Bronwyn Law-Viljoen

PHOTOGRAPHING JOHANNESBURG

BIOGRAPHY

Bronwyn Law-Viljoen is a former Fulbright scholar who completed her doctorate in literature at New York University under the directorship of Harold Bloom. In her capacity as Managing Editor of David Krut Publishing, she has edited a number of titles including *Art and Justice, Light on a Hill, TAXI-013 Diane Victor* and *William Kentridge Flute* (for which she wrote an introduction and essay). She is also a freelance writer and has contributed essays on South African art and photography to a number of South African and international publications, including *Art on Paper, Art South Africa, Aperture* magazine, *Printmaking Today* and *Scrutiny.* Bronwyn is a Research Fellow in the University of Johannesburg's Research Centre, *Visual Identities in Art and Design.*

→ **In my** essay on recent photographic representations of Johannesburg, I consider the work of the following photographers: Andrew Tshabangu, Graeme Williams, TJ Lemon, Jodi Bieber, Senzeni Marasela, Sabelo Mlangeni and Stephen Hobbs. I consider the ways in which these photographers examine, parse and construct the face and character of a rapidly growing metropolis. In particular, I seek to understand the many attempts to make familiar a city that is shaped by the tension between the domestic and the global, between growth and stasis. In doing so, I explore some of the philosophical assumptions that photographs of Johannesburg rely upon and question.

Looking at a range of photo-essays or series on Johannesburg, I have been surprised by the reiteration of the theme of a ghostly, empty or hallucinatory city in many of them. Even in works crowded with the movement and bustle of people and vehicles, it is apparent that the city, for many photographers, slips away from the images that seek to pin it down. In this essay, I try to articulate this element in the work, without, I hope, needing to make any Derridean comments about absences and traces.

What, one must ask, are the implications of such representations of the city? To begin to answer this one must first take into account some of the changes that the city has undergone in the last two decades, changes that I paint only in broad strokes here. These have, by and large, revolved around the constant shifting of the centre of Johannesburg's juridical, economic and political power in the period from just prior to the first democratic elections to the present day. Throughout the 1990s, Johannesburg was the site of evacuation and simultaneous influx. However these two movements, outward from the centre, on the one hand, and towards the centre, on the other, were weighted in different ways. The exit of many of the financial institutions and large corporations meant the demise of smaller businesses and institutions (shops, galleries, hotels, cinemas, restaurants) that were dependent for their livelihood upon the wealth generated by the larger corporations. At the same time, the residential demographics of the city began to shift, reflecting the exit of largely white-owned and run institutions and the influx of immigrants from rural parts of South Africa and from other African countries. The businesses set up in the wake of the movement of immigrants into the city centre bear witness to these changing demographics and to the establishment and growth of alternative economies in the metropolis.

The last decade has seen changes, however, that have yet to produce a coherent inner-city citizenry. Large corporations are returning to the city and their presence is signalled by a slow 'clean up' of pockets of the city in and around the corporate precincts. The clean up involves moving informal vendors into central hubs like taxi ranks and increasing the presence of security personnel in and around corporate buildings. Yet, these changes notwithstanding, the inhabitants of the city who have been in residence for two or more decades continue a lifestyle that incorporates frequent interactions with informal traders centred around transport hubs, and forms of commuting which combine train and taxi transport with walking. Given its current state of development and the extent to which discussion of the city centres around the perception of 'change', it is perhaps not surprising that images of the city are so filled with movement, to the extent that the metropolis has taken on, in photographic representation, a paradoxical ghostliness, an hallucinatory sense of instability, of chaotic movement without a central point of reference.

