

## « OUR PLACE » IN NEW ZEALAND CULTURE : How the Museum of New Zealand Constructs Biculturalism<sup>1</sup>

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### **Résumé :**

Le Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa a été controversé lors de son ouverture en 1998 mais a depuis rencontré un large succès populaire au point de devenir une icône de l'identité nationale. La controverse, confinée au cercle des élites locales, portait sur la manière opposée dont les objets représentatifs des cultures Maori et Pakeha étaient exposés : les premiers de façon révérencieuse, les seconds à la manière d'objets incohérents, temporaires et dérisoires. En analysant les modalités respectives de leur exposition et les représentations qui les entourent, cet article suggère que la dichotomie sacré/profane que le Musée met en avant est certes discutable, mais est sans doute aussi un trait inéluctable de la politique biculturaliste dans un contexte postcolonial.

### **Abstract :**

The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa opened in 1998 amidst controversy but has been a huge popular success and has become an icon of national identity. The controversy was confined to elite circles and stemmed from criticisms of the contrasting ways in which Maori and Pakeha (European) cultural items were displayed — the former in a reverential manner and the latter as a kind of 'amusement arcade' of supposedly incoherent, temporary and mocking exhibits. Through an analysis of these displays and of the representations surrounding them, this paper argues that the sacred/profane

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dichotomy promulgated by the Museum may be open to argument but is probably an inescapable feature of the official policy of biculturalism in a postcolonial setting.

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## **Introduction : criticizing Te Papa as a national sport**

Museums are intensely contested sites these days, especially when they are called on to manage the contradictions between nation-building and the display of indigenous or minority cultures. Even as their modes of representation — and sometimes their very existence — have been called into question, some commentators defend the traditional conception of the museum more fiercely than ever before. The launch of a new museum and its bedding-in process has proven to be a particularly productive moment for the airing of such issues.

The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, popularly referred to as « Our Place »<sup>2</sup>, opened to the public in 1998. Te Papa (another of its shorthand names) is situated in the capital, Wellington, like its predecessors, the National Museum and the National Gallery, whose historic collections it combines<sup>3</sup>. This location at the heart of political power is no coincidence. As recently as February 2003, Te Papa was the terminus of a military marchpast of New Zealand servicemen and servicewomen who had taken part in the deployment of peacekeeping forces to East Timor. Its importance as a signifier of national and cultural identity cannot be overstated.

The museum's opening was the culmination of a long process of planning and construction in which the goal of creating an internationally recognized symbol of national identity was explicit from the beginning. It was a project in which politicians took a great interest and to which they committed vast amounts of money (it apparently cost NZ\$317 million<sup>4</sup> just to build, leaving aside the hefty operating costs to be derived from government and commercial sponsorship). Te Papa is at the pinnacle of the museum hierarchy in New Zealand, so much so that comparable institutions in other cities, like the Auckland War Memorial Museum, regularly complain at their relative lack of state subsidy.

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<sup>2</sup> A documentary film on the making of the Museum was simply entitled « Getting to Our Place ».

<sup>3</sup> A small selection of official images of Te Papa can be viewed at :

<http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/communications/images.html>

<sup>4</sup> 1 \$ NZ = 0.50 € (approx.)

Admission to the museum itself and to most of its exhibits is free though special exhibits and some permanent ones do have entry charges. Primed by controversy, the sheer scale of the project, and sustained media coverage, the New Zealand public flocked to Te Papa's opening and the museum quickly became a favourite attraction, with over a million visitors per year, far exceeding all its targets. Critics unsheathed their swords, however. This introduction presents a selection of their critical comments in order to provide the raw material for an analysis of the themes they contain.

One of the first and most damning criticisms came from Theodore Dalrymple, a columnist for Britain's *New Statesman* magazine, who likened Te Papa to an « amusement arcade » (1999). New Zealand's Labour leader and (since 1999) Prime Minister, Helen Clark was said to have concurred with Dalrymple's assessment, describing the displays as « jumbled and incoherent », according to art critic Hamish Keith (2000). Much of this umbrage stemmed from a feeling that the highpoints of Europe's contribution to New Zealand culture had been trivialized. One gallery was especially contentious. Entitled *Parade*, it featured a corrugated iron sculpture of a car, a locally made refrigerator, and other supposed « icons » of Pakeha identity<sup>5</sup>.

