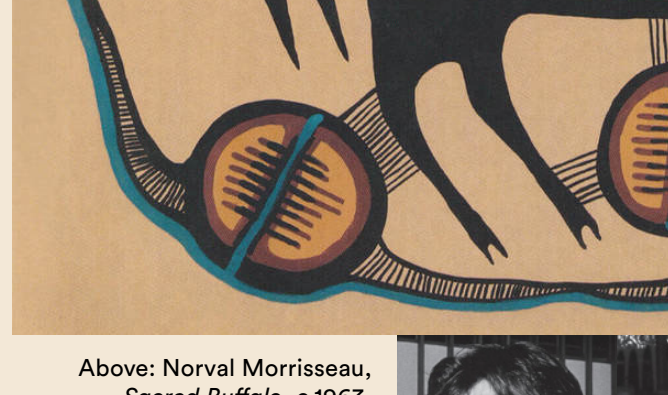


AUGUST 26, 2022

“TOGETHER WE BROKE DOWN BARRIERS” NORVAL MORRISSEAU & THE RISE OF THE PROFESSIONAL NATIVE INDIAN ARTISTS INCORPORATED

In the early 1970s a group of seven artists known as the Professional Native Indian Artists Incorporated (PNIAI) broke new ground in the representation, proliferation, and dissemination of First Nations art practices in Canada.



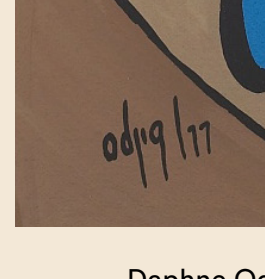
Left to right: Artists Norval Morrisseau, Alex Janvier, and Jackson Beardy.



Above: Norval Morrisseau, *Sacred Buffalo*, c.1963, University of Lethbridge Art Collection. Left to right: Artists Carl Ray, Eddy Cobiness, Joseph Sánchez, and Daphne Odjig.

