

M I C H I G A N S T A T E U N I V E R S I T Y

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND LETTERS
DEPARTMENT OF ART, ART HISTORY, AND DESIGN

**2023 MASTER OF FINE ARTS EXHIBITION
ELI AND EDYTHE BROAD ART MUSEUM
AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

OPENING RECEPTION: FRIDAY, MARCH 24, 6-8 PM
EXHIBITION DATES: **MARCH 11-MAY 21, 2023**
GALLERY TALKS: TUESDAY, APRIL 18, 2023, 6-8 PM

PARTICIPATING MFA CANDIDATES

KELSEY BLACKLOCK
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URSULA HEDER
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LEWIS

CHRISTIAN OLID-RAMIREZ
WWW.CHRISTIANRAMIREZSTUDIO.COM

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Whether focused within or across disciplines, the MSU MFA student is characterized by a desire to push beyond the boundaries of existing art and design paradigms. Each MFA student therefore defines and customizes their own integrative, multi-disciplinary or media-focused program under the guidance of a faculty committee selected by the student. Utilizing a recursive approach, student artists/scholars work with their committee to refine their research and artistic goals and to develop a unique project and written thesis. The MSU Department of Art, Art History, and Design celebrates the creative research of Kelsey Blacklock, Ursula Heder, Lewis, and christian olid-ramirez as evidence of their achievement and continuing artistic and scholarly promise.

ZACH KAISER

Director of Graduate Studies/Department of Art, Art History, and Design

DAN CAMERON is a New York-based curator of contemporary art who also writes, teaches, makes, and serves on art-related juries and boards. He advises both public and private collections. Throughout his 40-plus year career organizing exhibitions, Cameron has steadfastly championed both the unexpected and the under-recognized. Cameron is the 2022–2023 AAHD Critic-in-Residence.

K E L S E Y B L A C K L O C K

WRITTEN BY DAN CAMERON

The work of Kelsey Blacklock serves as a reminder that even the most steadfast of artistic conventions, like landscape painting, can become noticeably reconfigured as each generation, with its unique configuration of opportunities and restraints, takes on the challenge of instilling appropriate meaning into vessels of representation that might at first seem to have been exhausted of any possibility of renewal. For her, the rampant exploitation of environmental resources and deep-rooted hierarchies of power together bring up questions that are inextricable from the subject of landscape. This in turn makes the 19th century convention of seeking to experience the sublime through nature seem escapist, even irresponsible.

Blacklock's current group of paintings, which are collectively titled *Nothing Goes One Way*, reflects some of her underlying misgivings about ownership,