Henri Lefebvre's (2001:332) analysis of the relationship of power to space is particularly apt here. In his discussion of "contradictory space" he explains that "[c]entrality is movable"; that we can trace the impact of the shifting centres of power on cities all the way back to ancient Greece. But where modern cities differ from ancient models is that

> **centrality now aspires to be *total*. It thus lays claim, implicitly or explicitly, to a superior political rationality [...] It falls to the agents of the technostructure – to the planners – to provide the justification for this claim [...] indeed a centrality of this order expels all peripheral elements with a violence that is inherent in space itself.**

To Lefebvre's post-Vietnam, post-1968 analysis, however, we must introduce something of a corrective, given that Lefebvre's generation was witnessing the subversion of state power in the aftermath of the barricades and anti-war demonstrations and the simultaneous shoring up of this power via the mechanisms of an intractable cold war. Writing almost 40 years later, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001:xiv) posit a new kind of power that extends well beyond the state as it was understood by Lefebvre, an Empire which is "characterized fundamentally by a lack of boundaries" and whose "rule has no limits." Instead of the articulation of a centralised state power, they argue, what we are now presented with is quite different:

> **First and foremost [...] the concept of Empire posits a regime that effectively encompasses the spatial totality, or really that rules over the entire 'civilized' world. No territorial boundaries limit its reign. Second, the concept of Empire presents itself not as a historical regime originating in conquest, but rather as an order that effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity.**

Where, however, do we situate a 21st-century African city along the trajectory suggested by these two kinds of analysis? Certainly it is a city whose centre of power has been in a state of flux for almost three decades, a situation represented by the cycle of occupation, eviction and re-occupation of many buildings in the inner-city, which in turn suggests a constant tussle between government and its allies in big business on the one hand and the thousands of migrants on the search for affordable accommodation and a sense of security in the sprawling and increasingly violent metropolis on the other. Indeed the latter reality – the ever-presence of violence on the streets – feeds into the struggle for ownership and control, destabilising the once-clear hierarchies in which state vehicles of power (the police and the courts) and the owners of wealth (the city itself, the mining houses, financial institutions) dominated. However, is it a city that is tapped into the global network that is the premise of Hardt and Negri's analysis? Its cosmopolitanism does not automatically qualify it for participation in such an Empire. If anything, its connection to global crime syndicates (the extent of which is not yet fully known and understood) and to a global net that encompasses financial institutions, entertainment and the Internet suggestsv entry into Hardt and Negri's Empire.

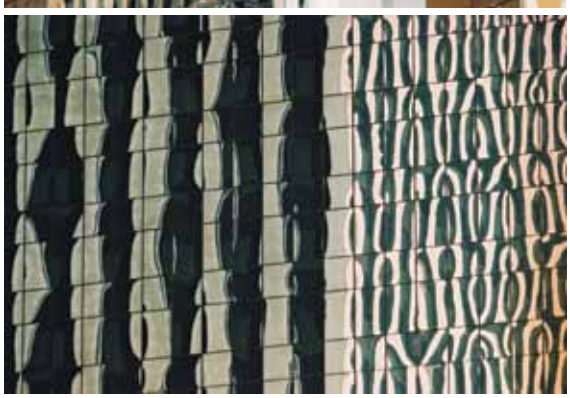
Yet, the movement that is woven into the very fabric of Johannesburg's identity must take into consideration another paradigm that feeds into both Lefebvre's analysis of shifts in power and space and Hardt and Negri's radicalisation of the notion of empire. This is perhaps best summed up in Achille Mbembe's (2007) remarks on 'Afropolitanism'. He describes the histories of "Negro diasporas" as giving rise to a dispersed population of millions who can trace their origins to Africa, and this not only in the last two centuries of civil war and slavery. Indeed, both modern and pre-modern Africa cannot, he argues, "be understood outside the paradigm of itinerancy, mobility and displacement" (2007:27). Mbembe (2007:29) sees contemporary Johannesburg as a kind of distillation of such a paradigm, such that it "feeds on multiple racial legacies, a vibrant economy, a liberal democracy, a culture of consumerism that partakes directly of the flows of globalisation."

With this in mind, then, we can approach the bodies of work to which I refer here with a range of theoretical options that might help us to understand the ways in which the city figures in that most globalised and globalising of mediums, photography. Two things bear mentioning here. The first is a brief remark on the perils of lists. In my choice of photographers I have deliberately omitted reference to some important documenters of the city. Two in particular, namely David Goldblatt and Guy Tillim, present us, if taken together, with an almost perfect image of the polarisation of the photographic record of Johannesburg. On the one hand are Goldblatt's images that feed into his life-long documentation of the structures that people build. His work is a monumental record of *habitation*, with all of its associations with stasis and permanence on the one hand, and displacement and ephemerality on the other. What Goldblatt seeks to understand, above all, is how people inhabit space, construct identity through physical structures and lay claim to a hearth. His work is thus distinguished by its stubborn refusal to move quickly through an environment. Perhaps more than any other photographer we know, Goldblatt endeavours always to stop with his subjects.

