



Yeshua Magdalena

The Greatest Love Story Never Told

This beautiful article below is from Matthew Fox a former Dominican monk and priest whom Cardinal Ratzinger, now the new pope, banned from the Catholic Church:

The Return of the Black Madonna: A Sign of Our Times or How the Black Madonna Is Shaking Us Up for the Twenty-First Century

Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox © 2006 Matthew Fox

Every archetype has its seasons. They come and go according to the deepest, often unconscious, needs of the psyche both personal and collective. Today the Black Madonna is returning.

She is coming, not going, and she is calling us to something new (and very ancient as well). The last time the Black Madonna played a major role in western culture and psyche was the twelfth century renaissance, a renaissance that the great historian M.D. Chenu said was the “only renaissance that worked in the West.” It worked because it was grass roots. And from this renaissance was birthed the University, the Cathedral, the city itself. She brought with her a resacralization of culture and a vision that awakened the young. In short, it was the last time the goddess entered western culture in a major way.

In this essay I want to address what the Black Madonna archetype awakens in us and why she is so important for the twenty-first century. But before I do that, I want to tell a personal story of my first encounter with the Black Madonna.

That encounter occurred in the Spring of 1968 when I was a student in Paris and took a brief trip—my first—to Chartres Cathedral located about thirty five miles from Paris. While all of Chartres was an amazing eye-opener for me, its sense of cosmology and humor and human dignity and inclusion of all of life, I stood before the statue of the black Madonna and was quite mesmerized.

“What is this? Who is this?” I asked myself. A French woman came by and I quizzed her about it. The answer was as follows. “Oh, this is a statue that turned black over the years because of the number of candles burning around it,” she declared. I didn’t believe her. It made no sense. I looked carefully and saw no excessive candle power around the statue.

The story is an old one, one of ignorance and of racism. Even the French, at their most central holy spot, have lost the meaning and the story of the Black Madonna. And racism has contributed to this neglect. The Black Madonna is found all over Europe—in Sicily, Spain, Switzerland, France, Poland, and Czechoslovakia—as well as in Turkey and in Africa and in Asia as Tara in China and as Kali in India. She is also named by Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico. (Sometimes called the “brown Madonna.”) What is she about and why is interest returning in her today?

An archetype by definition is not about just one thing. No metaphor, no symbol, is a literal mathematical formula. The Black Madonna meant different things in different historical periods and different cultural settings. What I want to explore is why she is re-emerging in our time and what powers she brings with her. Why do we need the Black Madonna today? I detect twelve gifts that the Black Madonna archetype brings to our time. They are more than gifts, they are challenges. She comes to shake us up which, as we shall see, is an ancient work of Isis, the Black Madonna.

The Black Madonna is Dark and calls us to the darkness. Darkness is something we need to get used to again—the “Enlightenment” has deceived us into being afraid of the dark and distant from it. Light switches are illusory. They feed the notion that we can “master nature” (Descartes’ false promise) and overcome all darkness with a flick of our finger.



Meister Eckhart observes that “the ground of the soul is dark.” Thus to avoid the darkness is to live superficially, cut off from one’s ground, one’s depth. The Black Madonna invites us into the dark and therefore into our depths. This is what the mystics call the “inside” of things, the essence of things. This is where Divinity lies. It is where the true self lies. It is where illusions are broken apart and the truth lies. Andrew Harvey puts it this way: “The Black Madonna is the transcendent Kali-Mother, the black womb of light out of which all of the worlds are always arising and into which they fall, the presence behind all things, the darkness of love and the loving unknowing into which the child of the Mother goes when his or her illumination is perfect.”

She calls us to that darkness which is mystery itself. She encourages us to be at home there, in the presence of deep, black, unsolvable mystery. She is, in Harvey's words, "the blackness of divine mystery, that mystery celebrated by the great Aphophatic mystics, such as Dionysius Areopagite, who see the divine as forever unknowable, mysterious, beyond all our concepts, hidden from all our senses in a light so dazzling it registers on them as darkness." Eckhart calls God's darkness a "superessential darkness, a mystery behind mystery, a mystery within mystery that no light has penetrated."

To honor darkness is to honor the experience of people of color. Its opposite is racism. The Black Madonna invites us to get over racial stereotypes and racial fears and projections and to go for the dark.

