



# Following knock-off fashion's flow from Lagos to Guangzhou (and back again)

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# VERSAGE



If you look closely you'll notice  
That the pattern on this soft broadcloth shirt  
Is made of working man's blood  
And praying folks' tears.

If you look closer you'll notice  
That this pattern resembles  
Tenement row houses, project high rises,  
Cell block tiers,  
Discontinued stretches of elevated train tracks,  
Slave ship gullies, acres of tombstones.

If you look closer, you'll notice  
That this fabric has been carefully blended  
With an advanced new age polymer  
To make the fabric lightweight  
Weatherproof, and durable.

All this to give some sort of posture and dignity  
To a broken body that is a host for scars.

### From 'Soldier's Dream' by YASIIN BEY

1. LAGOS  
I took a photograph on election day in 2015. It was golden hour. I was new in town. Though I had a writing fellowship that had nothing to do with electoral politics, I was a recovering news journalist. So I registered with the electoral commission and got my press pass and badge and drove around the ghostly streets of Lagos with some local reporters. It was largely an exercise in futility. I felt adrift. I wasn't sure what I was looking for. The story I wrote rambles about the stories people tell. My fellowship editor thought it was useless. But, driving home, I shot this photograph. In it, a teenager is crossing the road. We are in the neighbourhood of Ebute Metta, and he is wearing the most beautiful hoodie, covered in a twirling, swirling motif. He stares at me through glinting shades. Between the patterned sweatshirt and his shorts — also printed black and white but in a different design — he has layered a striped shirt. He stands in front of the Wasimi Community Mosque, a burnt-red building in the 1970s tropical modernist concrete that blankets much of mainland Lagos. Round concrete circles are embedded like a screen for privacy and ventilation at the top corner of the building. The pattern looks classically Lagosian now, but an architect once told me those cutout blocks were imported from Israel.

Photographs flatten reality. They squash three dimensions into two, and turn bodies and buildings into patterns and shapes. They still the world; they solidify a moment. You can breathe with a photograph, though the instant captured was briefer than your exhale. I was driving when I shot this, and my subject was walking; its stillness is stolen. And yet this split second is layered with everything inside the photograph and also everything ephemeral emanating from the image: emotion, history, foreshadowing. The photograph illustrates an obsession I had not yet noted; a string to a web I had yet to pull and untangle.

I liked it when I shot it. I thought: this looks like Lagos. (And I find Lagos beautiful.)

I later became transfixed by both this swirling pattern and by the thought, "This looks like Lagos."

I saw the pattern everywhere. I took buses around town, little orbs bouncing through the city filled with uncountable lives, personalities, roles, all squished hip to hip on wooden benches. The clothes people wear express just a fragment of their personas. Sometimes it's obligatory — white garments for Aladura churchgoers, pleated burgundy skirts for school — and sometimes it's more loosely prescribed: suits and heels for office workers, individual designs in matching aso-ebi for weddings. But there is also a wide range

of freedom both within and beyond this criteria, and cosmopolitan Lagosians are unrelentingly expressive and well-dressed. The sweatshirt in the photograph is of a style worn mostly by the young, fly dreamers of Lagos' lower social strata — street hawkers, bus conductors, entrepreneurs with many hyphens: real estate agent-used car salesman-blogger of a fictional Yoruba playboy in Dubai. I came to call this style, and the concepts it encompasses, "Versage".

Versage is like Versace, but it is not Versace. It is knock-off Versace. But when I say, "This is knock-off Versace," I can never end the sentence there. I have to add, "This is knock-off Versace, but totally Nigerian." It is distinct from the knock-off Versace that I have seen anywhere else in the world. It does not look like the knock-off Versace in Casablanca. It does not look like the knock-off Versace in Harlem. It does not look like the knock-off Versace in Paris. And it doesn't even look like the knock-off Versace in Dakar. Some Nigerians call it "Versasse", with a hissed "s", or "Vers-ah-CH", but I settled on "Versage" because it is sometimes written that way on shirts and caps and sweats. But it's not always written that way, and in fact it's not always written. Often it's a playful reconfiguration of the Versace Medusa, the brand's logo that is itself an appropriation of Greek mythology: the head of Medusa, the beautiful, raped monster-woman, whose gaze turns men to stone. The filigree that surrounds the Medusa in the logo is reconfigured on Versage clothing, often expanded, turned into a whole pattern that covers the shirt, like the teenager's sweatshirt, which has neither the Medusa nor the name, but whose pattern is decidedly Versage.