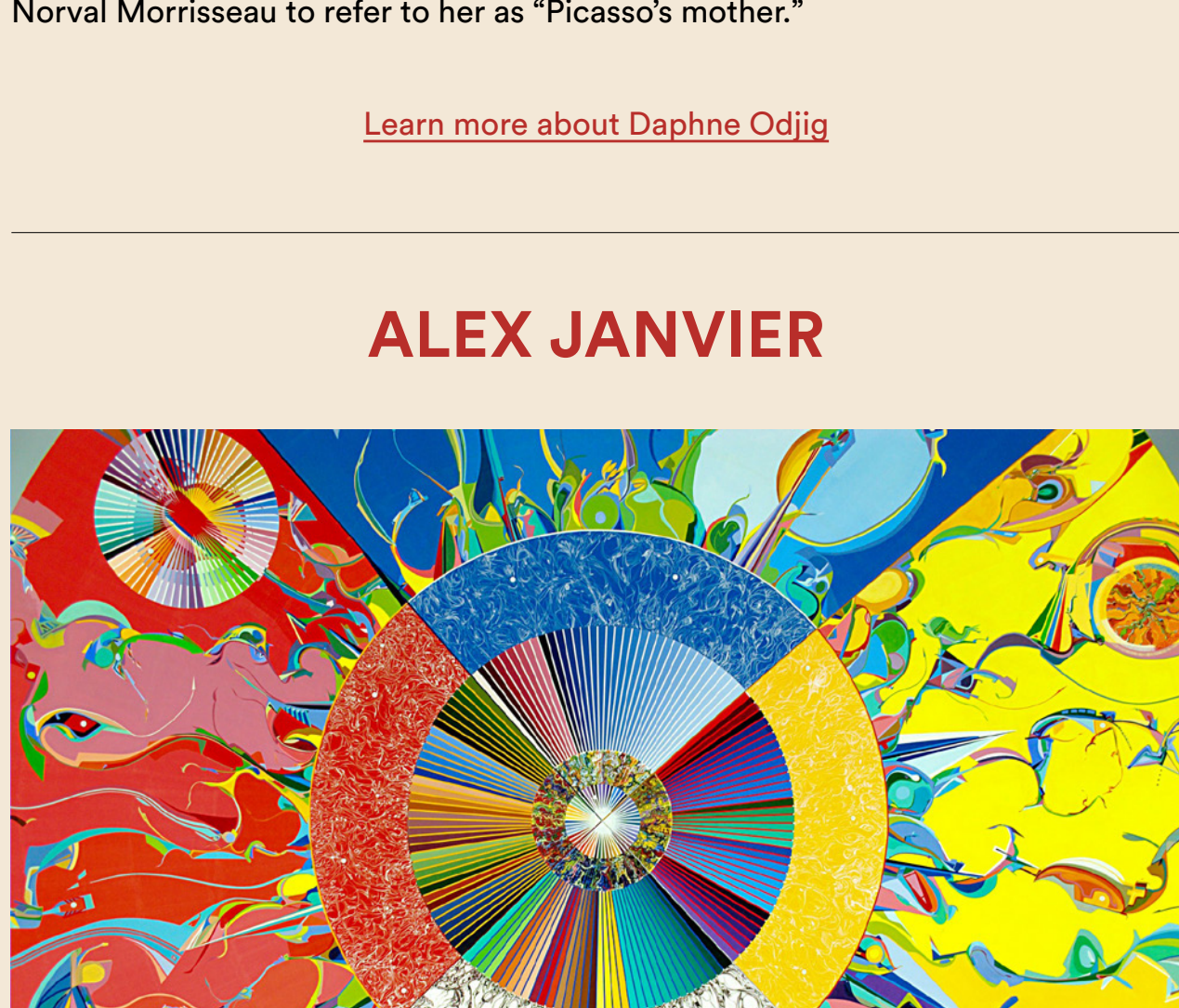


Sixty years ago this summer, in June 1962, Norval Morrisseau (1931–2007) met the Toronto gallery owner Jack Pollock in the artist's hometown of Beardmore, Ontario. Intrigued by his unique vision, Pollock planned an exhibition of Morrisseau's paintings, marking the first showing of an Indigenous artist's work in a contemporary art gallery in Canada. With images like *Sacred Buffalo*, c.1963 (above), the exhibition sold out on opening day and Morrisseau's celebrity was cemented—he earned the reputation of the *misshomis*, or “grandfather,” of contemporary Indigenous art in this country. In the decade following his triumphant debut, Morrisseau joined together with a group of artists to challenge the exclusionary nature of the mainstream art world. Known as the Professional Native Indian Artists Incorporated, the collective was founded by Daphne Odjig (1919–2016) in the early 1970s and included seven visionary artists who championed the development of emerging First Nations talent through support and sustained strategic intervention. Six decades after Morrisseau and Pollock's pivotal meeting, we are sharing a selection of works by members of this ground-breaking artistic alliance, whose immense impact on art and advocacy continues to resonate.



Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

DAPHNE ODJIG



Daphne Odjig, *Mother and Child - Playtime*, 1977, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



Not only was Daphne Odjig (1919–2016) a founding member of the PNIAI, she also provided its first home. Together with her husband Chester Beaver, the pair opened “Odjig’s” in Winnipeg in 1971. Eventually, the small craft store expanded to become the New Warehouse Gallery, a favoured gathering place where the group could connect and exhibit work.

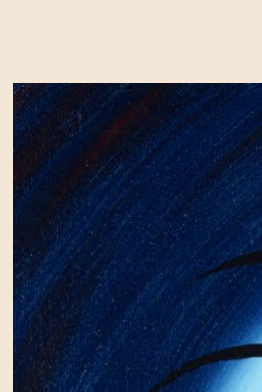
Speaking to the power of collaboration in the face of adversity, Odjig noted, “We acknowledged and supported each other as artists when the world of fine art refused us entry.... Together we broke down barriers that would have been so much more difficult faced alone.” Along with her work in advocacy and mentorship, Odjig's paintings like *Mother and Child - Playtime*, 1977, advanced a representational approach that bridged traditional First Nations styles with modernist aesthetics—a tendency that once inspired Norval Morrisseau to refer to her as “Picasso's mother.”