The Black Madonna calls us to cosmology, a sense of the whole of space and time. Because she is dark and leads us into the dark, the Black Madonna is also cosmic. She is the great cosmic Mother on whose lap all creation exists. The universe itself is embraced and mothered by her. She yanks us out of our anthropocentrism and back into a state of honoring all our relations. She ushers in an era of cosmology, of our relationship to the whole ("kosmos" means whole in Greek) instead of just parts, be they nation parts or ethnic parts or religious parts or private parts. She pulls us out of the Newtonian parts-based relation to self and the world—out of our tribalism—into a relationship to the whole again. Since we are indeed inheriting a new cosmology in our time, a new "Universe Story", the timing of the Black Madonna's return could not be more fortuitous. She brings a blessing of the new cosmology, a sense of the sacred, to the task of educating our species in a new universe story.

The Black Madonna calls us down to honor our lower charkas. One of the most dangerous aspects of western culture is its constant flight upwards, its race to the upper charkas (Descartes: "truth is clear and distinct ideas") and its flight from the lower charkas. The Black Madonna takes us down, down to the first charkas including our relationship to the whole (first chakra, as I have explained elsewhere is about picking up the vibrations for sounds from the whole cosmos), our sexuality (second chakra) and our anger and moral outrage (third chakra). European culture in the modern era especially has tried to flee from all these elements both in religion and in education. The Black Madonna will not tolerate such flights from the earth, flights from the depths.

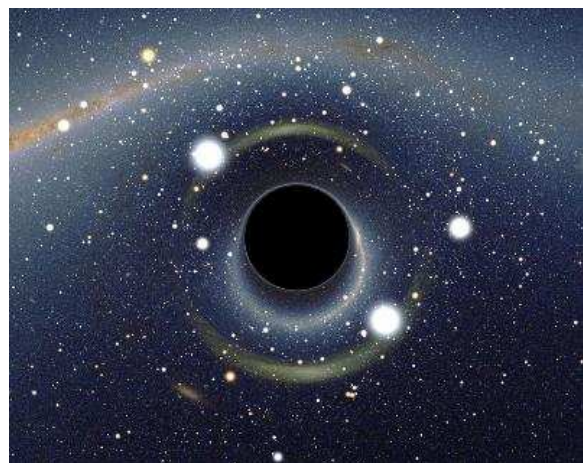
Because she honors the direction of down and the lower charkas that take us there, the Madonna honors the earth and represents ecology and environmental concerns. Mother Earth is named by her very presence. Mother Earth is dark and fecund and busy birthing. So is the Black Madonna. Andrew Harvey says: "The Black Madonna is also the Queen of Nature, the blesser and agent of all rich fertile transformations in external and inner nature, in the outside world and in the psyche."

Mother Earth nurtures her children and feeds the world and the Black Madonna welcomes them home when they die. She recycles all things. The Black Madonna calls us to the environmental revolution, to seeing the world in terms of our interconnectedness with all things and not our standing off to master or rule over nature (as if we could even if we tried). She is an affront to efforts of capitalist exploitation of the resources of the earth including the exploitation of the indigenous peoples who have been longest on the earth interacting with her in the most nuanced of ways.

The Black Madonna sees things in terms of the whole and therefore does not countenance the abuse, oppression or exploitation of the many for the sake of financial aggrandizement of the few. She has always stood for justice for the oppressed and lower classes (as distinct from the lawyer classes). She urges us to stand up to those powers that, if they had their way, would exploit her beauty for short term gain at the expense of the experience of beauty that future generations will be deprived of. She is a conservationist, one who conserves beauty and health and diversity.

Furthermore, if Thomas Berry is correct that “ecology is functional cosmology,” then to be called to cosmology is to be called to its local expression of ecology. One cannot love the universe and not love the earth. And, vice versa, one cannot love the earth and ignore its temporal and spatial matrix, the universe.