Lagos is like nowhere else in the world, like everywhere in the world is like nowhere else in the world. But to say that this looks Lagosian to me, this looks Nigerian to me, what am I saying? How do you deconstruct and explain an aesthetic? I wanted to articulate the specificity of taste in a meaningful way. So I pulled many threads. I spun through the evolution of taste, the factors that are at play, the ideas and values and desires that are expressed through the aesthetic, through what the clothes refer to, what the clothes aspire to, what the fashion says. I followed the supply chain, the pathways the clothes and the ideas for the designs travel; how the clothes come to be. I listened to the stories of the people who wear them and make them and procure them and transport them to hear how they see and interact with the world. It is the weaving of history, values, ideas and identities that makes something simultaneously foreign and Nigerian so compelling.

Versage is more than a style, it is a concept, a node at the center of a million questions, a lens through which to look

at social realities in a city with which I was falling in love. There is an aspiration common in the Lagos hustle that is embroidered into the fabrics. Versage declares simultaneously what the wearer wishes to be, and what the wearer actually is. The aesthetic is glamorous and loud, it screams of money, for money, in the glitzy taste of the nouveau riche. But it is also cheap.

Mimicry is a stilted covetousness. I wanted to untangle what exactly Versage is mimicking, its specific creolisation of taste. The copy has flown far from the original, so while Versage started as an imitation of Italian designer wear, it is now evolving in a completely different context. Versage breeds Versage now. Mimesis becomes an infinity loop. This conversation is happening throughout the fashion world. Singer M.I.A. designed a line for Versace that "bootlegs the bootleg". Dapper Dan, a designer in Harlem, reconfigured designer prints into new shapes and designs. Fendi sued him and shut him down in the 1990s. Twenty-five years later Gucci appropriated his style, taking it from the runway to the streets and back to the runway; then they hired him. The endless spinning out of mimesis points to this ongoing conversation — how designer wear only carries the clout that it does because everyone copies it and aspires to it, making it accessible and cool when the original is out of reach.

Lagos is a land of extremes; it is not outside of our global realities, but rather is a space where the inequality that defines our current economic system is glaringly visible. Capitalism is barbaric, but it is reality, and money is not just money: it is safety, it is access, it is survival. This is true everywhere, but for many Lagosians this deadly dance is a quotidian anxiety. You cannot blame the nouveau riche for their ostentatious celebrations of survival. Or the poor for posturing wealth when wealth means life.

Is this a story about fashion? Sort of. It's also a kaleidoscopic exploration of urbanity, of a city stacked with universes, and all the places that exist in one. It is about the worlds we construct from our respective vantage points and everywhere layered into everywhere, as twisting and sprawling as Versage prints.

### 2. SAN FRANCISCO

I met Vivian Chenxue Lu for coffee in one of the many loft-ceilinged, open-plan roasting cafés that dot the Mission District. Vivian was working on her PhD at Stanford. An anthropologist, she researched travelling Igbo traders from Lagos to Istanbul, Dubai and Guangzhou. Her work ethic was methodical and her queries fascinated me: on masculinities and ethnicities and diasporas and markets. When we both lived in Lagos she would pick me up in her two-door

stick-shift Honda Concerto and we would drive to buy Chinese vegetables in Lekki Market, or bad coffee at Federal Palace hotel, or wander the bright red, oddly vacant Chinatown in Ojota. There we bought herbs for my sprained ankle from a chain-smoking traditional doctor, and were invited to lunch by a bustling Chinese businesswoman who seemed to be illegally exporting lumber, and who chatted blithely about dwindling forests.

In San Francisco, Vivian and I bemoaned the slow pace of writing, and I asked her about my new work on Versage. I maundered on about my curiosity for the aesthetic, and wondered where it came from. I knew vaguely that the imports mostly came from China, but I didn't understand how Made-In-China Versage was so Nigerian.

I asked her to tell me about Guangzhou. She had spent months there with Nigerian traders of all stripes. They procured and imported televisions and cell phones, home goods and clothes. Flippantly, she mentioned that one of her contacts there was a designer.

What? I said. My eyes lit at the poetry of knock-off-designer designers.

My earlier questions about how Versage looks nothing like any other fake Versace, and how it looks so Nigerian, suddenly made perfect sense. It looks Nigerian because it is Nigerian. It is designed by Nigerians for Nigerians. They just happen to be in Guangzhou.