[Learn more about Daphne Odjig](#)

ALEX JANVIER



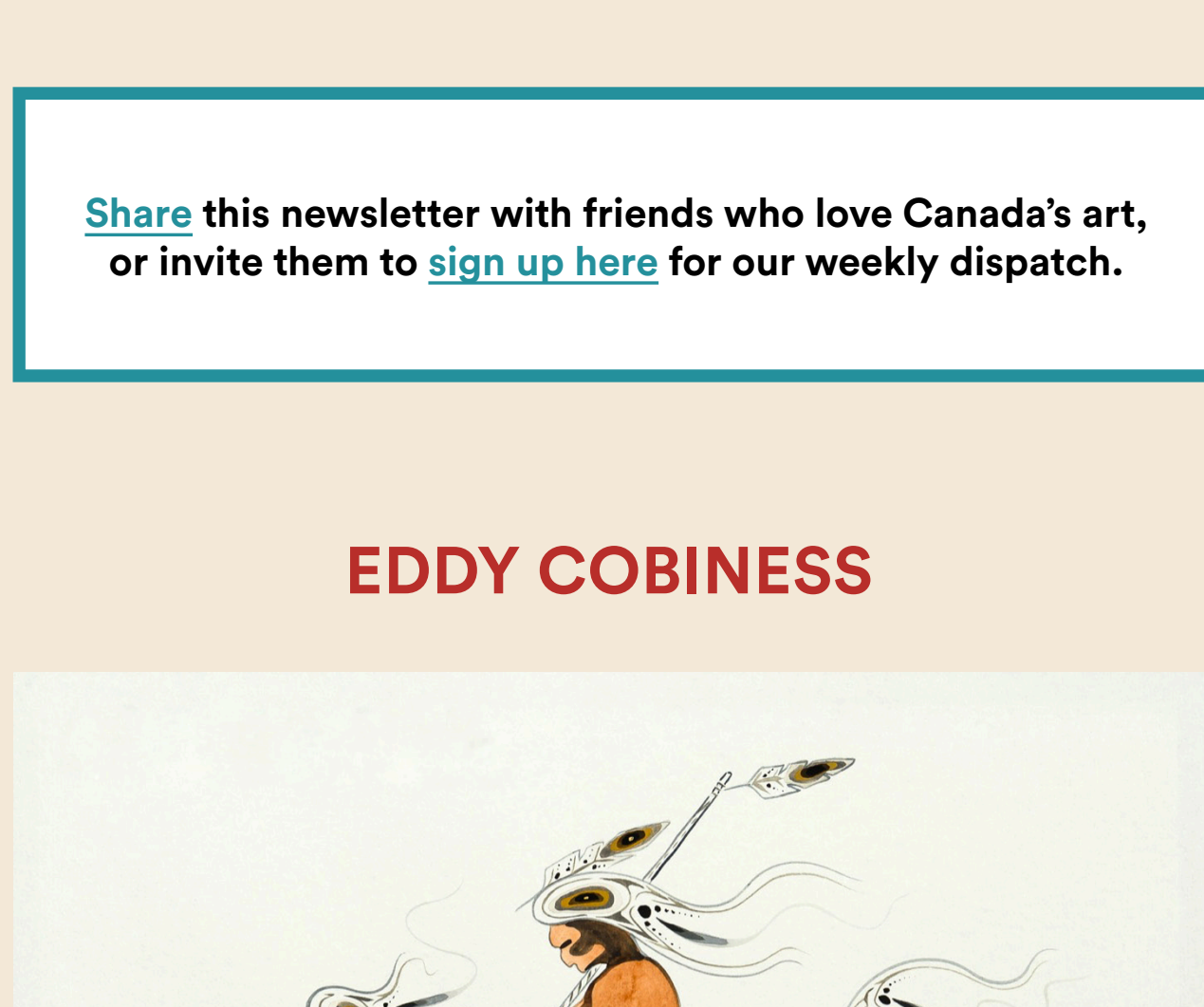
Alex Janvier, *Morning Star*, 1993, Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau.



