

rossi_001 Installation view 2022
Photo credit: Marcin Vasina

The View from Where

by

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...what way of being human do we need to become,
whatever the cost to our past way of life, so that we can begin
to inhabit ecosystems without traumatizing them?

--Jack Dudley, Ecology without Civilization

Using the forest ecosystems of British Columbia and western Alberta as a specific location for investigation, the work considers how we, as westerners within the settler state of Canada, view the ecological systems we exist within and rely upon.¹ That view is constructed upon ideas developed out of scientific rationalism and alongside the global expansion of European empires. At its base is the belief that humans are separate from, superior to, and in dominion over the ecological. This view is twinned with our current practice of global extractive capitalism, one that regards the ecological as a site of extraction and exploitation for domestic and foreign markets. Ecology itself is considered a discrete object within this view, a location for exploitation and extraction without consideration for the long-term health and sustainability of the ecosystems we disrupt, and without consideration of how the health of these ecosystems directly affect us.

This has necessarily resulted in significant changes to ecosystems if not outright destruction. The climate crisis is part of that destructive change, registering on a global scale. The Anthropocene has become a way to refer to the impressive and destructive impact human activity has on the planet, however the Anthropocene in its own way reinforces ideas of human superiority and separates the human from the geological impacts of our actions. This work is interested in looking at how the human cannot

1 "We" is an opaque term. As a settler of European decent and as a white citizen of Canada, this work is very specifically oriented from a white, settler point of view and engages with that viewpoint in the specific location of what is referred to as western Canada.

be extricated from the ecological, and how, as a local and specific example, forest ecosystems are a place of interaction between humans, ecology, and technology.

The View from Where also considers how we “read” ecology. On both a shared and a personal level, our view of the world is informed by the way we imaginatively and conceptually occupy landscape.² This conceptual and imaginative occupation grows out of the stories we are told, the histories we are taught, and our own personal experiences in the land. The View from Where explores how the landscape, how ecology, looks without



rossi_002 **mirror test** 2022 relief print various dimensions

2 Art historian Richard Hill discusses how landscape is imaginatively and conceptually occupied by First Nations in contrast to settler Canadians; anthropologist Brenda Guernsey examines the settler idea of “wilderness” and its connections to the ongoing legacy of colonialism in BC and how it “is a cultural and social construction that conceptually and physically erases First Nations and their ideologies from the landscape”. Hill, Richard. “Too Silent to be Real.” In *Expanding Horizons: Paintings and photography of American and Canadian Landscape, 1860-1918*, edited by Hilliard T. Goldfarb et al. Musée des Beaux-Arts Montréal, 2009: 100; Guernsey, Brenda. “Constructing the Wilderness and Clearing the Landscape: A Legacy of Colonialism in Northern British Columbia.” In *Landscapes of Clearance: Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by Angele Smith and Amy Gazin-Schwartz. Taylor and Francis, 2008: 112-123.

the layers of meaning humans cast over it. Re-viewing the world from an alternative perspective is a way for us to reorient our understanding of ecology and our relationship to it.³ It is only through a radical reorienting of our conceptualization of ecology that we will be able to more successfully adapt to and mitigate the ongoing climate crisis.⁴

