties, Richards continued to create her sometimes humbler experiments in living. By day she wrote poems, made pots, and gardened. By night she taught English at City College of New York. She thought deeply about pedagogy, equality, and performance. She brought her students homemade clay cups, baked them bread, and offered an unlisted course on poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.

By 1958, Richards was making her name known on wider stages. She'd just translated *The Theater and its Double*, a signature work by surrealist Antonin Artaud. A friend of Duchamp, Man Ray, and Breton, Artaud had written a manifesto claiming that the dream of theater exposes the lie of life. Artaud called for theater in non-traditional modes, in new spaces, as space itself. *The Theater and its Double* is now a classic in American theater classrooms. Richards' translation is still the standard English language version.

That same year, Richards also held a solo exhibition of her pottery at the Nonagan Gallery in New York. Here's Ashwini on that show:

Bhat: The title of the show for which she made a poster is called Clay Things To Touch, To Plant In, To Hang Up, To Cook In, To Look At, To Put Ashes In, To Wear, And For Celebration.

It starts with something so simple, action-oriented—all verbs, all straightforward, a straightforward use for the object—and then moves into a slightly philosophical realm. "To Put Ashes In." And then you are immediately thinking about someone you have lost. And this object can hold the memory of someone you have lost. And from there, she immediately moves, almost like an end punchline in a poem, "For Celebration."

Taylor: The exhibition did not quite expose the lie of life, but it had a wry way of reminding us that we are connected to clay, to earth, to the ash we will become.

Meanwhile, at this moment for celebration, Richards did not feel celebrated by the community she'd worked so hard to craft. She felt slighted by Cage at her book launch for *The Theater and its Double*. Tudor was on the road during both her book launch and her opening.

And there were other impasses. In 1958, David Tudor requested to continue their partnership in celibacy, something that felt too hard for Richards, who'd been so physically awakened both by him and by her engagement with clay.

Over the next few years, Tudor and Richards made a painful break, taking turns moving out of their shared home at Stony Point. The separation was wrenching.

Even so, Richards's correspondence with Tudor remained intense, as if her letters to him were still the vessel for her deepest thoughts. On November 15, 1960, she wrote:

“I had a pretty remarkable sudden sense on Sunday as I was wedging clay in my pottery studio, of the spiritual nature of matter. Suddenly the immanence within matter of all spiritual forms was evident to me. Dreams, ideas, formative forces, moral intuitions—the sense of the “material” of which I and the universe are made....well anyway it was an illumination of a sort.”

This illumination became the germ of *Centering*, a book that grew out of a lecture she gave in 1962 at Wesleyan. It’s a raw, lumpy thing, blending poetry, philosophy, and craft. Here’s Ashwini:

Bhat: *Centering* is the only book, probably, written by a potter, which doesn’t talk about anything about pottery making as an illustrated or a technical way. She mostly talks about life and process.

Taylor: It’s less a how-to book than a soulful examination of why any of us might make anything at all. Ashwini again:

Bhat: I think that’s why the book is so relevant, even today. Like, I could take the book and open any page, and almost like a ritual before entering the studio, and that will be beautiful and inspiring. I think the book has that kind of a power, where craft people know how much power there is in that material intelligence we hold within ourselves, and the material knowledge we have.

Taylor: I read some of my favorite passages to Jenni and Ashwini and we talked about them.

“My experience builds bridges between disciplines which are often considered separate, if not antagonistic.”

Sorkin: I love that she leans into the antagonism of interdisciplinarity. And that the antagonism also pervades her life story.

Taylor: “It is not the pots we are forming, but ourselves.”

Bhat: I’m just fascinated how her entire life is searching, and almost like a relentless search, for a philosophical thought that goes beyond the human. It could be clay, it could be carrots, it could be the garden.

Taylor: “I do not know if I am a philosopher, but if philosophy is the love of wisdom, then I *am* a philosopher. Because I love wisdom, and that is why I love the crafts, because they are wise.”

Sorkin: I think she’s absolutely right. The crafts are wise. They have a lot to offer us about consciousness and being in the present and holding space with traditional forms of making. But the fact that we’ve gotten so far away from the hand, I think, is something she identified very early on.

She uses words so beautifully to articulate the passion of letting go in your mind and being in your body and in your hands, and having mind-muscle, you know, the body holding memory.

Taylor: Publishing *Centering* was pivotal for Richards. 61 years later, it is still in print. It has sold over 200,000 copies. The book also emerged out of a period in which Richards was recentering herself. She was pulling away from Tudor and the community she’d helped build. It is almost as if “the book” gave her the language she needed to center herself, the fire she needed to go on.

The journey wasn't easy. When *Centering* was released in 1964, Richards was suffering, living alone in a cold unfurnished loft in New York City. She had just had a hysterectomy. Here's what she wrote to Tudor at the time:

"It is all very strange and scary.... Here I am sweating it out, taking baths, knitting, washing the floor, sending out announcements of my book when I can bear to. I will not be distracted from this encounter with darkness and the depths of my own shadows. I may not be able to get far with it, but I want to give it a chance."

