



Fabrice Monteiro: *The Prophecy*

Work / Photography

# Photographer Fabrice Monteiro's fear-inducing prophecy of west Africa's future

Words by Bryony Stone, Monday 05 June 2017

Art Basel is known the world over as a code word for art world excess, an occasion christened with endless bottles of champagne and recounted through the telescopic lenses of endless paparazzi cameras as international celebrities jostle for column inches.

Tripping on the heels of Art Basel is satellite fair Photo Basel, Switzerland's "first international art fair dedicated to photography-based art". Now in its second year, the fair brings together around 30 international galleries with artists from across the globe to create a comprehensive look at contemporary photography.

Among the long list of artists showing at the fair is Dakar-based Fabrice Monteiro. An industrial engineer turned model turned photographer, Fabrice is living proof of the motto "better late than never", only picking up a camera at the age of 37 inspired by friend then mentor, New York photographer Alfonse Pagano.

In Fabrice's striking portfolio of work spanning photojournalism, fashion photography and portraiture is *The Prophecy*, a collaboration between the photographer and costume designer Doulsy (also known as jay gal) with the support of the Ecofund organisation. Through the project, Fabrice addresses the critical environmental problems faced by the African landscape and asks the viewer to confront their own behaviour and reconsider their affect on the world around them. In ten Senegalese landscapes ranging from bush to beach, Fabrice and his team built elaborate constructions inspired by jinn, west African spirits, working with found materials relating to different environmental issues and transforming trash-speckled fishing nets into ballgowns. Each image is so complex that it was no surprise to learn that the crowd-funded series took two years to complete.

We caught up with the photographer to unlock the story behind the highly dramatic set of images.



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**What are the major ecological problems faced by the African landscape at the moment?**

When it comes to environment, as anywhere else the main issue is education and awareness. To have a positive environmental behaviour you need to be educated and if the most advanced country in the world is stepping back on the Paris agreement, why would the least advanced make the effort and how could they?

**You were born to a Beninese dad and a Belgian mum, and you grew up in Benin. What took you to Senegal to make *The Prophecy*? Was it your first time in the country?**

In 2011, after almost 20 years spent in Europe, I felt the need to go back to Africa and chose Senegal for its vibrant cultural scenery. My first contact with Senegal was in December 2010 as I went there to make a series on Senegalese wrestling and felt in love with the country.

**Tell us about the effort that went into constructing each image.**

Once the issue was identified, the first step was to find the most representative landscape of that issue then create a costume that is directly related to the topic.

**And how long did each image take? How did you finance it?**

Each image took between two and four months to realise. The Senegalese part of the series was crowdfunded on [www.ecofund.org](http://www.ecofund.org), a local organisation in Senegal that works on environmental protection and education.

I am now in the process of making "prophecies" around the world with different partners. We made one in Australia on the Great Barrier Reef in 2015 and another one last year on the e-waste dump site of Agbobloshie in Ghana.

**You collaborated on the project with costume designer Doulsy. Tell us about your partnership.**

The work of Doulsy inspired me in this project because he has always been recycling old clothes to make other clothes. He has the ability to sew any kind of material. Our collaboration on this project is a perfect symbiosis: I came up with the costume concept and he made it happen.

**The images are a visual metaphor, linking jinn, the spirits which are incredibly revered across West Africa, with manmade environmental disasters. How did Senegalese people react on seeing the images? Have you exhibited in Senegal?**