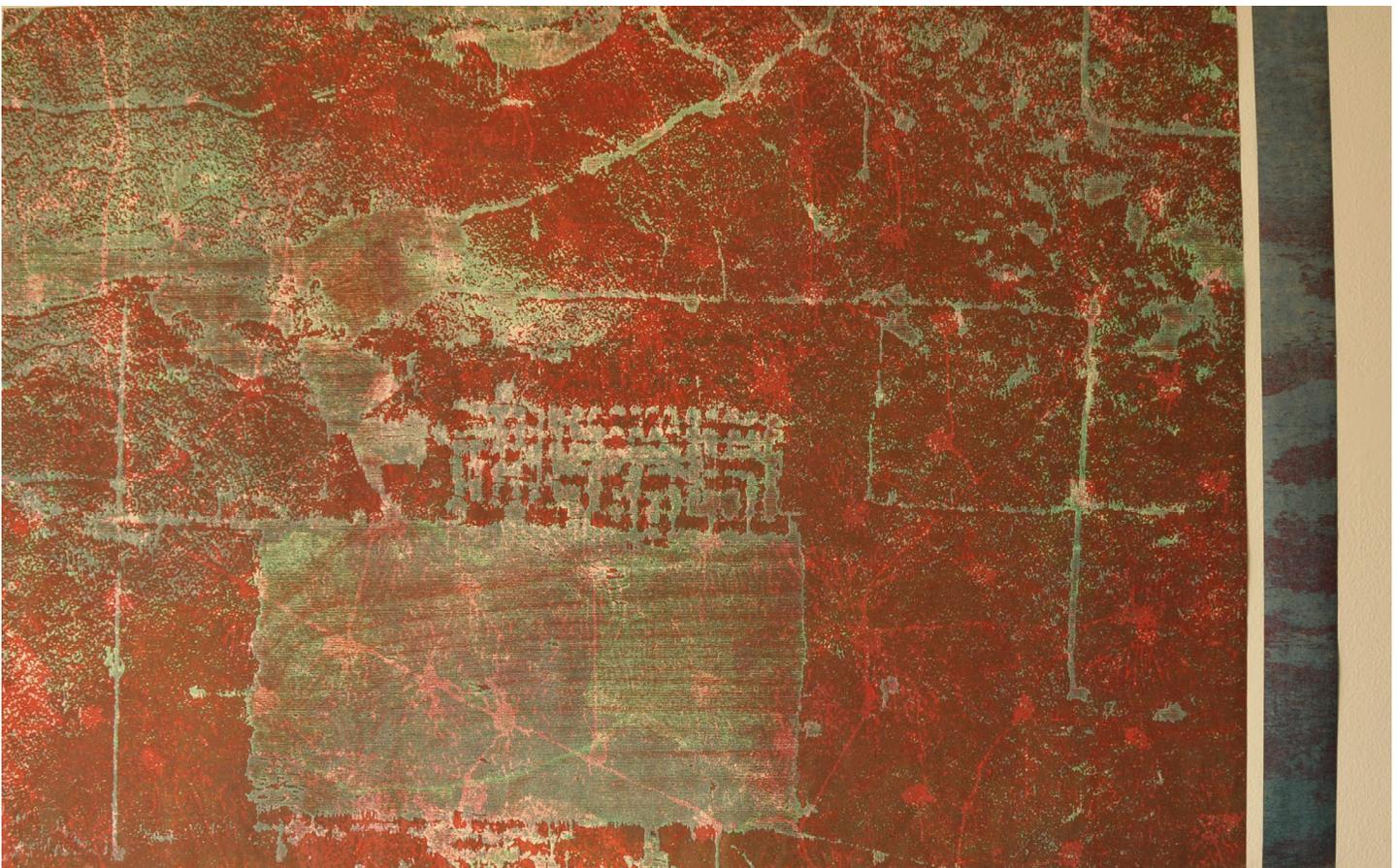


rossi_003
mirror test (detail)
2022
relief print
24x36 inches

3 In her book, *Death by Landscape*, Elvia Wilk discusses the centrality of the human figure in literature and art that is a part of the individualistic western outlook. She writes, “stories about people are one of the best technologies we have for understanding what it means to be a person. But what it means to be a person in an age of drastic ecosystem decline—of planetary extinction—is changing”. She also discusses how reality—another way to frame worldview—is constructed “is a form of invention” which can include “bringing to the public consciousness the already existent histories and realities” that are not part of the hegemonic worldview. Wilk, Elvia. *Death by Landscape*. New York: Soft Skull Press, 2022: 7, 123-4.