In the same vein as Dalrymple and Clark, New Zealand historian Kerry Howe contrasted the building itself with what it contained : « Te Papa's architecture is monumental, serious, formal, which its contents, often frivolously presented, cannot live up to. [...] New Zealand has got itself into a state of uncertainty. Thus Te Papa offers a jumble of images, events and artifacts that don't connect, have no contextual explanation, and so seem to offer minimal content » (Howe 2001). However, even as Howe asserted the superiority of the new National Museum of Australia over the Museum of New Zealand, an Australian historian, Keith Windschuttle (2001 : 16), critiqued his own national institution in terms that are uncannily reminiscent of Howe's concerning Te Papa (« lack of coherence » and « history... degenerates into a tasteless blancmange of worthy sentiment », etc.). This similarity points to a shared unease surrounding the role of the museum in nation-building in settler societies, and a hair-trigger readiness to take offence at post-colonial rewriting of colonial history.

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<sup>5</sup> The term Pakeha refers to the section of the New Zealand population descended from settlers and more recent immigrants from Europe, especially Britain. It is a contested label, proudly adopted by some to indicate solidarity with Maori in a bicultural partnership but rejected by others as an ethnic slur or because it diverts support from a common New Zealand identity, while for many others it is simply a convenient term for the non-Maori majority. The common synonym « European » can be used in some contexts, as in this paper where Pakeha cultural artifacts are positioned within a tradition originating prior to the British colonization of this country.

More recently, with the changes in late 2001 to Te Papa's display of « European » high culture, Luit Bieringa, former director of the old National Gallery, from which most of Te Papa's collection derives, joined the fray. The *New Zealand Herald* reported him as being “unhappy that none of the art works will be on permanent display. He said : « The big question is, ‘Is this the answer to [displaying] the national collection?’ It's not a permanent site » (Mitchell 2001).

With the changes, Hamish Keith, who had previously described the Museum as « the cultural equivalent to a fast-food outlet » (Keith 2000) now excoriated the Te Papa approach even more vigorously, lamenting the contrast between the European and Maori display philosophies :

« Public galleries and museums were set up in the late 18th century to provide the deserving general public with exactly that kind of experience [of continuity]. They were not set up as some kind of cultural massage parlour where a quick rub down could stand in for true love. They were about cultural continuity as much as cultural entertainment. This is where Te Papa has got it wrong. It is not that Our Place in its first five years actually buried all of its art collections. But the way it presented them in pursuit of entertainment reduced the works of art in its care to curatorial Lego blocks, knocked down and reconstructed as something fresh and new.

For some odd reason the curators of Te Papa, despite their pleas that the new museology never displayed works of art forever, confined these adventures to the European and Pakeha collections.

Many of the great Maori works such as *Te Hau-Ki-Turanga* remained permanently installed, as they have since the original institution opened in 1936 » (Keith 2001)<sup>6</sup>.

In short, many cultural commentators in New Zealand bemoaned what they saw as unequal treatment of the two main cultures on display, Maori and Pakeha. By contrast, this cultural disparity became a positive feature for the Australian anthropologist Margaret Jolly or at worst a matter for ambivalence. The Maori halls « with their deep dark vaults and dim lights create a strong sense of seriousness, calm and spirituality. [...] The Maori exhibits — both contemporary and ancient creations — evince a deep spirituality and invite quiet contemplation in the viewer », whereas « the halls devoted to the European heritage often display a mock imperial pomp and attitude to the past that lurches

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<sup>6</sup> Windschuttle's comments on the National Museum of Australia once again show the similarity in the underlying discourse of criticisms of the postcolonial turn in museology : « While many of the exhibits of white culture are presented in terms of mockery and irony, the treatment of indigenous culture ranges from respect to reverence » (2001 : 14).

between guilt and laughter ». There « seems to be a scrupulous avoidance of the sacred in Pakeha cultural history », she writes, noting the affront felt on this score by a number of art critics like Rachel Kent and Simon Rees (Jolly 2001 : 445-447). The tone of her reaction is less critical than that of most commentators, however.