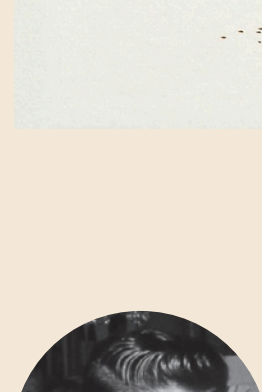
Of Denesuline and Saulteaux heritage, Alex Janvier (b.1935) championed First Nations creative expression throughout the 1960s in his capacity as a cultural advisor, before bringing his vision to the PNIAI. From the group's first-ever exhibition at Odjig's New Warehouse Gallery in the 1970s, to the dome of the Haida Gwaii Salon in Gatineau's Canadian Museum of History (CMH) two decades later, Janvier's remarkable career is an inspiration. *Morning Star*, completed in 1993 for the CMH, is a colourful masterpiece that covers 418 metres of architectural space, tells the story of our shared land from the artist's cultural perspective, and was undertaken with help from his son—a testament to Janvier's continued mentorship of the next generation of creative talent.

[Learn more about Alex Janvier](#)

JACKSON BEARDY



Jackson Beardy, *Flock*, 1973, Indigenous Art Centre, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau.



In 1972, Oji-Cree artist Jackson Beardy (1944–1984) participated in the exhibition *Treaty Numbers 23, 287, 1171* together with PNIAI members Daphne Odjig and Norval Morrisseau. Making reference to the treaties between the Canadian government and each of the artists' communities, the show was a pivotal event in the lead-up to the foundation of the group. Along with his artistic skills, Beardy brought a vision of unity and mutual respect to the PNIAI collective, pledging: “It has become my deep, personal life goal to create an awareness of our culture within the public at large—thereby cementing stronger ties of mutual understanding for one country, one Canada.” *Flock*, 1973, is exemplary of Beardy's uniquely illustrative style, and his commitment to visual storytelling through symbols, pictographic images, and representations of the natural world.

[Learn more about Jackson Beardy](#)

CARL RAY



Carl Ray, *Spirit Fish*, c.1975, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.