4 My approach in seeing technology and ecology as equivalent actors with humans is in part informed by Wilk’s discussion of ecosystems approach, in which “all elements are vital influences, and not because they are as important as people but because people are interdependent, too. After all, it is due to our interdependence that humans, like all other elements of ecosystems, are facing extinction.” This kind of thinking relates to the way we imaginatively and conceptually occupy the land and how it affects the way we relate to and view ecology: “Only a perspective shift in terms of figure and ground can adequately portray the ecological dependencies that have led the world to environmental cataclysm, the interconnectedness that neoliberalism and its pervasive story forms continue to violently deny”. Wilks, *Death by Landscape*, 23.

In order to explore the entwinement of the human, the ecological, and the technological, and to uncover a view of the ecological that is shorn of a human-centric lens, *The View from Where* works with photographs from three viewpoints of the pine forests of western Alberta and southern BC.⁵ The ecological is represented in close-up photography of mountain pine beetle tunnel patterns in dead trees, the technological is represented in aerial photographs of logged areas taken from google satellite imagery, and the human is represented in ground-level photographs. By collaging together and juxtaposing these three perspectives, the intent is to present an alternative view of the forest ecosystem, one in which the three elements are each seen as integral and intertwined, influencing, and reacting to each other in a way that, in contrast to the western worldview, the ecological and the technological become recognizable as part of the human, and the human becomes unrecognizable as part of the ecological and the technological.



rossi_004 **mirror test** (detail) 2022 relief print 24x36 inches

The close-up and aerial photography of the ecological and technological in *mirror test* present disturbed landscapes of irregular patterns. There are repetitions within the

⁵ The choice to use photography was in part because of the nonhuman aspect of the medium, as laid out in Joanna Zylińska's book, *Nonhuman Photography*. This was in part appealing because of the time in which the work was made: during a pandemic and within the unfolding of the climate crisis, the nonhuman, if not unhuman, aspect of photography reflected the loss of self experienced through the social isolation required to mitigate the pandemic.

individual images and between images/perspectives: insect tunnel patterns and logging patterns resemble each other and both, in their loss of scale, resemble other spaces: Martian terrains, skeletal remains, embroidery, celestial maps, childish drawings. Juxtaposed, these two views render human activity both incomprehensible and unremarkable, traces of human activity rendered (in)distinguishable from the traces of ecological behaviour and exposes a similar intelligence and capacity for disruption in the ecological. These images also allude to the advances in logging technology that have enabled human intervention on a landscape level, and the ecological response to such landscape-level disruptions. Satellite imagery specifically has aided in the planning and monitoring of forestry practices; mountain pine beetle, responding to human-caused changes in the landscape, has intervened on a landscape level, decimating hectares of forest. Historically part of the forest ecosystem that survived on weak, diseased, and dead pine, mountain pine beetle has expanded beyond its historical boundaries and adopted much more destructive behaviour patterns in response to changes in the ecosystem due to forestry practices and changes in seasonal patterns due to the climate crisis.⁶ Each images contain the ecological, the technological, and the human as both actors and reactors and pushes against the idea that the human is a separate and independent entity within ecology.

The images taken at ground level—the human view—are edited and collaged together to make less familiar a familiar view.⁷ Anyone who has spent time in national or provincial parks will be familiar with historical sites that exist within these spaces. Typically, those historical spaces are white histories of industrial exploitation and settlement of the west (trains and railroads, traces of logging industry, mining).⁸ These historical spaces are

6 Andrew Nikiforuk's book, *Empire of the Beetle* details pine beetle in BC since the early 1970s.

7 This can be considered a "weirding" of the view in the way that Mark Fisher in *The Weird and the Eerie* has described as something that exists but which seems as if it should not; Amitov Ghosh describes the weirdness of the climate crisis as "not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien; [the] uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from: ... the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors." Ghosh, Amitov. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press, 2016: 30. I think of this weirding of the view as a kind of glitch sublime, where the glitch is in the way we perceive the ecological, and how this other viewing only appears wrong to our expectations, and not in the ecological itself.