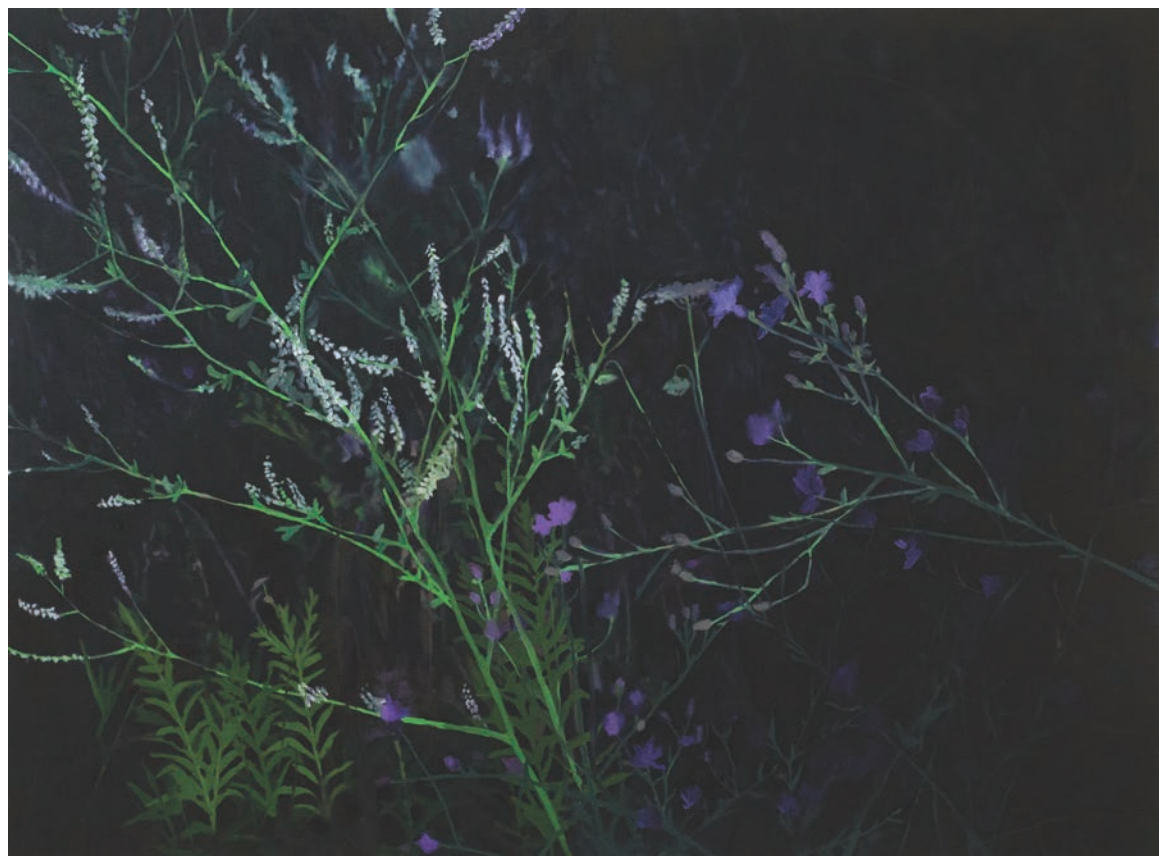
dominion, and agency. Her subject is a small, untended plot of land near where she lives that seems to constitute a leftover in-between space that doesn't correspond to the lines dividing up the land into subdivisions for residential zoning. The slice of land is left untended most likely because it doesn't fit existing coordinates, so it has transformed into a semi-overgrown state, with weeds and other vegetation filling in the blank spots.

The paintings themselves have a notably unearthly quality about them, wrapped in a crepuscular twilight with random cross sections bathed in the artificial glare of overhead street lamps nearby. In the largest of the group, a ten-foot wide triptych, the detailed blooms of several species of wildflowers seem to have been shoved unceremoniously into the foreground, while everything around them recedes awkwardly into the enveloping darkness.

Blacklock, a Louisville native, studied painting at Herron School of Art in Indianapolis before coming to MSU. Her commitment to nature isn't simply an artistic matter: her partner is a vegetable farmer, and the intentionality of their life has contributed to her philosophy of thinking about and working within nature at a level that transcends simple questions of subject matter. For her, choosing landscape in the second decade of the 21st century also requires figuring out how we relate to nature through the lens of white supremacy, and from there to the unnecessary destruction of nature caused by humans.

Although it's unsurprising that most of the backgrounds in Blacklock's new paintings are bathed in a somber darkness, it should also be noted that that does not lead to a net loss of aesthetic beauty for us to contemplate. As with actual darkness, however, it takes our eyes a few extra minutes to adjust to the changed conditions, then we start to discern the detail of

the plants themselves. It's a mistake to call their beauty delicate, since they are obviously thriving in this environment with no intended help from us. But the optics of the pictorial gloom and the unconventional angles and points of view are such that our eyes invariably have to work a little harder to establish our place within the scene, and that adjustment might itself be understood as an allegory of the extra effort we all need to commit to if we are to have any chance of avoiding a mass extinction event in which the species that bears the brunt will be us.



2023 FROM THE SERIES **NOTHING GOES ONE WAY**
Oil on canvas | 28" x 38"



2023 FROM THE SERIES **NOTHING GOES ONE WAY**
Oil on canvas | 28" x 38"



2023 FROM THE SERIES NOTHING GOES ONE WAY [DETAIL]
Oil on canvas | 5' x 10'



2023 FROM THE SERIES NOTHING GOES ONE WAY
Oil on canvas | 5' x 10'

U R S U L A H E D E R

WRITTEN BY DAN CAMERON

Ursula Heder came to art-making by way of graphic design, having attained a BFA in the field from University of Houston, following an undergraduate degree in international studies and French from Emory University, and her current studio work bears ample evidence of these multiple, overlapping interests. Much like the layout artist she trained to become, her preferred materials today are colored pencil, cray-pas, Letraset, archival paper and vinyl on hard surfaces like MDF and hardboard tempered panel. The affinity comes across even more in Heder's concerted effort to transform the world of written language, graphic markings and color into a fleeting, pulsing image, much in the spirit of the Dada collage artists who habituated Zurich clubs and cafes in the years between the two World Wars, and invented a new, irrational art in response to their direct experience of a harsh new century. By employing fragmented language