The Black Madonna calls us to our depths, to living spiritually and radically on this planet and not superficially and unthinkingly and oblivious to the grace that has begotten us in so many ways. The depths to which we are called include the depths of awe, wonder and delight—joy itself is a depth experience we need to re-entertain in the name of the Black Madonna. She calls us to enter into the depths of our pain, suffering and shared grief—not to run from it or cover it up with a myriad of addictions ranging from shopping to drugs and alcohol and sport and superficial religion. She calls us to the depths of our creativity and to entertain the images that are born in and through us. And she calls us to the depths of transformation, of social, economic, gender, racial and eco justice and the struggle that must be maintained to carry on solidarity with the oppressed of any kind. She calls us to the depths of our psyche which, as Meister Eckhart says, are “dark”



and to the depths of the earth, which are surely dark and to the depths of the sky that have also been rediscovered for all their darkness.

Black holes abound in space as well as in the mysterious breadth of our souls. We need to explore them. They too are fecund. They have much to teach us.

The Black Madonna calls us to our Divinity which is also our Creativity. First, our Divinity. Because she is a goddess, the Black Madonna resides in all beings. She is the divine presence inside of creation. She calls us inside, into the “kingdom/queendom of God” where we can co-create with Divinity and feel the rush of Divinity’s holy breath or spirit. But to call us to Divinity is to call us to our responsibility to give birth.

If Carl Jung is correct when he says that creativity comes “from the realm of the mothers” then the Black Madonna, who is surely a realm of the mothers, calls us to creativity. She expects nothing less from us than creativity. Hers is a call to create, a call to ignite the imagination. What but our collective imaginations can succeed in moving us beyond our energy dependence on fossil fuels to an era of self-sustaining energy based on solar and renewable, clean fuels?

What but an education in creativity can reinvent learning so that the joy and wonder and enticement of learning displaces our failing and boring educational systems? What but moral imagination can move us beyond the growing divide between materially impoverished nations and materially sated but spiritually impoverished nations?

The Black Madonna would usher in an era where more and more artists will get good work and thrive on good work and reawaken the human soul by way of moral and political imagination.

The Black Madonna calls us to Diversity. There is no imagination without diversity—imagination is about inviting disparate elements into soul and culture so that new combinations can make love together and new beings can be birthed. Because the Black Madonna is black, she addresses the fundamental phobia around race and differences of color and culture that come with race and ethnic diversity. Meister Eckhart says: “All the names we give to God come from an understanding of ourselves.”

To give God the name “Black Madonna” is to honor blackness and all people of color and to get over an excessive whiteness of soul and culture. It is also to honor the feminine. Divinity is diverse. Diverse in color and diverse in traditions and diverse in gender. God as Mother, not just Father. God as Birther, not just Begetter. Gender diversity is honored by the Black Madonna and so too is gender preference. The Black Madonna, the Great Mother, is not homophobic. She welcomes the diversity of sexual preferences that are also part of creation, human and more than human. (We have now counted fifty four species of birds and mammals that have significant homosexual populations. The medieval notion that homosexuality is “against nature” has been disproven: A homosexual minority is very much part of nature.)

John Boswell, in his ground-breaking scholarly work entitled *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* has demonstrated that the twelfth century, that century that birthed the great renaissance and the Black Madonna in France, rejected homophobia. For a period of 125 years—years that were the most creative years in western civilization—diversity was welcomed at all levels of society. Creativity thrives on diversity.

The Black Madonna calls us to Grieve. The Black Madonna is the sorrowful mother, the mother who weeps tears for the suffering in the universe, the suffering in the world, the brokenness of our very vulnerable hearts. In the Christian tradition she holds the dying Christ in her lap but this Christ represents all beings—it is the cosmic Christ and not just the historical Jesus that she is embracing, for all beings suffer and the Black Madonna, the Great Mother, knows this and empathizes with us in our pain.



She embraces us like a tender mother, for compassion is her special gift to the world. She invites us to enter into our grief and name it and be there to learn what suffering has to teach us. Creativity cannot happen, birthing cannot happen, unless the grieving heart is paid attention to. Only by passing through grief can creativity burst forth anew. Grieving is an emptying, it is making the womb open again for new birth to happen. A culture that would substitute addictions for grieving is a culture that has lost its soul and its womb. It will birth nothing but more pain and abuse and misuse of resources. It will be a place where waste reigns and where Divinity itself wastes away unused in the hearts and imaginations of the people. Andrew Harvey writes of how the Black Madonna provides “an immense force of protection, an immense alchemical power of transformation through both grief and joy, and an immense inspiration to compassionate service and action in the world.” She is also “queen of hell,” or “queen of the underworld, that force of pure suffering mystical love that annihilates evil at its root and engenders the Christ-child in the ground of the soul even as the world burns.” She holds both creative and destructive aspects within her.