8 François-Marc Gagnon criticizes the Canadian narrative, « where since 1910 people have droned on about the country's "wilderness," even as it was being assailed from all directions by mining companies, railroads and lumberjacks. Sublime indeed are the views offered [by the Group of Seven] of the land emptied of the First Nations, of forests on the shores of the Great Lakes reduced to a single tree, of the Precambrian Shield laid bare by prospecting hither and yon". "Nothing" he writes, "is less innocent than the idea of the landscape. It arose with individualism and thus with the right to own property. The gaze cast upon nature ... is a gaze of possession and exclusion, of exploitation and privilege". Gagnon, François-Marc. "The Forest, Niagara and the Sublime" in *Expanding Horizons: Painting and Photography of American and Canadian Landscapes 1860-1918* edited by Hilliard T Goldfarb. Musée des Beaux-Arts Montréal, 2009: 33.



rossi_005
Untitled (bench)
2022
wooden sculpture
48x36x30 inches

often accompanied by didactic panels that tell the spectator how to understand the view, typically through the narrow settler/nationalist lens of Canadian history. To counter this viewpoint, these images present a crowded view of fractured and partially obscured elements which compete with one another in an altered colour space that heightens the sense of discord.⁹ This view partially meets and partially frustrates the expectations of the human viewer, presenting a complex view that acknowledges the presence and interconnectedness of the human, the ecological, and the technological within the boreal forest and rejecting the human-centric narrative of settler history. It presents human activity within the boreal forest not as an isolated action of a species located outside of the ecological system, but rather a site in which human, ecological, and technological forces interact, influencing and countering each other. By working with fractured but recognizable elements, the viewer is brought back to a recognizably human scale, albeit one that continues to frustrate the viewer's expectations by rejecting a human-centric viewpoint.

9 These aesthetic choices reflect the rejection of the figure/ground as explained by Wilk, and in the rejection of “the ‘god trick’ of infinite vision, a masculinist gaze of domination and occupation ‘seeing everything from nowhere’” as articulated by Zylinska. Zylinska, Joanna. *Nonhuman Photography*. MIT Press, 2017: 14

The sound and video work are field recordings that locate the viewer more firmly in the ecological space. The recordings capture the presence of the human, the ecological, and the technological within the forest ecosystem, reinforcing the space as a site that has always been entangled.



rossi_006 **untitled (bench)** 2022 wooden sculpture 48x36x30 inches

The furniture found in the exhibit, itself made of BC pine lumber, is modeled on outdoor furniture found in national and provincial parks in Alberta and BC. The presence of furniture in parks orients the ecological space as a site of human consumption, directing the human viewer to appropriate views of picturesque or sublime nature. In the exhibit, the furniture orients the viewer to confront the entangled view that refuses the human-centric reading of ecology. It offers the viewer the opportunity to “take a seat” in the future, and to contemplate how we might restructure our relationship to ecology within a future of our own (co)making.



rossi_007 **untitled (bench)** 2022 wooden sculpture 48x36x30 inches
Photo credit: Marchin Vasina

The human figure is notably absent from these images, but the human is very much present through the traces of human activity: abandoned machinery, clearings in the forest, the sounds of machines, furniture. While the works engage with our human/ecological/technological present, the absence/presence of the human also visualizes a future that is deeply connected to the human activity of the past. The human—or that orientation of human—is absent from the future that they were directly involved in creating. This reflects the temporal dissonance of the climate crisis: the carbon outputs of human activity from the past have accumulated in the atmosphere to impact the present, and our activity now will impact our future. The dissonance in these images reflects a kind of hostility to the human of the present, but also an invitation to reflect on what kind of human we need to become to survive a more hostile climate. We desperately need to reorient our relationship with the planet in order to more fully take responsibility for the future we are creating, and more successfully engage with what that future will be. This work hopes to nudge viewers to reconsider their worldview for one that includes a viable future.



rossi_008 **untitled (bench)** (installation view) 2022 wooden sculpture
48x36x30 inches