Yet another article, by *Listener* critic Philip Matthews, generally sympathized with the recent changes but still reiterated the standard kind of complaint : « The problem with heralding the new uncertainty — or postmodernism, or pluralism, or cultural relativism, or multiple points of view — is that it is all so... uncertain » (Matthews 2001 : 50). In the same journal, William McAloon was slightly more complimentary : « Thankfully, gone are *Parade's* plastic thumbs up/thumbs down signs and those execrable vox pop labels (not to mention the fridge) » (McAloon 2001 : 50). But his review also criticized mistakes in labeling and the thinness of some of the exhibitions. And the usual language surfaced in his comment that most of the sections of the major new display of fine art, *Sightlines*, « feel confused, haphazard and inconsequential. [...] Clever juxtapositions are fine and breaking the chronological treadmill may be practically mandatory in museums these days, but it needs to be done with more flair and sensitivity than is evident here ». On the question of (im)permanence, he made the insightful point that « the debate about permanent versus temporary hangs at Te Papa is fairly silly. There are very few 'permanent' displays in museums anywhere, just degrees of temporariness ». He went on to say that the new exhibition called *Masquerade* « proves that the 'mix it all up' approach that has defined Te Papa for many of its critics can work, if done well » (2001 : 51). By accepting the idea of randomness as a guiding principle for European cultural presentations, nevertheless, such comments reinforce the kind of discourse that, I argue, characterises the debate over Te Papa.

Thus, even according to its supporters, Te Papa Tongarewa cannot avoid the accusation that it is frivolous, mobile, temporary, and incoherent<sup>7</sup>. Running in tandem with this argument is the claim that the Pakeha/European exhibits have not been curated with the same reverence as the Maori ones.

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the accusation of incoherence is not confined to Te Papa by any means. In fact, it may be a feature of a certain kind of contemporary highbrow critique of museums and art galleries in general. For example, Nigel Reynolds wrote with only grudging approval of the new Tate Britain gallery : « When it opened in spring last year, Tate Britain adopted a chaotic, non-chronological display, each room filled with an allsorts pick'n'mix of pictures connected to some very loose themes — the land, the city, fantasy, portrait. This now appears to have been a temporary aberration. The new hang returns broadly to chronology... but with some intelligent thematic steering. [...] This is a focused and impermanent display. [...] But the framework seems sound » (Reynolds 2001).

## The discourse on Te Papa

It may be useful to summarise in tabular form the New Zealand discourse presented so far :

PAKEHA	UNMARKED	MAORI
	amusement arcade jumbled and incoherent frivolously presented uncertainty artifacts don't connect	
not permanent		
	fast-food outlet cultural massage parlour	
[temporary]	curatorial Lego blocks	[permanent]
mock imperial pomp avoidance of sacred		seriousness, calm and spirituality
confused, haphazard and inconsequential		
haven't a clue		confident of identity

This schematic ordering suggests that much of the criticism ostensibly directed towards the Museum as a whole has actually been criticism of the European/Pakeha displays, even when those have not been stated explicitly as the target. I doubt, for example, that Helen Clark meant to include Maori exhibits in her condemnation, and even Dalrymple admired what was *in* the Maori displays, though not the context in which they appeared.

Some concepts adapted from structural linguistics may assist in the analysis of this discourse (Greenberg 1966). They suggest that « Pakeha » culture is the unmarked member of a partitive opposition between Pakeha and Maori in (mainly Pakeha) discourse about New Zealand culture. Indeed, in the table, both the items in the left-hand column (labeled Pakeha) and those in the central column (that were supposedly « unmarked » for ethnic identity at the moment they were uttered) can be seen, on reflection, as folding into each other. The fact that « Maori » is the marked member of the pair will gather significance in the development of my argument. What is important to note for the moment, however, is that the very opposition between incoherence and coherence (chaos and order) is a coherent and orderly dualism.