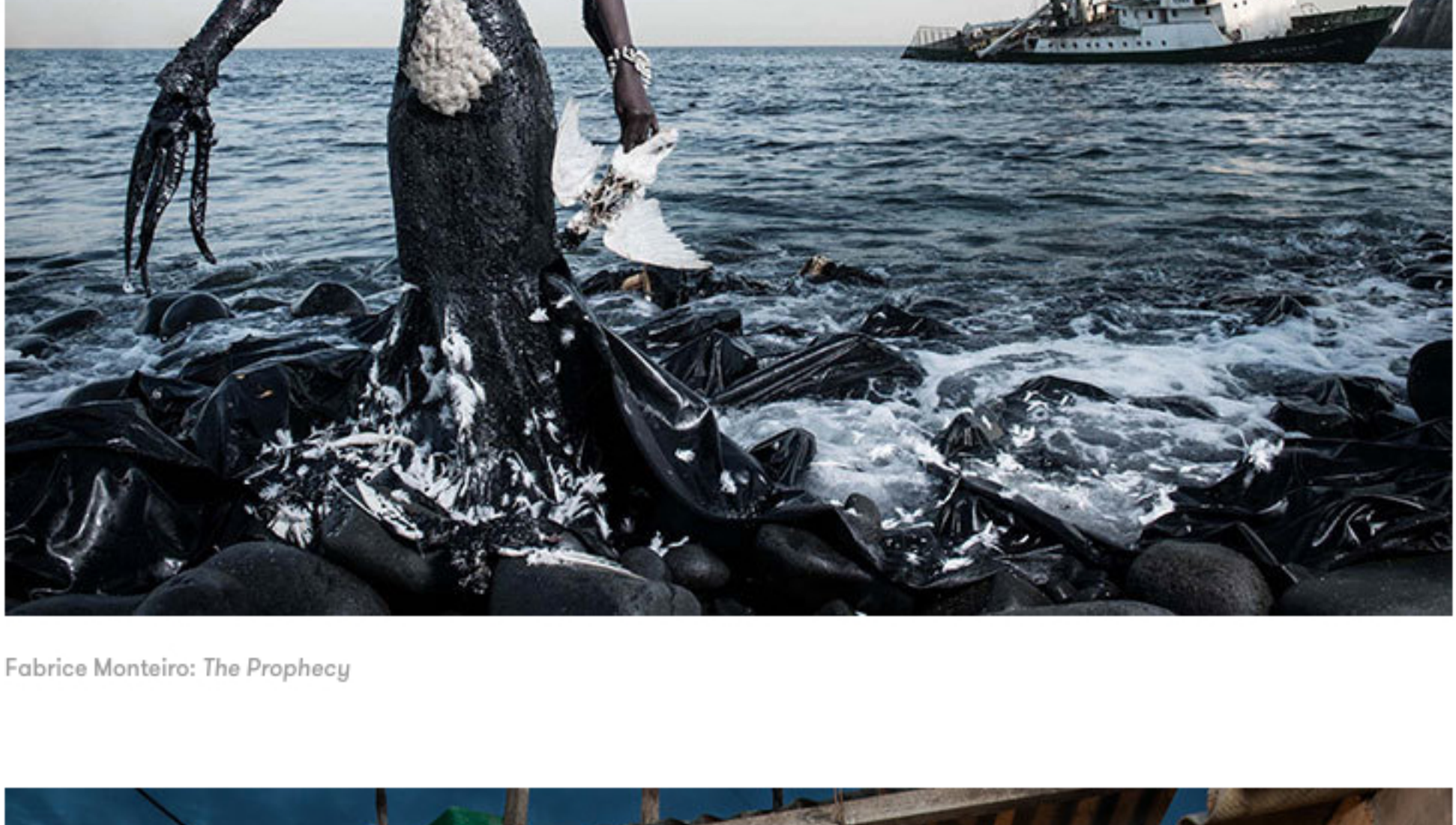
The whole idea was really to provoke the interest of the local public through images relating to their beliefs in spirits. We did an outdoor exhibition in collaboration with [ecofund.org](http://ecofund.org) on a main avenue in Dakar. Each picture was accompanied by facts about the local issue. People were attracted by the pictures: they would approach then read the facts. It was a start for a conversation.

**You only began seriously make photographs at the age of 37. How do you think that has impacted your work?**

For your work to have a real interest, it needs a certain maturity. Photography gave me the opportunity to transcend my concerns and thoughts. It gave me the ability to initiate a conversation with the public. It has been, and still is, some kind of self-therapy.