In direct contrast to this methodology is Tillim's documentary aesthetic of upheaval and movement, represented in several bodies of work. His leperello publication *Jo'burg* (2005) (pages 237-239) is a good example of this, constructed as it is around the event of an eviction in an inner-city tenement. Even within the tight constraints of his narrative – one that begins and ends with panoramic views of the city skyline – Tillim's 'story' of eviction renders moot any images of permanence (people pictured eating meals, lying in bed, playing).

Several of the bodies of work discussed here made their appearance around the same time as Tillim's body of work, and while many of them function within the same set of assumptions about life in the inner city they move in quite different directions to his work. I have selected them for their particular representation of a quality of the spectral that betrays an underlying aesthetic of a city in which the image-maker is a documenter not simply of change but of a great shift in our understanding of the meaning metropolis.

The first image to consider is Stephen Hobbs's triptych *Citizens of the Mirage City* (1998) (Figure 1). It is a large work, standing 1.8 metres tall, and the figures – more shadow than substance – in each panel are seen from above, but inverted; they almost seem



LEFT
fig 1 Stephen Hobbs,
Citizens of the Mirage City, 1998
Lambda prints
1.8 m x 1.2 m each
Courtesy of the artist

BELOW LEFT
figs 2-5
Stephen Hobbs,
Mirage City 1-4, 1998
Hand colour print
100 x 66 cm
Courtesy of the artist

OPPOSITE PAGE
Graeme Williams
All images from
The Inner-city, 2000
Courtesy of the artist

TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT
fig 6 *Brixton 1996*
fig 7 *Hillbrow 1997*

SECOND ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT
fig 8 *Hillbrow 1997*
fig 9 *Brixton 1997*

THIRD ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT
fig 10 *Joubert Park 1989*
fig 11 *Braamfontein 1997*

BOTTOM
fig 12 *Braamfontein 1997*

to be walking backwards across the strip of grey static that is the road (though the reference here is less to a road than to the grainy image of a surveillance tape). As a commentary on this image, whose title strikes an ironic note since no sooner are we presented with 'citizens' than we are reminded of the kind of city to which they belong, I quote an excerpt from Ivan Vladislavić's (2006:54-55) series of vignettes on life in Johannesburg, *Portrait with Keys*

> **A stranger, arriving one evening in the part of Joburg I call home, would think that it had been struck by some calamity, that every last person had fled. There is no sign of life. Behind the walls, the houses are like ticking bombs. The curtains are drawn tight, the security lights are glaring, the gates are bolted. Even the cars have taken cover. Our stranger, passing fearfully through the streets, whether in search of someone with open hands of whom he might ask directions or merely someone to avoid in the pursuit of solitude, finds no one at all.**

Vladislavić and Hobbs both describe the spectre of a city emptied or abandoned. Even though, for Vladislavić, this is a function of the paranoia generated by the high crime rate in Johannesburg, both he and Hobbs imagine the alienating quality of loneliness in the context of this vacated city. Hobbs extends this idea to suggest that the very idea of fixity, the very possibility of describing the city is under question, since it is mirage-like, eluding representation.

Graeme Williams's book *The Inner-city*, published in 2000, contains several shots that seem to me to echo this sentiment, notwithstanding Williams's interest in the denizens of the city, or the obvious differences in style and content from Hobbs's work. William's photographs, peopled or not, are captioned simply *Brixton 1996, Braamfontein 1998, Hillbrow 1997* (Figures 6-12), as

though the name of a place is substitute for action, event, or person. Several images, taken in the heart of the city or suburbia, suggest vacancy, offering a poignant reminder of the banality of the habits or patterns – of working, of socialising – that make up or bring the city into being.