## **The role of bricolage, or « don't mention the fridge »**

Poet, essayist and novelist Ian Wedde is said to have been the presiding genius behind many of the « Pakeha » displays in Te Papa, including the controversial *Parade* gallery (Jolly 2001 : 447). When a figure as prominent in New Zealand cultural politics as Wedde (1998) describes himself as a « bricoleur », anthropologists are entitled to prick up their ears<sup>8</sup>. This is despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that, like many cultural critics, his readings of anthropological theory clash with those of anthropologists.

The first point of divergence is his statement that a bricoleur is a « plagiarist and eclectic », a reading which subtly but unmistakably distorts Lévi-Strauss's original definition :

« The bricoleur is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks ; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand', that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous

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<sup>8</sup> A former academic, Wedde has been at the cutting edge of New Zealand fiction and poetry writing since the 1970s.

because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions » (Lévi-Strauss 1966 : 17).

I cannot see Wedde being happy with such a job description in his role as one of the chief « creatives » on Team Te Papa. And I think he would be even less pleased by Lévi-Strauss's further point that « the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the 'bricoleur' by inclination or necessity always remains within them » (1966 : 19).

The purpose of this brief excursion into a classic structuralist text is to raise the possibility that, had both Wedde *and the critics of his approach* been aware of the original meaning of bricolage, they might have been able to see and to accept that the superficial incoherence of Te Papa conceals an underlying coherence. That being the case, I find a message in Wedde's notorious juxtaposition of a McCahon painting and a Kelvinator fridge that, whether intentional or not, transcends that apparently random act of cultural leveling. Isn't he making a rather naughty statement about the role of cold dead culture in museums ? And, if he were (allowed to be) truly irreverent, wouldn't the picture have been placed *inside* the fridge ? To have done so, in fact, would have neatly parodied the division between sacred and profane that I am about to suggest is at the heart of Te Papa's code of representation.

## **The grammar of bicultural nationhood : the sacred and the profane**

A statement by another columnist, Gordon Campbell, is fairly representative of the views listed so far. He takes the architects to task for failing to capture a truly bicultural dimension in their design.

« Bicultural architecture is tough but possible. Wellington's Futuna chapel... is a splendid cultural synthesis. [Te Papa] isn't. [...] Behind the gizmos and several worthy displays, the museum does reflect who we are now, but perversely. It showcases Maori confident of their identity and Europeans who haven't a clue, lost as they are in mere nostalgia — mainly because European tradition is now being rewritten by gender and race zealots that most Europeans neither believe nor endorse » (Campbell 1998).



Pace Campbell, I would argue that Te Papa is an extremely (perhaps frighteningly) coherent presentation of an inherently volatile and problematic subject : New Zealand's bicultural nationhood (see, too, Macdonald 1999 : 86). The supposed incoherence that critics claim to have discerned in Te Papa masks something deeper in New Zealand public culture, something equivalent to a civil religion. That phenomenon is a persistent and powerful ordering of sacred and profane roles, spaces and institutions.

Take the architecture. Campbell seems oblivious to the almost painful genuflections to biculturalism in the conceptual statement by Jasmx, the architectural and engineering firm that won the contract to build Te Papa. The Jasmx plan specifically and systematically opposes Maori and European « design generators » of « natural responses to landform » and « urban/colonial grid influences » respectively (Bossley 1998 : *passim*). Whether these are « successful » in architectural terms is almost beside the point. With Te Papa, form defers to function.