I wanted to meet these Versage designers. I decided to go.

### 3. GUANGZHOU

Guangzhou is a humid hub of consumption. People are making, and stocking, and selling; wholesale and retail and everything in between. There are glittery, air conditioned shopping malls and wholesale plazas with names that reflect their scope: "THE UNIVERSE COMPREHENSIVE BUILDING SHOES CITY" and "GUANGDA CHILDREN'S CLOTHING WORLD". It is a factory city, and (like everywhere?) a crossroads. I had a laughing conversation with my vivacious, far-wandering translator about how he doesn't buy souvenirs when he travels, because everything is made right here. It's true. The factories are stacked one on top of the other, each floor open plan with sewing machines in rows. They are tucked down alleyways in garages, or loom over side streets. Forklifts drive through manufacturing neighbourhoods like it is all one giant warehouse. There is stuff everywhere. Vendors push carts with bags and bales and boxes down the sidewalk, a spare pair of jeans dangling out. Mint green satchels are stuffed for shipping, they litter streets and shops, half open, or tied tight. China is the world's largest garment exporter, shipping off three times as many shirts and skirts and pants as India, the second

largest producer. And Guangzhou is the textile hub of the Pearl River Delta. The region in Southern China has had annual growth rates over 13 per cent since 1979. It is the fastest growing region in the fastest growing economy in the world.

I wandered the Nigerian pathways of the city with the designers and curators of Versage. They were friends, and friends of friends of traders I knew in Balogun Market in Lagos. I asked Onyinye — a stylish Chinese entrepreneur married to a Nigerian who splits her time between Guangzhou and Abuja — for a hotel recommendation. She directed me to the Lai Si Dun (Nice Town Hotel) in the San Yuan Li neighborhood. It was down the street from the Tong Tong Hotel, a plaza that had been central to the African immigrant community. Tong Tong is home to an Ethiopian Airlines office, independent shipping companies, boutiques with Versage dresses pulled tight over mannequins, and a giant sign that advertises "A Taste of Africa" at the "African Pot Kitchen", blinking a neon image of iridescent steam. I had read about this plaza before I came, so when one of the traders mentioned it I said, "Oh yes that place is famous, right?"

"It's not famous," he said.

I remembered how niche my obsession was.

But if famous is the wrong word, the place was known enough as a centre of the African community that police set up checkpoints outside. The locus was becoming too visible, and the state was cracking down on immigrants. The government's gaze was scattering Africans with expired visas, and rendering the community more diffuse. Tong Tong was still visibly African, but only those with their paperwork in order dared to pass.

My hotel was a 15-minute walk down a busy thoroughfare beneath a concrete overhang dripping with lush tropical vines. The base I made in the city, my center of reference, the space I returned to each day, was in the midst of the transient African traders — short-term visitors who come for a week or two to gather stock. The hallways and elevators were littered with sacks, and the industrial scale in the lobby was the site of much hand wringing over cargo weight.

Pasted above the phone in my room was a yellow card advertising Coco food delivery. When I couldn't sleep I ordered plantain and jollof rice, and stared out my small window at the mahjong house across the alley. I was not the only one up all hours, looking out at this layered neighbourhood, this layered world. Uzoma became one of my closest friends in the city. The first day we met I asked to meet him in the morning, but he pushed our meeting to noon. "I hate to miss my appointments," he said, and after seven years living in China, he still

keeps Nigerian time. His phone, like mine, buzzed throughout the night. His clients follow market hours in Lagos and Aba. The Nigerian traders I met knew each other by a range of names. Emmy’s shop overflowed with Versage shirts. He played with the printed polyester as he explained, “If I want to make my own design I may remove all this wire, and put only head, and this is my own idea.” He said. “And I put on the Versach because people need Versach.” He spoke in low tones as we ate suan cai yu, the spicy fish soup all the traders offered me. “Have you eaten?” they would ask, then call delivery and within minutes a man carrying plastic soup bowls and styrofoam containers of rice would bustle down the crowded hallways of the plazas, past tiny shops packed with samples of wholesale knock-off designs. Emmy spoke so low it was like a conspiracy. He mumbled and glanced around. I tilted my ear close to him as he muttered, “Before I show somebody my design I must sell more quantity because they might copy it.”