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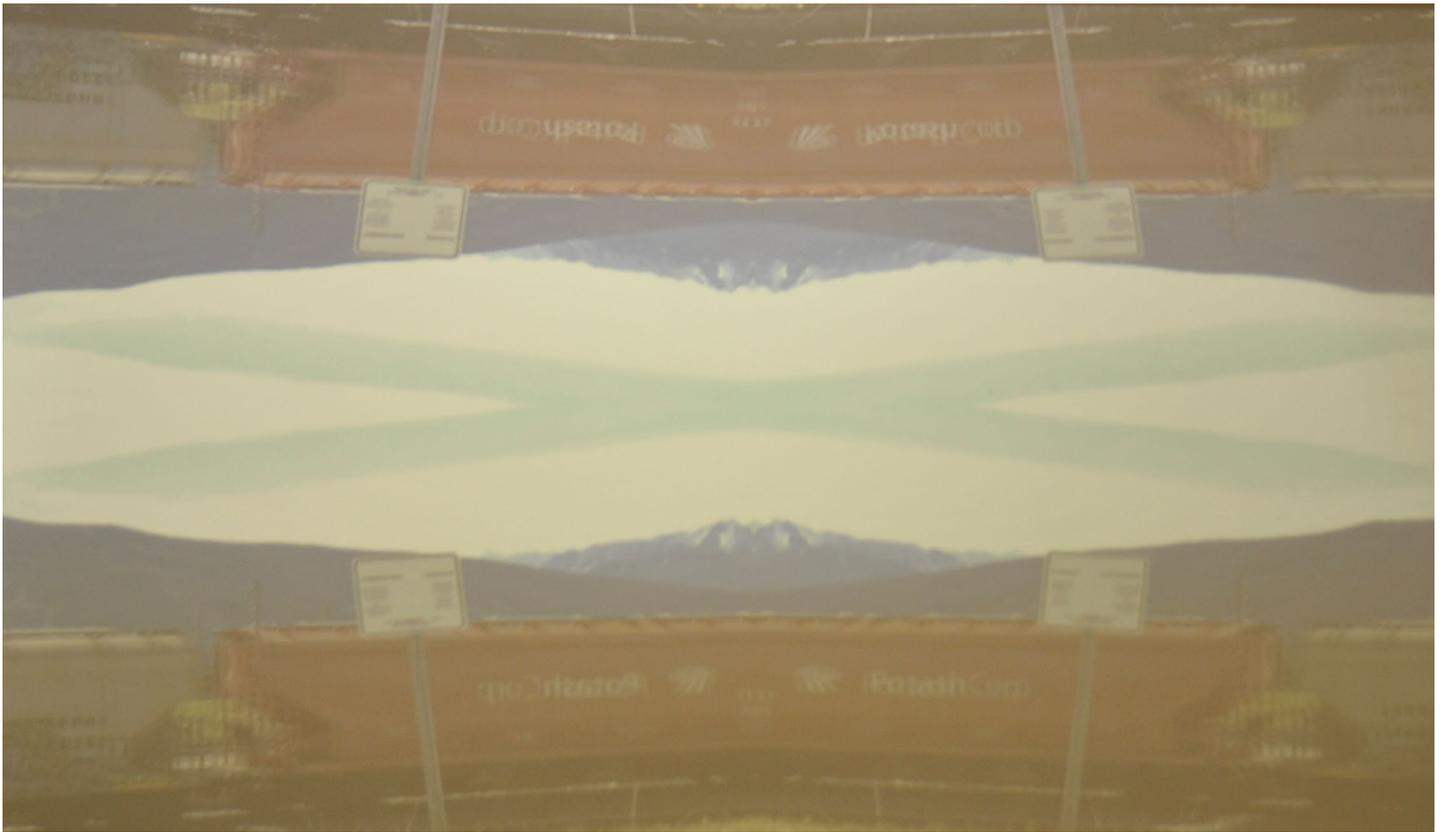
THE VIEW FROM WHERE