and shattered images to counter their hollowed-out world, the Dadists also sought to undermine the visual authority of their diverse sources.

In many of Heder's works, what appear at first to be lyrical passages of painterly brushwork frequently turn out to be snippets of words composed in script or cursive, often captured moving in conflicting or juxtaposed directions and angles with other bits of language. For all of the works' immediate visual appeal, the artist has made clear that the root for these works is her direct experience of the ideological distortions of language and visual imagery within oppressive political regimes that seek to dominate all individual expression within the public and private sphere. To Heder, it's only after the words and images have been rendered unintelligible that it also becomes possible for the artist to handle them as if they were powerless.

Heder's interest in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes is not merely scholarly. Both her parents grew up in repressive societies before she was born, and the Soviet ideology of her father's East German upbringing, along with the far-right Brazilian military dictatorship that her mother experienced, continue to find their way into her artistic choices today. Born in Hungary, Heder grew up in a household where German and Portuguese were the default languages, and has spoken of feeling out of place in situations where confusing linguistic ambiguities negatively impacted the ability to exchange cultures and ideas, which in turn fed a feeling of needing to push back against ways that language—including in its most primitive form as mere repetitions of letters—operates as a mechanism of control.

One of Heder's more effective strategies is to use both fragmentation and repetition to build up optical patterns of gestural scraps of meaning that remain on the pre-linguistic side, but float in

and out of the patches of color and ambiguous linear markings. To create these repetitions, she scans, prints, cuts up and recombines the compositions to produce entirely new images. Although she has expressed her intention to build visual structures that slow the eye's movement through the space, the overall effect of Heder's compositions is that they unpack themselves in stages: the aesthetic followed by the analytic, which is followed in turn by the unflinching human impulse to try to make cognitive sense of a scrambled field of dissociated parts by perceiving it as a puzzle that, like Humpty Dumpty, only needs the safety of a kingdom to be pieced back together again.