**Finally, has anything changed in Senegal or in West Africa more broadly on an environmental level in the three years since you launched *The Prophecy*?**

Things are very contradictory, on one end the use of plastic bags has been forbidden last year but on the other end, they are building a coal plant 30km from the capital to produce electricity with coal imported from India...



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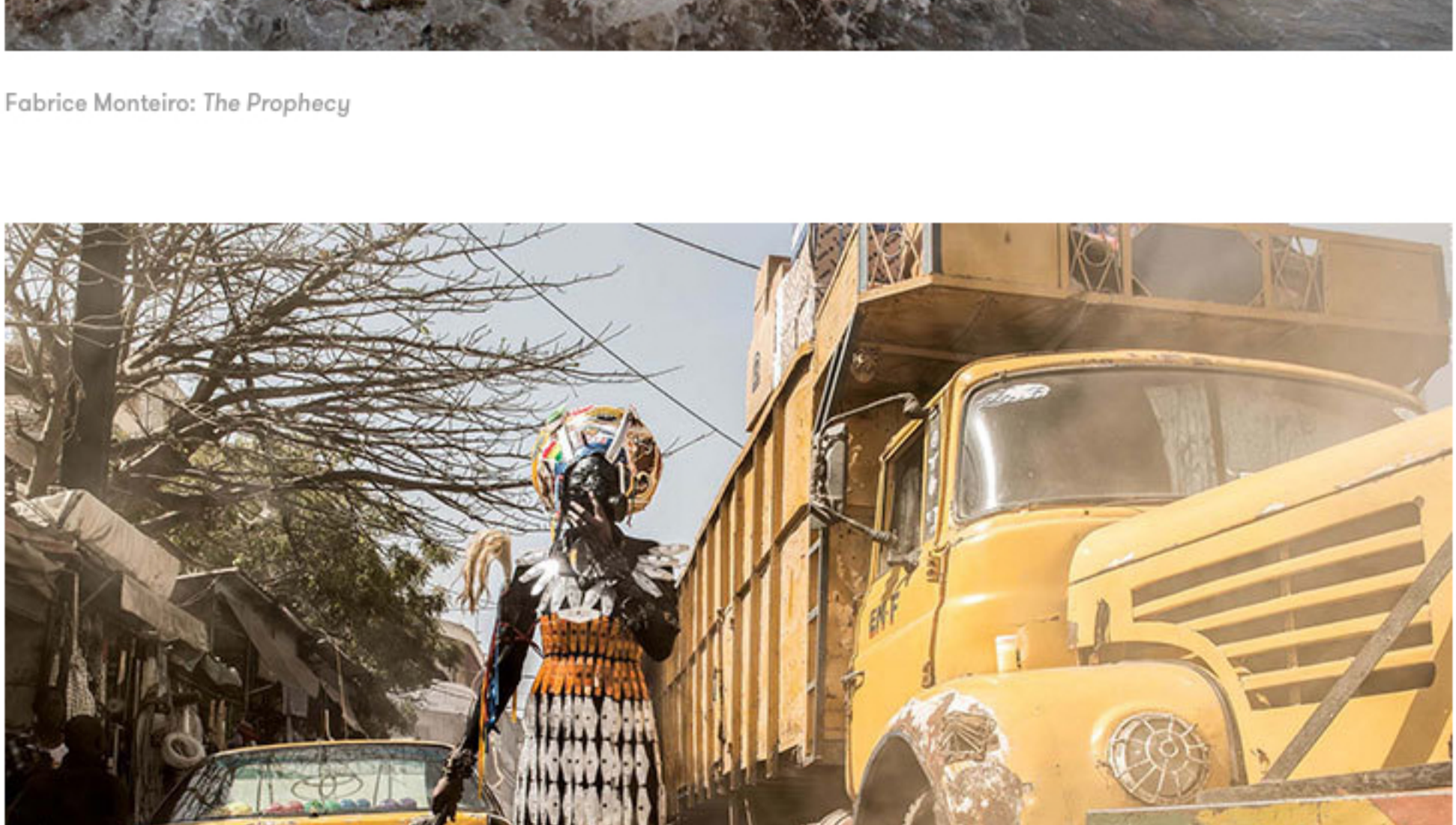
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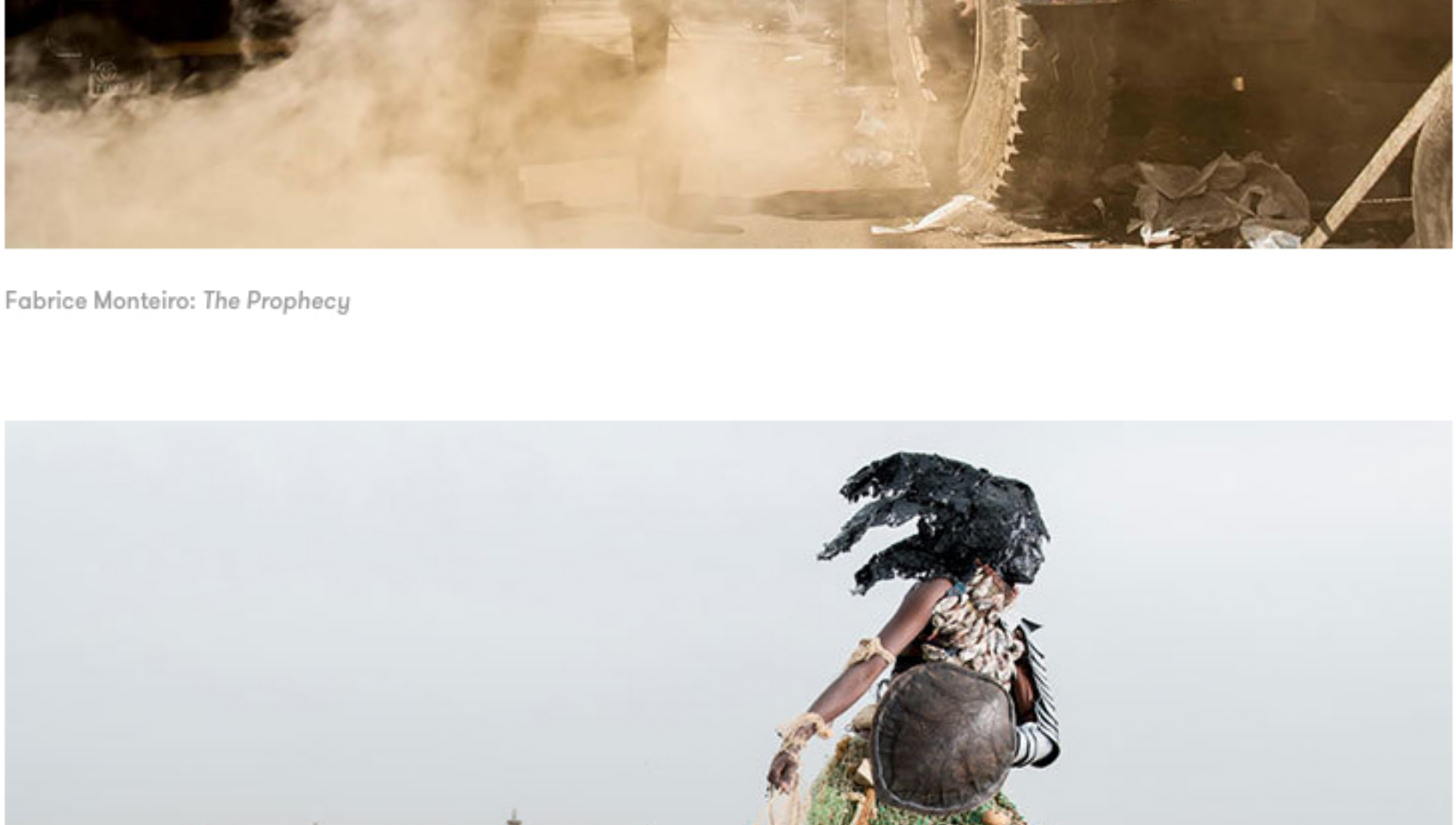
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