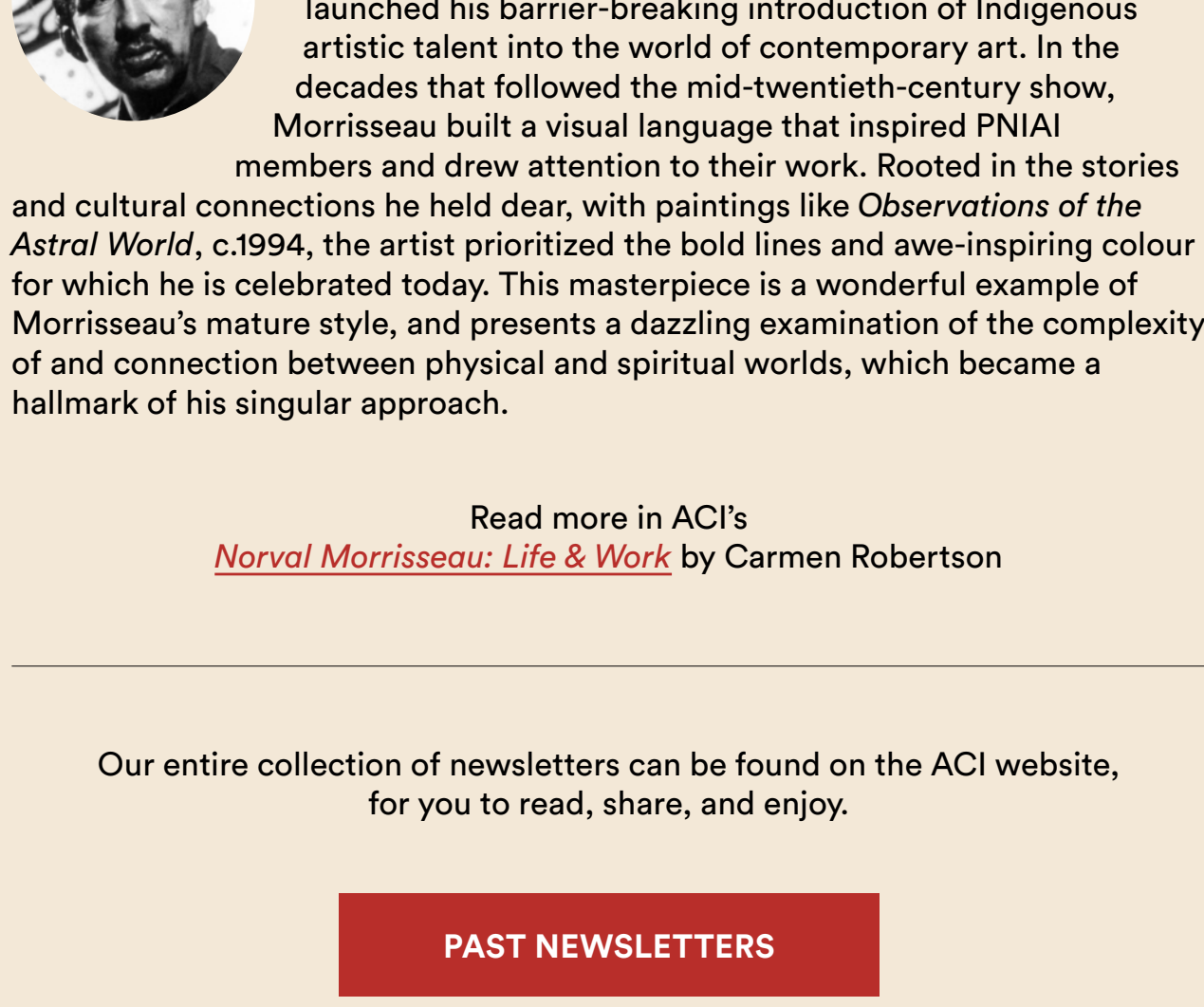


Carl Ray (1943–1978) came to the PNIAI through the mentorship of Norval Morrisseau, who took the budding artist under his wing in the early stages of his career. Before the establishment of the group, Ray worked with Morrisseau on *Earth Mother with her Children*, a major mural that was featured as part of the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67. Collaborations like this were important early exposure for Ray, who went on to develop a style characterized by bold lines, minimal colour combinations, and an x-ray aesthetic that reveals the inner workings of the humans, animals, and creatures he depicts. Like many of his PNIAI peers, Ray took inspiration from storytelling traditions in his community, producing visual interpretations that evoke a sense of depth and connectivity in our shared world.

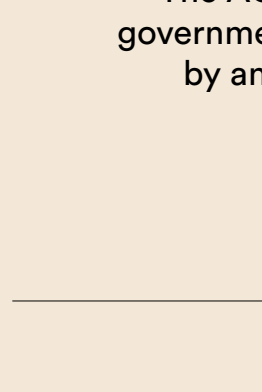
[Learn more about Carl Ray](#)