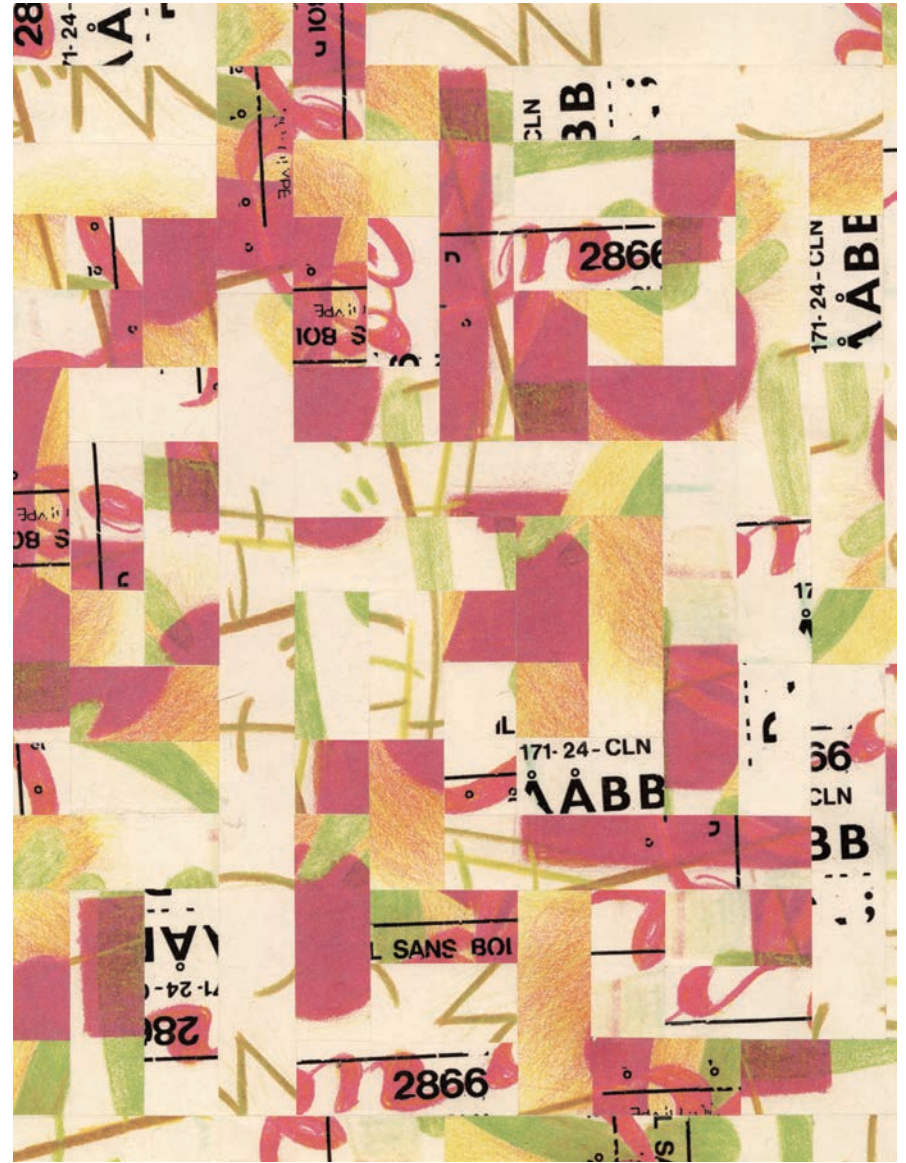
2022
2023
FALSE MEMORIES/IDENTITY THIEF [DETAIL]
Colored pencil, cray-pas, Letraset, archival paper, vinyl, MDF,
hardboard tempered panel | Dimensions variable



2022
2023
FALSE MEMORIES/IDENTITY THIEF [DETAIL]
Colored pencil, cray-pas, Letraset, archival paper, vinyl, MDF,
hardboard tempered panel | Dimensions variable



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FALSE MEMORIES/IDENTITY THIEF [DETAIL]
Colored pencil, cray-pas, Letraset, archival paper, vinyl, MDF,
hardboard tempered panel | Dimensions variable



2022
2023
FALSE MEMORIES/IDENTITY THIEF [DETAIL]
Colored pencil, cray-pas, Letraset, archival paper, vinyl, MDF,
hardboard tempered panel | Dimensions variable

L E W I S

WRITTEN BY DAN CAMERON

Throughout most of Western history and up to the present, painting and sculpture have served collectively as a vehicle for exalting and reinforcing the privileges of class. Painting in particular, whether of portraits, still lifes, history paintings, and religious scenes, was a practice limited to the adornment of palaces, churches and homes belonging to those who had the means to commission them. Not surprisingly, one result was that these embedded value systems and conventions of decorum remained fairly consistent during eras in which tastes and styles experienced a multitude of changes, but the social hierarchy that buttressed the entire system did not.

That hierarchy changed dramatically in the 1960s when Andy Warhol, in particular, definitively imposed the tastes of mass consumer culture onto the vehicle of highbrow aesthetics. As a consequence, the artists who