Andrew Tshabangu's series, *A City in Transition* (2004) (Figures 13-21), though it documents the moving, teeming life on the streets, is, as its title suggests, a meditation on grand-scale shifts in historical, economic and political paradigms. Though Tshabangu is interested in minutiae he maintains a tension – between the story of the everyday and the master narrative – by constant focal and perspectival shifts. In order to allude to something larger than the faces in the crowds on the street, Tshabangu often shoots through veils of smoke and glass, or from a slightly elevated position. This has the effect of constructing something around the subjects that his camera takes in, of adding a kind of thinking and filtering process to mere observation. Thus Tshabangu's experience of the city is, as his images and style suggest, multi-layered. On the one hand, his black and white photographs record his contact with small-time vendors, harried taxi operators, and cleaning women shuttling their brooms from street to street: he is indeed a commuter like any other. Yet, on the other hand, the impact of his work resides in its presentation of the city as a symbol of something larger than the daily rush and grind of people. His perception is of a city almost cinematic in its pace and movement, reminiscent of Sergei Eisenstein or Charlie Chaplin but more fragmented, less constructed, in which the individual is pitted against the essential emptiness (in the philosophical sense, not the psychological) of paradigms.

Then there is the series by Sabelo Mlangeni which explicitly foregrounds the theme we are exploring in its title, *Invisible Women* (2006) (Figures 22-28). The series documents the female street cleaners who, in a kind of grim poetry, are the gatekeepers of a night-time world of decay and disorder. They are 'on the brooms' in the small hours, when the city has been emptied of its daytime traffic, sweeping and bagging the swirling piles of garbage. Mlangeni captures the surreal quality of Johannesburg's late-night, littered streets and the overwhelming nature of the work facing these women. Armed with brooms and spikes, and wrapped in protective plastic, they seem to merge with the very trash that they are trying to clean up. A famous passage from *Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens (1989:420) (that most astute, if provocative, 19th-century theoriser of cities) suggests a similar merging of city and humanity, labour and flesh:

> **It was a foggy day in London, and the fog was heavy and dark. Animate London, with smarting eyes and irritated lungs, was blinking, wheezing, and choking; inanimate London was a sooty spectre, divided in purpose between being visible and invisible, and being wholly neither.**





All images
Andrew Tshabangu
Fibre-based print
50 x 75 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Momo

TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT
fig 13 Rain on Windshield, 2004
fig 14 Passage, 2007
fig 15 Old Man, 1994
fig 16 Rear-View Mirror, 2004

MIDDLE
fig 17 Inside Bree Street Taxi Rank, 2004

BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT
fig 18 Broken Window and Railway Lines, Mandela Bridge, 2007
fig 19 City Near Bree Street Taxi Rank, 2004
fig 20 Butchery, Traders and Taxis, 2004
fig 21 Naledi, Bree Street Taxi Rank, 2003


ADVERTISE
HERE
(011)
509-9000
ADVERTISE
HERE
(011)
509-9000

All images
Sabelo Mlangeni
Silverprint
48 x 70 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Warren Siebrits Contemporary

LEFT
fig 22 MaMbatha, 2006

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT
fig 23 Hidden Identity, 2006
fig 24 MaDlamini, 2006

BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT
fig 25 Low Prices Daily, 2006
fig 26 Invisible Woman II, 2006
fig 27 Invisible Woman III, 2006
fig 28 The Tools, 2006

Of course it would be a misrepresentation of Mlangeni's work to suggest that the invisibility he alludes to is anything other than economic. What he means, I suspect, is that the work of these women, while it keeps at bay the rubbish that threatens to overwhelm the city every day, goes unremarked by those of us who are not street sweepers. Nonetheless, his methodology adds a particular quality to the purely documentary, so that the women he describes as invisible are indeed spectre-like, resident in shadows, hidden by darkness.

In a similar gesture, TJ Lemon's prize-winning 2000 series, *OSwenkas – The Jeppe Hostel Swankers* (Figures 29-37), follows a group of migrant workers from their KwaZulu-Natal homes to jobs in Johannesburg. He suggests, through his documentation of a fashion competition known as swanking, held on Saturdays in some of the men's hostels in Johannesburg, the creation, on the part of the men in his images, of alternate identities that raise the individual above the daily grind of physical work and the complexities of life in a men's hostel in the Central Business District. The competitions, often incorporated into *isiChatamiya* singing performances, have all the marks of a serious event – an impartial judge (often brought in off the streets at the last minute), a strict order of proceedings, the awarding of prize money once the judge has made his decision and they gave Lemon an insight into the lives of the many migrant workers whose lot has not significantly changed since the end of apartheid.