In 1964, in the depths of those shadows, Richards could not foresee that *Centering* would shape the rest of her life. It helped her to move towards a new world.

After leaving Stony Point, Richards began to take residencies at experimental communities, lecturing on art as interdisciplinarity, healing, and craft. Her work tapped into an emergent hunger for things not ready-made. Some of the avant garde artists of her generation—including Tudor and Cage—made work that seemed dazzlingly abstract. But Richards became a prophet of art practices that could be accessed widely and developed for community well-being. She founded community gardens and kilns. She spoke about the role of art in community repair.

By the late sixties, Richards, who had begun her career wanting to translate poetry, became a translator *between* artistic disciplines. The free-living radical who had lost her first job for living with her partner out of wedlock was ready to teach the children of the 1960s her insights. The PhD who'd found the University of Chicago constraining was driving the Trans-Canada highway in her Volvo, breaking binaries and forging new practice in language she just happened to borrow from T. S. Eliot: "One does not decide between craft and art, pottery and sculpture, tradition and the individual talent. One...performs the act that one performs."

Ashwini noted the way that Richards took so much she had learned on her journey and put it into use in the classroom:

Bhat: Even when she's teaching a workshop, there's no real hierarchy with the student and teacher. So many of ceramic workshops end up being about the technique, about how to make something. And the end result is always about an object. And M. C. was always about the non-object, about the process itself. She's challenging the maker to bring in something of your inner self into whatever you're making. There's no separation between the material and you. And that's just beautiful.

Taylor: By the early 70s, Richards was teaching pottery and gardening to at risk youth on farms in Fresno, something she called "a combination of theater and political science." In the 1990s, she lectured during the fall and worked during the summers as a teacher, gardener, and potter at a Pennsylvania community designed partly to serve the mentally disabled.

Richards often talked about how art, like poetry, succeeds when it imagines the relationship between the part and the wider whole. And she wanted us to be both ethical and daring in imagining that wholeness. As she lectured, she left prophetic runes behind her: "One of the ways I've learned to keep warm, is to live in the world as if it were a person," she said.

I was captivated by Richards' presence as a thinker and artist, even though she leaves an uneven legacy. The poems are of mixed quality. Many of the pots are now earth again. I spoke to Jenni about the discomfort I felt:

I don't know where we leave this person, who in some ways doesn't necessarily leave me leaves me utterly intrigued. You're the art historian. What do you do when you find an artist who doesn't leave you an artifact?

Sorkin: *Centering* is an artifact. So I would argue she did leave an artifact. And she left a correspondence. She left an archive. Her medium is really correspondence. She is an amazing letter writer and correspondent. It's a lost art form now; we don't write these kind of impassioned letters.

Taylor: For Jenni, as important as the physical remnants of Richards's career were less tangible things:

Sorkin: She leaves this network, this radically important series of networks. For me, she's the translator, literally, between disparate groups of practitioners, students, communities, both artistic and academic, both traditionally university-based and not. And I think that that's a really important place that art history has taken a long time to value.

I think she brings to the table all kinds of interdisciplinary sensibilities that she didn't have language for but was inventing along the way. She, to me, is such a proto everything. A proto-hippy, a proto-bohemian, a proto-feminist, a proto-interdisciplinary social practice artist. And today, we would have a category for her.

Taylor: Ashwini, for her part, admired the way the work spoke across both poetry and clay:

Bhat: There's a small sculptural work by her—I think it is titled *Ballerina*—which is just a lump of clay, quickly formed, almost like she's sculpting the form by taking out the excess clay. And for me, that process is also very similar to what poetry does to the form, where economy of words and how you create a shape on the page and how you arrive at a form is also by looking at what is happening between the lines.

Taylor: As I spent time with Richards, I thought about how her presence nourished me—first in the chatty, tender, brilliant letter writing voice, and later in the deliberate move to social practice. Her art took the form of responsiveness, not only to clay, but to time, season, vegetables, and the material needs of communities. Her best writing brought me closer to my own center as a maker.

Sometimes, peeling a potato or tending some of the trees at the community garden where I work or teaching a song to a group of children, I think of her voice saying, "I love the crafts, because they are wise." It is with this unusual, enigmatic, haunting voice that I hope to leave us today.

Here is a recording of M. C. Richards in October 1969 at the end of her drive on the Trans-Canada Highway, having arrived in Cheney, Washington in her Volvo. She's giving a talk called "Some Thoughts about Art and Wholeness in Learning." She's inviting us to balance our inner and outer worlds:

M. C. Richards: Life is an art, because our social practices are embodiments of inner pictures and of inner feelings. Like art, life projects an inner world. What picture do we have of ourselves. Let's get to know the elements in ourselves which govern our choices. This is a lifetime's artistic labor: not to be gripped by a faceless power, but to see face to face whom we serve.

If we want to practice a wise human art, we need to bring our wholeness as persons into consciousness. We carry ourselves as a vessel, in which play all the members of

our inner family.

Sit with me at table, oh my fear.

Sit with me at table, oh my fear.

Sit with me at table, oh my fear.

Give yourself to me, oh my fear.

And I marry thee.

Taylor: This podcast is sponsored by the Getty Patron Program.

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