Stanley was slightly less suspicious, he took me with him to the fabric market, an open-air structure with rows and rows of simple shops packed to the ceiling with rolls of textiles. New bales come in every day, raw material for every kind of fashion in the world: the base for saris and salwar kameezs, glittery gowns and suit pants. Stanley comes most mornings, weaving in and out of the aisles. We played our fingers in the various qualities and prints. The aesthetic he seeks is loud and bold; the texture is thin. He finds the cheapest fabrics and negotiates hard. He doesn’t even bother with the luxurious, thick cotton rolls — those are for the American market. For the Nigerian market, traders start with the cheapest materials.

I discussed this with Uzoma, who designs shoes and manages logistics and had endless patience for explaining systems to me. “In China you can be stingy,” he said, “but you will be punished for it”. The traders know the quality they are buying. Here in the place where all of the things of the world are made, they know they are buying the very bottom for their customers, and they know enough to buy higher quality for themselves. Uzoma exports cheap shoes, but he buys Zara on sale for himself. When I met him he was planning his return to Nigeria after five years in China. He had shipped ahead most of his things, and one Sunday needed to buy church shoes, so he stopped and bought some from a Chinese wholesaler. They broke six hours later. Livid, he brought them back to the vendor. “What do you expect?” the vendor asked. “You bought cheap shoes.”

From the fabric market, Stanley let me follow him to the factories. We passed through a parking lot leading to identical stairwells between identical buildings. Upstairs, piles of T-shirts nearly obscured

an altar in the foyer. Alex, one of the owners of the small family business, welcomed us into a cluttered office and poured tea, then led us into the back where piles of knock-off T-shirts littered the ground and rows of sewing machines stretched across the open room. Stanley’s design process is collaborative and ad hoc, he scrolled through images on his phone, googled or sent from his contacts in Lagos. Alex offered his own suggestions, showing new designs he made for other clients, bedecked with symbols made here, referring to elsewhere, destined for somewhere else. When they negotiated the order, Stanley gestured to his own shirt, demonstrating how he wanted to adjust it: adding a cuff link and changing the neckline. He speaks a few words of Chinese, but the men also spoke through a translation app, sentence by sentence.

“Nigerians in their own way like to emulate you know? We like to learn. Everywhere we are we just look at what entices our eyes and kind of put it on to try it, then we keep wearing it and we’ll think, if we can change it this way it can be also nice,” Uzoma mused. “We are inquisitive when it comes to fashion, curious. And we are also creative. We steal, we change, and add things to it.”

Through Uzoma I met Rich, and through Rich I met Felix. Industrious and obsessive, Felix designs in flashes in the middle of the night. He said he takes inspiration from Nollywood and everything he encounters. After seven years in China, he has worked his way up to owning a factory. He has a Chinese business partner for all the paperwork, but the business is his. The building was under renovation when I visited, there were holes in the ceiling, but the walls had paintings of idyllic nature scenes and tigers, and the production room was buried in Felix’s latest creation: a sparkle-studded T-shirt he promised would flood the streets of Onitsha in a couple of months when they arrived at port. His staff were all Chinese. Chinese hands sewed Nigerian designs for Nigeria, paid by their Nigerian boss.

In Nigeria people sometimes say ‘chinko’ to describe things made in China. I discussed the term with a group of Nigerian artists; we were all commissioned to produce work for a ChinAfrika exhibition in Germany. The artists bounced around ideas for installations exploring toxicity and disintegration; they felt cheated, and disgusted. But the truth is complex. Chinese imports are often ordered, designed and imported by Nigerians. And while they are often cheap to the point of danger, they also allow Nigerians to access things — or at least the imitation of things — that they could never otherwise afford. Is a ‘chinko’ phone better than no phone at all? Versage is

not Versace, but it is as close as keke and okada drivers can get.

“If you make quality things and send to Africa not everybody will buy, but if you have cheap items, people will rush to buy it,” explained Douglas, another trader who had built a career in China over 15 years. He designs shirts that he prints with his name, “Douglas King Lenin”, then sticks on a “Made in Italy” label.

Africa, he said, needs “substandard”.

#### 4. KADUNA

If Nigerians were running factories in China, I wondered, what about Nigerian industries back home? Nigerian textile production launched in Kaduna in 1956, with the founding of the city’s first textile mill, and the industry at its peak employed hundreds of thousands. Nigeria was the second largest textile producer in Africa behind Egypt.

When I arrived in Kaduna I visited the Ministry of Information, which was in the midst of a remodel. The archives were boxes strewn across the floor of a back room: pages and pages of contact sheets, photo proofs that show regal Northern leaders bringing foreign investors to tour bustling factories. In the moments pictured, new looms and gins and spinning machines gleam. At the top of the sheets labels placed the images in time: Kaduna, 1959; Kano, 1966.