To grieve is to enter what John of the Cross in the sixteenth century called the “dark night of the soul.” We are instructed not to run from this dark night but to stay there to learn what darkness has to teach us. The Dark Madonna does not run from the darkness of spirit and soul that sometimes encompasses us. She invites us not to flee from pain and suffering. Mechtild of Magdeburg in the thirteenth century wrote of this darkness in the following manner: “There comes a time when both body and soul enter into such a vast darkness that one loses light and consciousness and knows nothing more of God’s intimacy. At such a time when the light in the lantern burns out the beauty of the lantern can no longer be seen.

With longing and distress we are reminded of our nothingness....I am hunted, captured, bound, wounded so terribly that I can never be healed. God has wounded be close unto death.”

Mechtild does not run from the darkness but stays and learns. “God replied: ‘I wish always to be your physician, bringing healing anointment for all your wounds. If it is I who allow you to be wounded so badly, do you not believe that I will heal you most lovingly in the very same hour?’ [16] What is it we learn in this darkness of soul and spirit? “From suffering I have learned this: That whoever is sore wounded by love will never be made whole unless he embrace the very same love which wounded her.”

The Black Madonna calls us to Celebrate and to Dance. The Black Madonna, while she weeps tears for the world, as the sorrowful mother, does not wallow in her grief, does not stay there forever. Rather, she is a joyful mother, a mother happy to have being and to have shared it with so many other creatures. She expects joy in return. Celebration of life and its pleasures lie at the core of her reason for being. She expects us to take joy in her many pleasures, joy in her fruits.

Sophia or Wisdom in the Scriptures sings to this element of pleasure and eros, deep and passionate love of life and all its gifts.

I have exhaled a perfume like cinnamon and acacia,
I have breathed out a scent like choice myrrh....
Approach me, you who desire me,
And take your fill of my fruits,
For memories of me are sweeter than honey,
Inheriting me is sweeter than the honeycomb.
They who eat me will hunger for more,
They who drink me will thirst for more.
Whoever listens to me will never have to blush...

(Eccl. 24.15, 19-22)

Celebration is part of compassion. As Meister Eckhart puts it: “What happens to another be it a joy or a sorrow happens to me.” Celebration is the exercise of our common joy. Praise is the noise that joy makes. Joy, praise and celebration are intrinsic to community and to the presence of the Black Madonna. She did not birth her Divine Child by whatever name in vain. She opts in favor of children, in favor of life, in favor of eros and in favor of biophilia. She is a lover of life par excellence. She expects us, her children, to be the same.

The Black Madonna calls us to our Divinity which is Compassion. Compassion is the best of which our species is capable. It is also the secret name for Divinity. There is no spiritual tradition East or West, North or South, that does not exist to instruct its people in how to be compassionate. “Maat” is the name for justice, harmony, balance and compassion among the African peoples. The Black Madonna calls us to Maat. To balance, harmony, justice and compassion. Grieving and Celebrating and Acting Justly are all parts of compassion. In both Arabic and Hebrew, the word for compassion comes from the word for “womb.” A Patriarchal period does not teach compassion, it ignores the womb-like energies of our world and our species. If it mentions compassion at all it trivializes it and renders it sissy. (For example, Webster’s dictionary declares that the idea that compassion is about a relationship among equals is “obsolete.”) Patriarchy neglects what Meister Eckhart knew and taught: “Compassion means justice.” Compassion has a hard side, it is not about sentiment but about relationships of justice and interdependence.

Because the Black Madonna is the goddess that dwells deeply and darkly within all beings, ourselves included, she brings with her our capacity for compassion. We are not whole—we are not ourselves—until we partake in the carrying on of compassion. Meister Eckhart taught that the name of the human soul properly is “Compassion” and that until we are engaged in compassion we do not yet have soul.