Let me explore the cultural functions of Te Papa, then, in a little more detail. Large New Zealand museums (including Te Papa, the former National Museum and the Auckland Museum) have historically incorporated within themselves Maori meeting-houses, which at various times have had the functions of *marae*, or ritualized places for the reception of visitors and exchanges of oratory. This house-within-a-house pattern is interesting and more mysterious than it seems, i.e., it represents much more than the convenient coincidence of one building being small enough to fit inside another. At one level, it is a classic sign of imperial conquest and absorption. At another level it is about the dominant culture's stated desire to protect and preserve the minority and/or indigenous culture. One might call this the museological impulse, which despite its conservationist intention, is still about power.

Taking this argument even further, Te Papa can be portrayed schematically as a series of concentric circles with a sacred centre and a profane periphery. But where exactly is the sacred centre ? Is it the Museum's own *marae* complex, called variously Te Marae or Rongomaraeroa with its own meeting-house called Te Hono ki Hawaiki (see Plate 1 : Te Hono ki Hawaiki, the meeting-house of Te Marae ; photo : M. Goldsmith) ? Or is it the much older meeting-house (*whareniui*) inside, called Te Hau ki Turanga, built in 1842, acquired for the Colonial Museum by the national government in 1867, and displayed in the previous National Museum (see Plate 2 : Te Hau ki Turanga ; photo : M. G.)<sup>9</sup> ?

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<sup>9</sup> In recent hearings of the Waitangi Tribunal, representatives of the aggrieved descent group Rongowhakaata have argued that the house was actually confiscated and that the Museum's treatment of the Te Hau ki Turanga over the years amounts to desecration (*New Zealand Herald* 2002).

Or do these spaces *jointly* constitute the sacred centre within a wider Maori area that encompasses them both ?

I suggest that the older, inner meeting-house, Te Hau ki Turanga, is the one that is truly central in a symbolic sense. This is because Te Marae and its house Te Hono ki Hawaiki are generally perceived as non-traditional in terms of design, decoration and materials, while the inner meeting-house is seen as traditional and correspondingly spiritual. On this reading, Te Marae acts as a liminal zone on the boundary of the truly sacred site to which it provides access. Note, further, that Te Hono ki Hawaiki is not a conventional meeting-house but, rather, a foreshortened structure at the rear of the open performance space or *marae atea*<sup>10</sup>.

Such an interpretation is consonant with a wider pattern in New Zealand's civil religion. Maori culture in general, I would argue, is seen as more sacred than Pakeha culture by most New Zealanders, particularly by those who espouse the official policy of biculturalism. In a way, this was the point made by another anthropologist, Erich Kolig, in a critical essay on Te Papa, though for him that insight was a springboard for criticism of the double standards applied to Maori and Pakeha exhibitions (Kolig 2000)<sup>11</sup>. Whatever my own qualms about the « unholy alliance » of Pakeha materialism and Maori spiritualism (Goldsmith 1984), any anthropological observer would have to concede that this underlying grammar of complementarity has been a powerful driving force in New Zealand culture and politics over the last 20-30 years and arguably much longer. Maria Brown has argued that this asymmetry is a conscious reaction to « the inequalities resulting from colonial domination. The museum, then, operates as a compensatory space ». How successful this act of « balancing... power relations » between Maori and Pakeha has been is, however, open to question (Brown 2002 : 293).

Kolig was probably right to suggest that there is a double standard in terms of displaying culture at Te Papa. But I see that double standard as a fundamental axiom of New Zealand civil religion. It may be regretted and it can certainly be criticized — but it cannot be dismissed, because it is founded on powerful (and partly tacit) cultural assumptions. It is also implicit in a great deal of cultural policy. For all these reasons, we should try to understand it in anthropological terms.

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<sup>10</sup> Some of the details of the carving and decoration from this meeting house can be seen online at the following webpage : <http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/newimages/SamplerLG.asp?Page=3&Cat=5>

<sup>11</sup> Kolig argued that a controversial exhibition of contemporary British art featuring a small figurine of the Madonna in a condom was defended by the museum's administration, even though many Roman Catholics expressed outrage, but that any exhibit offending Maori cultural or spiritual sensibilities in similar fashion would never have been allowed.