Lemon's experience of the city (by which I mean that the photographer engages, through his or her work, in experience that is not wholly their own) is not unlike that of the Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama (2004:113) who, in his book *Memories of a Dog*, draws together memory and photography by imagining a history of cities, which he is compelled to recall and which he helps to create: "When I walk now, camera in hand, through an actual town, I am listening to the memories of dreams spoken by a town that once was, and I am also envisioning a modest documentation addressed to the dream of the town to come."

TJ Lemon's work is an articulation of longing but also suggests a tenuous connection between history and lived experience. In this regard, he is, I think, less romantic than Moriyama, but nonetheless displays an optimistic belief (or hope, at the very least) of the possibility of transcendence.

Travelling, quite literally, in the opposite direction, Jodi Bieber's essay *Going Home* (2001) (Figures 38 - 47) documents the police crackdown in 2001 on illegal immigrants living in Hillbrow. For this project Bieber followed a series of raids in Hillbrow and the mind-numbing processing of people at the deportation centre in Roodepoort, and then boarded a train with the deportees to a Mozambique stricken by the worst flooding in the country's history.

Bieber's work, which may be compared to Goldblatt's *The Transported of KwaNdebele* (1983-1984), suggests that the relationship, if such a thing is possible, between the city and those who, though they live and work in its environs, are denied citizenship, is premised upon upheaval and dislocation. The title of the essay, and the images themselves, lay bare the mythology of home and belonging.

TJ Lemon
All images from the series *OSwenkas – The Jeppe Hostel Swankers*, 2000
Lambda laser jet print
Mounted on corrugated sheeting
120 x 180 cm
Courtesy of the artist

OPPOSITE PAGE
TOP ROW
LEFT TO RIGHT
fig 29 Qunu, KwaZulu-Natal, home to many of the migrant workers who live in the Jeppe Hostel
fig 30 At home in Qunu, KwaZulu-Natal
fig 31 Siphamandla Sithole at home in Qunu, KwaZulu-Natal, preparing for a competition

OPPOSITE PAGE
BOTTOM ROW
LEFT TO RIGHT
fig 32 Migrant worker, End Street, Jeppestown
fig 33 Security guard Piet Zulu in a men's hostel on the East Rand
fig 34 Migrant worker, downtown Johannesburg

RIGHT
fig 35 Alpheus Hlatshwayo performing for the judge

BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT
fig 36 Dingani Zulu shows off matching accessories to the judge
fig 37 Winning swanker congratulated for his fine performance

Jodi Bieber
All images from the series *Going Home*, 2001
Fibre-based hand print
40 x 50 cm
Courtesy of the artist

LEFT,
TOP TO BOTTOM
figs 38 & 39 Operation Crackdown, Hillbrow, Johannesburg
figs 40 & 41 Lindela Deportation Centre
fig 42 Immigrants waiting in line at Lindela Deportation Centre in Roodepoort before deportation back to country of origin
figs 43 & 44 On the way to the trains before being repatriated back to country of origin – Lindela Deportation Centre

BELOW
fig 45 On the way to the trains before being repatriated back to country of origin – Lindela Deportation Centre
fig 46 Shafkop, the police captain of the train, who was later accused by the Mail and Guardian of allowing corruption to take place on the train from South Africa to Mozambique

OPPOSITE PAGE
fig 47 To prevent escape, illegal Immigrants are asked to place their heads between their legs at each station that the train stops at on the way to Mozambique

Which brings me back to Hobbs, whose series *Mirage City* (Figures 1-5) I compare with a very different body of work by Senzeni Marasela, *Theodora Comes to Johannesburg* (2006) (Figures 48-56). In Marasela's work, a woman in bright yellow is pictured in various street scenes or on her own in empty lots and abandoned buildings. She stands out from the crowd, by virtue of the camera's focal point, but also because she is dressed in a floral dress reminiscent of the uniforms bought by white homeowners for their black domestic workers. Although Theodora is named, her face is never visible. Each time we see her, it is from behind as she contemplates, it would seem, a façade, a wall, a street that might give back her image. In counterpoint, Hobbs's mirages, at a double remove from people we might imagine in the street below his shimmering, half-real buildings, suggest that the city as a backdrop to life – good, bad, or indifferent – is unreliable. The monumental architecture of the metropolis, rooted in a boom-and-bust history, lacks substance, not in reality, but in the image.