Compassion knows when enough is enough; compassion does not overindulge; compassion does not hoard and does not run its life on addictions of insecurity and pyramid-building to overcome these addictions. Compassion trusts life and the universe ultimately to provide what is necessary for our being. But compassion works hard as a co-creator with the universe to see that a balance and basic fairness is achieved among beings. Compassion is present in the Black Madonna in her very essence for “the first outburst of everything God (and Goddess) does is compassion.” (Eckhart) To return to compassion is to return to the Goddess.



Cultural historian and feminist Henry Adams writes about the role of Mary at Chartres Cathedral in the twelfth century. “The convulsive hold which Mary to this day maintains over human imagination—as you can see at Lourdes—was due much less to her power of saving soul or body than to her sympathy with people who suffered under law—justly or unjustly, by accident or design, by decree of God or by guile of Devil.” Adams understood Mary as the Buddhist element in Christianity for with her as with Buddha, compassion is the first of all the virtues. “To Kwan Yin the Compassionate One and to Mary the Mother of God, compassion included the idea of sorrowful contemplation.” Only the Great Mother could provide the compassion needed by the sorrowful human condition.

The Mother alone was human, imperfect, and could love; she alone was Favour, Duality, Diversity. Under any conceivable form of religion, this duality must find embodiment somewhere, and the Middle Ages logically insisted that, as it could not be in the Trinity, either separately or together, it must be in the Mother. If the Trinity was in its essence Unity, the Mother alone could represent whatever was not Unity; whatever was irregular, exceptional, outlawed; and this was the whole human race.

She was beyond the law, a friend of the outlaws who appealed to the masses who “longed for a power above law—or above the contorted mass of ignorance and absurdity bearing the name of law.” This power had to be more than human. It required the goddess.



The Black Madonna, the goddess, provides the womb of the universe as the cosmic lap where all creatures gather. An ancient hymn dedicated to Isis underscores her cosmic role as sovereign over all of nature and queen of all the gods and goddesses.

I am Nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are. My nod governs the shining heights of Heaven, the wholesome sea-breezes, the lamentable silences of the world below.

How like a twelfth century poem to the Christian goddess Mary is this ancient hymn to Isis. Alan of Lille wrote the following poem about Nature in the twelfth century:

O child of God and Mother of things,
Bond of the world, its firm-tied knot,
Jewel set among things of earth,
and mirror to all that passes away
Morning star of our sphere;
Peace, love, power, regimen and strength,
Order, law, end, pathway, captain and source,
Life, light, glory, beauty and shape,
O Rule of our world!

Interestingly, Alan of Lille speaks of the “Mother of things” as a “firm-tied knot” and the *Thet* which is an important symbol of Isis is also understood to be a knot. We play in her cosmic lap, we bump up against one another there, and we work for balance, *Maat*, and justice there.

The Black Madonna is the Throne of Compassion, the Divine lap. That is the meaning of the name “Isis” and Isis is the African goddess who gave us the Black Madonna both in Ephesus, Turkey and through Spain and Sicily directly into Western Europe. Indeed, certain passages of the Christian Gospels such as the birth narratives, which are clearly not historical but are stories of the Cosmic Christ, are passages taken from stories about Isis and her son, Horus. Sir Ernest A. Wallis Budge, the late keeper of the Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities at the British Museum, writes:

The pictures (see above) and sculptures wherein she is represented in the act of suckling Horus formed the foundation for the Christian paintings of the Madonna and Child. Several of the incidents of the wanderings of the Virgin with the Child in Egypt as recorded in the Apochryphal Gospels reflect scenes in the life of Isis...and many of the attributes of Isis, the God-mother, the mother of Horus...are identical with those of Mary the Mother of Christ.

The Black Madonna Calls us to a renaissance of culture, religion and the city. Isis often wears a regal headdress that symbolizes her name as meaning “throne” or “queen.” Erich Neumann has written about Isis as “Throne.”

As mother and earth woman, the Great Mother is the ‘throne’ pure and simple, and, characteristically, the woman’s motherliness resides not only in the womb but also in the seated woman’s broad expanse of thigh, her lap on which the newborn child sits enthroned. To be taken on the lap is, like being taken to the breast, a symbolic expression for adoption of the child, and also for the man, by the Feminine. It is no accident that the greatest Mother Goddess of the early cults was named Isis, the ‘seat,’ ‘the throne,’ the symbol of which she bears on her head; and the king who ‘takes possession’ of the earth, the Mother Goddess, does so by sitting on her in the literal sense of the word.