rossi_011 installation view 2022 digital prints various dimensions

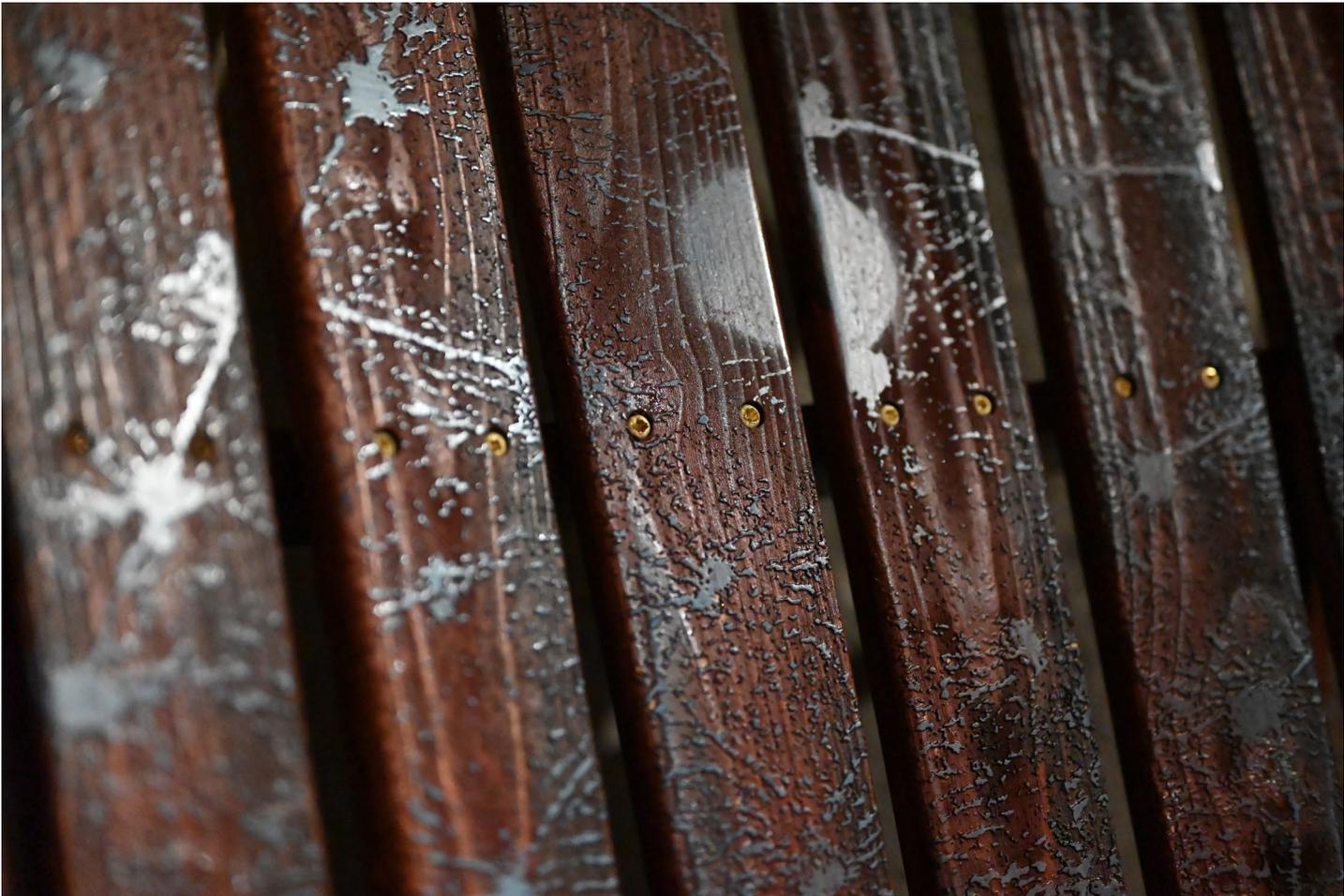
Previous page from top:
rossi_009 **The Executioner** (installation view) 2022 digital print 60x76 inches
photo credit: Marcin Vasina
rossi_010 installation view 2022 digital prints various dimensions
photo credit: Marcin Vasina



rossi_012 **Jasper** (still, installation view) 2022 video



rossi_013 **Fire** (still, installation view) 2022 video



rossi_014 **Untitled (chair)** (detail) 2022 wood sculpture various dimensions
Photo credit: Marcin Vasina

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Now on to other things.

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