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EDDY COBINESS



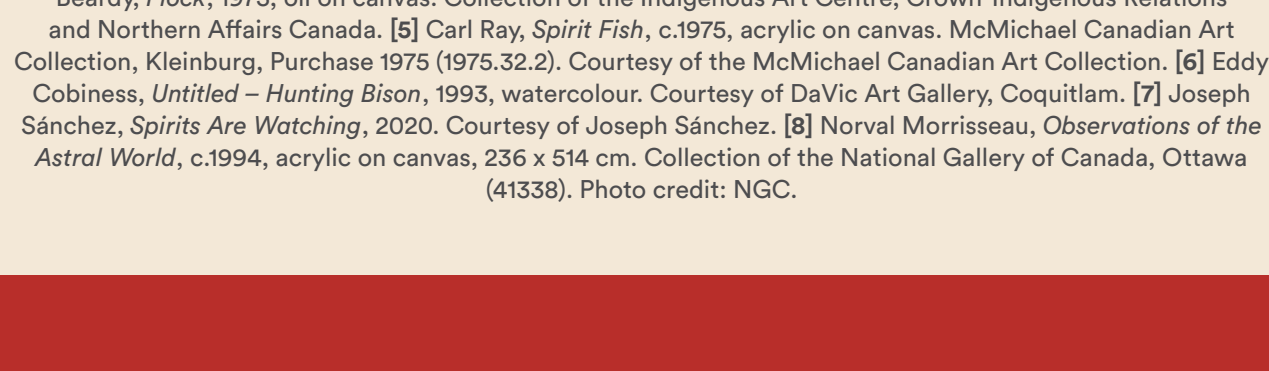
Eddy Cobiness, *Untitled – Hunting Bison*, 1993.



Minnesota-born, Manitoba-raised artist Eddy Cobiness (1933–1996) came to the PNIAI through a circuitous route. Before joining the group, he served in the United States Army between 1954 and 1957—though he continued to cultivate his love of visual art through drawing and sketching over the course of his service. Later, he would settle back in Manitoba and develop his career as an exhibiting artist, participating alongside his PNIAI colleagues in shows throughout the 1970s. Cobiness worked primarily in ink and watercolour, mediums that contribute to the exquisite line work and dynamic movement found in images like *Untitled – Hunting Bison*, 1993, which brings together the artist's interest in representational forms with a hint of modernist abstraction, visible in the patterns and motifs for which he is renowned.

[Learn more about Eddy Cobiness](#)

JOSEPH SÁNCHEZ



Joseph Sánchez, *Spirits Are Watching*, 2020, Courtesy of Joseph Sánchez.

In his capacity as an artist and curator, Joseph Sánchez (b.1948)—the youngest member of the PNIAI group—has broken down barriers for close to fifty years. Like Eddy Cobiness, Sánchez was born in the United States; however, a fateful meeting with Daphne Odjig in Winnipeg in the early 1970s would prove pivotal in his artistic development. While serving in the U.S. Marine Corps, he shared one of his Surrealist-inspired paintings with Odjig. She purchased the work, and the rest is history: Sánchez went on to become a founding member of the PNIAI and began his career, which included being Chief Curator at Alberta's Portage College Museum of Aboriginal Peoples' Art and Artifacts, where a permanent collection dedicated to the PNIAI is housed. Using line to evoke the movement between different realms and realities, paintings like *Spirits Are Watching*, 2020, reveal Sánchez's style drawn, in part, from Surrealist traditions that favour intuition over reason and realism.

[Learn more about Joseph Sánchez](#)

NORVAL MORRISSEAU

Norval Morrisseau, *Observations of the Astral World*, c.1994, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Norval Morrisseau's storied exhibition at Toronto's Pollock Gallery in 1962 was successful not only for its commercial triumph—selling out on opening day—but also for how it launched his barrier-breaking introduction of Indigenous artistic talent into the world of contemporary art. In the decades that followed the mid-twentieth-century show, Morrisseau built a visual language that inspired PNIAI members and drew attention to their work. Rooted in the stories and cultural connections he held dear, with paintings like *Observations of the Astral World*, c.1994, the artist prioritized the bold lines and awe-inspiring colour for which he is celebrated today. This masterpiece is a wonderful example of Morrisseau's mature style, and presents a dazzling examination of the complexity of and connection between physical and spiritual worlds, which became a hallmark of his singular approach.

Read more in ACI's
[Norval Morrisseau: Life & Work](#) by Carmen Robertson

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