The twelfth century renaissance was especially conscious of the role of “throne” and the goddess. In Latin the word for “throne” is “cathedra.” The medieval church gave birth to cathedrals—over 125 were built the size of Chartres—and every single one was dedicated to Mary with such titles as Notre Dame de Chartres, Notre Dame de Lyons, Notre Dame de Paris, etc. Over 375 other churches the size of these cathedrals were built dedicated to Mary also. In many of these cathedrals a statue to the Black Madonna can be found even to this day. A cathedral by definition meant the throne where the goddess sits ruling the universe with compassion and justice for the poor. Anthropocentrism, clericalism and sexism have co-opted the invention of cathedral to mean the “place where the bishop has his (usually his) throne.” This is false. The cathedral is designed to be the center of the city, it is bringing the goddess to the center of the city to bring the city alive with goddess energies and values. Cities were birthed in the twelfth century with the breakup of the land-based economy and religious and political system of the feudal era.

The youth fled to the cities where religion reinvented itself apart from the monastic establishment that ruled for eight centuries and where education invented itself apart from the rural monastic educational system in the form of universities. Worship reinvented itself in the Cathedral in the city and apart from the monastic liturgical practice in the countryside.

Today for the first time in human history more than 50% of humans are living in cities; By 2015, over two-thirds of humans—a great proportion of them young people—will be living in cities. The Black Madonna and the “throne as goddess” motif contribute to the resurrection of our cities. They give us a center, a cosmic center, a synthesis and unity and a life-energy by which we can redeem our cities and take them back from lifelessness and thanatos. Artists gather in a city. Celebration and ritual happen in a city. Nature and human nature congregate in a city. No wonder Meister Eckhart and other medieval mystics celebrated the human soul as city and the city as soul. It is the task of a renaissance to bring soul back to city. We might even define renaissance as a “rebirth of cities based on a spiritual initiative.”

The Black Madonna calls us to reinvent education and art. The goddess also ruled at the university—she was “Queen of the sciences” and “mistress of all the arts and sciences” who was “afraid of none of them, and did nothing, ever, to stunt any of them.” All learning was to culminate in her. She was about wisdom not just knowledge. The renaissance that the Madonna represented was both religious and educational.

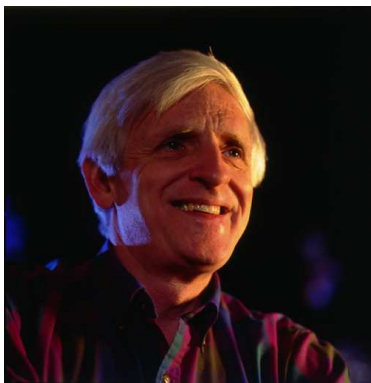


Often the headdress of Isis depicts the full moon between curved horns and has the shape of the musical instrument that the Egyptians played in her honor called the sistrum. Plutarch stated that the purpose of the sistrum which is a kind of rattle was that “all things in existence need to be shaken, or rattled about...to be agitated when they grow drowsy and torpid.”

The Black Madonna shakes things up. Is this not an archetype for our times? Is she not a forbearer of a renaissance, one who comes to give new birth to a civilization, a birth based on a new sense of spirituality and cosmology and learning—a learning that reawakens us to our place in the universe?

How will work in the world become wise as opposed to exploitive without wisdom? How will the human soul move from knowledge to wisdom without the kind of effort the goddess can bring? Without a balance of male/female, heart/head, body/spirit truly happening at all levels of education from childhood to professional degrees? How will a renaissance happen if education is left behind? What role will art play when the artist too lets go of the internalized oppression of the modern era and recommits himself/herself to serving the community and to serving the larger community of ecological sustainability?

These are some of the questions raised by the return of the Black Madonna in our time. They beg for response. They beg for listening ears and attentive institutions. They beg for self criticism of nation-states, governments, corporations, academia, religion, law, professions of all kinds which are called to something new (and very ancient): a new relationship between earth and humans. One of mutuality, not mastering. One of joy and wonder, not boredom. One that honors all our relations. For this to come about some rattling of our modern cages and mindsets is in order. The Black Madonna provides such a shake-up. Still. After all these centuries.



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