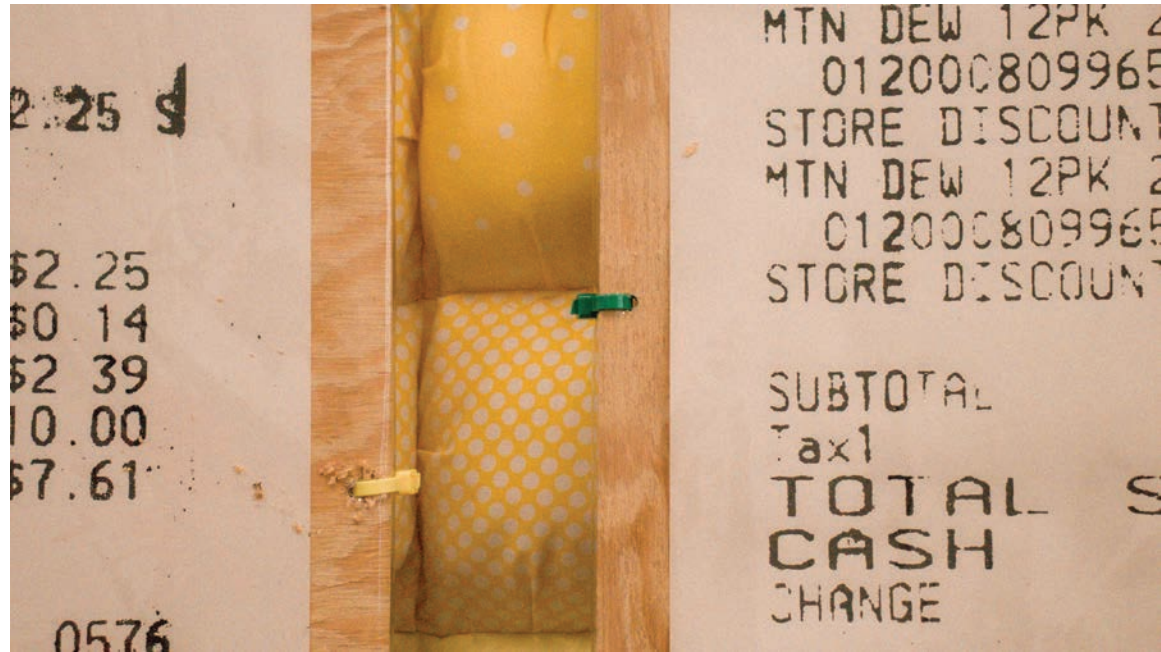
have emerged in the wake of Warhol's example to celebrate the popular culture and habits of their era are way too numerous to count. Frequently, however, that side of his work is overlooked, and the convenient fiction of a class-free USA worms its way into the meaning on much art driven by popular taste, diluting whatever allegiance the artist might have felt to the social outsider status that was key to all of Warhol's innovations.

Lewis, whose work warmly embraces the icons of Mountain Dew and Dollar General as her personal muses, is originally from Paint Lick, Kentucky, a rural Appalachian community with many residents living at or below the poverty line. Lewis was raised in a household where craft and quilting was a part of life. Her undergraduate studies were focused in psychology and studio art at Georgetown College in the state's center. At Georgetown, sculptor Daniel

Graham became an important guidepost in Lewis's trajectory, emphasizing to his student that many influential artists succeed in reflecting on the society around them by harnessing the reality of their own personal experience.

While identifying as an interdisciplinary artist, Lewis conveys a distinctive pride in her embrace of quilt making as her primary medium, and her twin consumerist muses. The title of her thesis installation, *Father, Son & Dollar General*, is intended as a completely unironic acknowledgment of the crucial role that the chain store has played in rural communities like Paint Lick, where they serve as a vital link to the outside world as well as a reliable source of cheap goods for the community. In referring to the components of her thesis installation as "Appalachian Ephemera" in place of the more anodyne descriptor "mixed media," Lewis uses the tribal identification within her work to deftly flip some viewers' expectations on their head. To uphold the cultural values of a community that is too often

marginalized and stereotyped in US media, and to instead claim those values as an ideal, requires Lewis to insist first that her audience meet her more than halfway, in the sense that her work requires a level of recognition on our part that severe economic disparities are a harsh reality in countless rural communities in this country, and an acceptance that so-called high culture, as embodied by contemporary art, is no longer the sequestered domain of those who can afford to pretend that such inequality doesn't exist.



2023 **FATHER, SON & DOLLAR GENERAL [DETAIL]**
Appalachian Ephemera | dimensions variable



2023 **FATHER, SON & DOLLAR GENERAL [DETAIL]**
Appalachian Ephemera | dimensions variable



2023 **FATHER, SON & DOLLAR GENERAL [DETAIL]**
Appalachian Ephemera | dimensions variable



2023 **FATHER, SON & DOLLAR GENERAL [DETAIL]**
Appalachian Ephemera | dimensions variable

C H R I S T I A N O L I D - R A M I R E Z

WRITTEN BY DAN CAMERON

Much abstract painting since the dawn of the information age has tended to feel somewhat anachronistic, at least in those cases where artists' traditional methods of developing new imagery show no visible sign of being impacted by the endless possibilities offered by new technologies. A further muddying of the waters seems to have occurred with those painters at the other end of the spectrum, who felt that there was little worth depicting other than cyberspace, and as a result are fully committed to reformatting some version of what's already on their computer screens.