This axiom of New Zealand civil religion is a two-edged sword, however. I first presented my interpretation of Te Papa — that the Maori space at the centre is sacred in relation to the surrounding profane space of Pakeha (or non-Maori) culture — to an introductory anthropology class in October 2001. Afterwards, two Maori students came up to me and said they agreed. But it is quite possible they would not accept some of the implications that follow.

First, the sacred is a constrained space. It is not always easy being sacred. That which is less sacred, and more open to criticism, is commensurately freer. To quote Thornley (citing Thomas 1993) : « One of the most damaging and entrenched discourses [in New Zealand] concerns the way in which Maori continue to be seen as the keepers of tapu (religious or superstitious restriction) and mana (authority, influence, psychic force), both aspects of Maoritanga or Maori culture. They remain the awesome powerful Other, not historicized, but instead associated with the past and a spirituality that is lacking in modern life with its attendant demands of consumerism, technology, and fragmentation » (2001-02 : 28 ; qv. Brown 1989).

Secondly, one can be forced into sacredness. The innovative and beautiful Te Marae, to the extent that it escapes rigid cultural dualities and essentialisms, is a sign of how unconstrained by tradition Maori culture can become. In this case it was probably only allowed such freedom, however, because a « real » meeting-house exists elsewhere in the building to safeguard the representation of sacredness. Conal McCarthy, a former employee of Te Papa and now a Research Associate at Waikato, has informed me that the sectors of visitor opinion most uneasy about the unorthodox Te Marae were Pakeha. It seems they could not attribute to it the degree of freedom they would allow for Pakeha culture, perhaps on the grounds that the latter isn't « really » cultural. A historically commonplace pattern of Pakeha telling Maori which aspects of their culture are traditional, and telling them off for not adhering to such traditions, is a corollary of such views.

Thirdly, the position that Maori culture finds itself in is perfectly compatible with a history of colonialism and conquest. Notice that I am trying not to say it is a logical consequence of that history — but the house-within-a-house arrangement has connotations of domination already alluded to. Hierarchy and encompassment can work as a kind of domestication. Up until quite recently, it was common for Pakeha to refer with a degree of possessive pride to « our » Maori. By the same token, the popular name « Our Place » asserts interesting ambiguities. English, unlike most Polynesian languages, does not distinguish between inclusive and exclusive first person plural possessive pronouns. « Our » can mean « yours and mine together » (inclusive) or « ours, not yours »

(exclusive). No doubt most overseas visitors take the name in the latter sense, but the exclusions are not limited to those from outside the country.

Finally, the discourse of sacredness can be seen as the other side of the coin of colonial discourse, a discourse which is equally ready to cast aspersions about « native » or « savage » disorderliness (Goldsmith 1992). Colonialism alternates freely between antithetical approving and disapproving stereotypes of « the Other ». This two-faced character is especially apparent in the case of sacred/profane oppositions. Since the sacred is an experience that occurs only fleetingly, attempts to institutionalize it will inevitably be unstable and prone to sudden reversal.

All these factors point to a pervasive grammar of « museumhood » in New Zealand. The grammar may be reflected most clearly in contemporary institutions like the Museum of New Zealand but I am confident that it has a lengthy genealogy. Hence criticisms of Te Papa that Maori culture is displayed too uncritically and Pakeha culture too frivolously are at one level irrelevant. There is no real double standard. *It is intrinsic to postcolonial biculturalism that it never accord equal treatment to the two sides of a bicultural relationship.* Biculturalism always carries moral and symbolic inflections that are differently weighted for the component halves.

Te Papa's national presentation of self may seem to some like so much pointless ritual — but for anthropologists that would be a strange indictment. Ritual always has a connection to people's material reality and relations of power. In addition, ritual, whatever else it might be, entails the culturally patterned allocation and occupation of certain roles in cultural mythology (heroes and villains, kings and clowns, agents of the sacred and agents of profanity).

To repeat, one can criticize New Zealand-style biculturalism on many grounds. But to criticize it for applying a double standard to the two cultures in question strikes me as beside the point. Such a double standard is an inescapable condition of postcolonial biculturalism.

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