There are many ways to theorise cities as phenomena, but two in particular seem to me to have particular bearing

fig 48-55
Senzeni Marasela,
All images from the series
Theodora comes to Johannesburg, 2004
Digital print in pigment ink
on cotton rag paper
50 x 75 cm each
Courtesy of the artist and the
Goodman Gallery

on the photo-essays or series that we have considered. On the one hand, Michel de Certeau (1998:142), in a well-known passage in *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2*, renders the city mythical, thus:

> The wordless histories of walking, dressing, housing, or cooking shape neighbourhoods on behalf of absences; they trace out memories that no longer have a place – childhoods, genealogical traditions, timeless events. Such is the 'work' of urban narratives as well. They insinuate different spaces in cafés, offices, and buildings. To the visible city they add those 'invisible cities' about which Calvino wrote. With the vocabulary of objects and well-known words, they create another dimension, in turn fantastical and delinquent, fearful and legitimating. For this reason, they render the city 'believable,' affect it with unknown depth to be inventoried, and open it up to journeys. They are the keys to the city; they give access to what it is: mythical.

Where de Certeau suggests the possibility of narrating the city (even "wordlessly" through patterns and histories of movement), the theorist of space, Lefebvre (1991:99) whom de Certeau read, warns that not all kinds of narratives of the city should be believed. Or, at the very least, metaphors of the city should be treated with circumspection. For example:

> In connection with the city and its extensions ... one hears of a 'pathology of space', of 'ailing neighbourhoods' and so on. This kind of phraseology makes it easy for people who use it – architects, urbanists or planners – to suggest the idea that they are, in effect, 'doctors of space'. This is to promote the spread of some particularly mystifying notions, and especially the idea that the modern city is a product not of capitalist or neocapitalist systems but rather of some putativeness' of society ... not that such a position is utterly indefensible from a strictly philosophical viewpoint ... My point is merely that this philosophical view ... leads *necessarily* to nihilism.

The philosopher Avishai Margalit (2002:64) describes the differences, and mediates between, these two views in his book *The Ethics of Memory:*

fig 56 Senzeni Marasela
From the series
Theodora comes to Johannesburg, 2004
Digital print in pigment ink on cotton rag paper
50 x 75 cm
Courtesy of the artist and the Goodman Gallery

> **Shared memory is torn between two worldviews, which are manifested, in their pure forms, by science on the one hand and by myth on the other. The contrastive feature is the Weberian contrast between viewing the world as an enchanted place (myth) and viewing the world as a disenchanted place (critical history).**

The bodies of work that we have looked at, taken together, lie at the very nexus of the relationship between myth and critical history. Without formulating, proposing, or even describing an ethic, they make reference, implicitly or explicitly, to the memories of relations, good or bad, which make and disrupt communities, to what Margalit describes as an "ethics of memory".

In Patrick Chamoiseau's novel, *Texaco* (1997:293), about the urbanisation of Martinique at the expense of its shantytowns, the character Marie-Sophie Laborieux asks

> **What is City? You say. It's not a place of happiness. It's not a place of misfortune. It's the calabash of fate ... There is no History of City. Rubbish. Speak of Time. It does not come like a thread but like a leashed dog that steps forward, rolls back, shivers, skids and takes a sharp right ... All the stories are here, but there's no History. Only grand Time without beginning or end, without befores or afters. Monumental Time.**

Here Chamoiseau, through his narrator, suggests a distinction between stories, time and history. Since he is a novelist, he must believe in the possibility of telling stories about the city, but exactly where these are located in relation to official history is uncertain. Marie-Sophie suggests that a history – an official record of birth, death, gentrification, urbanisation – cannot be told here, that the stories fit, perhaps, into something that supercedes history. This is an impulse that animates the photographs discussed here: stories there certainly are, but what is their relation to the history in which Johannesburg is described, mapped and regenerated?

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