As part of a quest to develop a balanced approach to exploring digital potential, the imagery in christian olid-ramirez's paintings comes about by him transferring algorithmically or AI-generated referents onto his canvases using a broad range of traditional studio media, with the result that

what appear to be passages of purely abstract brushwork are likely to have originated in clusters of code. Once these image transfers have occurred, his studio process becomes partly an act of camouflage, as he works to accommodate patterns, textures, words and other details into the larger composition. Most of the *KILLCHAIN* paintings' titles—*LETHAL AID*, *SURGICAL STRIKE*, *ENHANCED INTERROGATION*, and *FRIENDLY FIRE* are good examples—are derived from military communications, furthering the suggestion that the most benign surfaces and details within the paintings might be connected to some form of enforced order. This intentional blurring of sources is one factor that enables the work to convey an ambiguous visual tension.

olid-ramirez's painting *DETENTION CAMP: CTHULUSCENE* offers a good window into his thinking and studio process. Laying down a black background

and partial grid outlined in green, he has arranged three dozen roundish colored shapes, loosely following the boundaries indicated by the grid, with shapes close to the perimeter crisply outlined by black edges, and those in the interior blending more fluidly into their backgrounds. Suspended over this layer is a quadrant of four realistic images taken from nature, interconnected by thick impasto lines that also serve as a buffer between the interior and exterior zones. The accumulated effect is of overlaid visual cues imported from distinct systems of reference that coexist in an oscillating state of dynamic friction, with conspicuous points of overlap.

In purely quantitative terms, most of the painting *FRIENDLY FIRE: HATE MACHINE*'s composition belongs to a more straightforwardly abstract painterly tradition, with the presence of large swaths of bright yellow planes and a pair of labyrinths reinforcing the work's more contemplative aspect. The central location of the word "HATE," juxtaposed with a sideways image from Goya's

Disasters of War from the 1820s, in which two enemy soldiers trapped in a bog continue to flail at each other, makes it apparent that olid-ramirez wants us to peer more closely at the more seemingly benign quadrants of the painting, and to question whether something more sinister has escaped our attention.

olid-ramirez's commitment to incorporating systems-based thinking stems in part from his years-long experience founding and operating an alternative community art space in his native Santa Ana, California, while also working as an admissions counselor after receiving his BFA. His apparent conviction that any painting, even abstract, should strive to communicate the essence of its creator's world-view has brought him to the center of public discourse surrounding the place of digital technology in our everyday lives, while forging a visual vocabulary whose potency comes from its capacity to both reveal and conceal its deeper intentions.



2022
2023 **LETHAL AID 3: GUARDIAN** FROM THE SERIES **KILLCHAIN**
Collage and oil paint on canvas | 24" x 24"



2022 **FRIENDLY FIRE: HATE MACHINE** FROM THE SERIES **KILLCHAIN**
Collage and oil paint on canvas | 36" x 36"



2023 **PEGASUS FROM THE SERIES SATELLITE**
Spray paint, color pencil, graphite, flashe, collage
and oil paint on canvas with CNC carved
hand-painted frame | 60" x 60"



2022 **DETENTION CAMP: CTHULUSCENE FROM THE SERIES KILLCHAIN**
Spray paint, collage and oil paint on canvas | 36" x 36"

C O N T A C T

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This year the annual Master of Fine Arts Prize will be awarded by guest juror Elliot Josephine Leila Reichert, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University, Bloomington.

The 2023 Master of Fine Arts Exhibition is organized by the MSU Department of Art, Art History, and Design and the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, with curatorial oversight provided by Assistant Curator Rachel Winter. Support for this exhibition is provided by the Graduate School at MSU and the John and Susan Berding Family Endowment.

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