Now Kaduna is a ghost town. I wandered through the campus for Kaduna Textile Limited. Mint green walls opened into vacant rooms with the windows blown. Antique machines were strewn diagonally across the floor like sculptures amidst the wreckage. States of abandonment look interrupted. There is a visual poetry in neglect: dropped beams and cracked windows. It makes beautiful pictures with the lines and the shadows and the layers of atrophying treasures, remnants from another era.

A mix of structural adjustment policies, neoliberalism, corruption, lack of maintenance and poor management deteriorated the industry. When cheap Chinese imports flooded the market in the 1990s and early 2000s, Nigerian producers couldn’t compete. Spaces that have held something and have since gone silent are more haunting when you know the contrast. Down the road from Kaduna Textile Limited is United Nigerian Textile (UNTL), which is still hanging on by a thread, running at 20-per-cent capacity. I found a few workers in a quiet office building. A secretary recounted the history of the company and the city’s slow downfall. “Look out the window,” she said. “All these buildings you see here, as far as the eye reaches, are the finishing department, which has been idle since 2007. There’s nothing there, there’s nothing left.” And so she took me on a tour of nothing, of empty structures, of stillness, a tour of remnants. We were looking at bones.

I wandered down unlit streets after dark to meet Musa Bala, a blind patriarch who had worked decades in the sector. I slowed the cadence of my voice to mirror his. “We are the ones who started doing wax print, throughout the whole of West Africa,” he told me proudly. I enjoyed his nostalgia, the depth of his knowledge. “The textile industry here in Kaduna is almost dead but the branches of UNTL are still giving some service.” I had seen the machines that still function at the end of my ghost tour. Just a few lines of them, whirring and humming, vibrating productivity.

Gimba Ndandok is also retired, after a career as a professor of textile manufacturing at Kaduna Polytechnic. A Jehovah’s Witness, his gate is peppered with stickers. A placard overhead reads: “Forgive that you may be forgiven.” Loquacious and cheerful, he has a slightly more cynical view of the history. The textile industry in Nigeria “was never fully indigenous,” he told me. At its peak, the machines producing the fabrics were always imported. If they broke down, spare parts had to be special ordered from abroad. So while in integrated industries, like in China, the machines producing fabrics were constantly evolving, getting swifter and leaner, in Nigeria the machines were running into the ground. “I normally call them Lord Lugard equipment, who was the administrator during the colonial days,” Ndandok said, laughing. “The equipment is very old.”

Even more jarring was when he told me that in its glory days, the factories in Kaduna were almost all owned by foreigners: British, Japanese, Pakistani. UNTL was started by Mr Cha Chi Ming from Hong Kong, and still today is 99 per cent Chinese owned. Any kind of nostalgia for Nigeria’s industrial past has to recall that it was already global.

#### 5. LAGOS

This story starts and ends in Lagos. But here, too, we cannot sit still.

I spent countless sweaty afternoons in Balogun Market, a crammed commercial centre that branches off of Lagos’ central mosque and snakes along alleyways. The market is organised thematically: there is a section for frames, for books, for Christmas decorations, and, of course, for Versage. The Versage section is called Mandilas. There are plazas here, like in China, but the structures are older and more worn. Shiny Medusas are splashed across T-shirts and slippers, stacked on plywood beams and suspended from metal grilling. There are shops down endless corridors, tucked into underground thoroughfares and up rickety staircases. To draw customers to hidden stores, hawkers and apprentices stand in the central medians between the endless river of pedestrians, buses and

motorbikes churning through the space. They are dressed in the freshest fashion, walking advertisements for the styles they sell, and some stand over piles of T-shirts under the hot sun. I made friends with KC, one of the T-shirt vendors, and would stop by and chat with him and other market workers. One day I met Emmanuel, a robust middle-aged man, sweating at the junction. He told me that he was just visiting, his business was in Gambia where he sells “African jewellery”, mostly to tourists. “You know, that black stuff, wood,” he said. But the piece that glittered from his neck was Versage. Tiny Medusa heads pressed into the links of a chain that suspended a giant rhinestone.

One Saturday afternoon I went to Fabric & Dyes, an exhibition at Studio of Modé, a private gallery space in Ikoyi. The immersive installation explored Nigerian fabrics from silks and cottons to dyes and processing techniques. Studio founder Modé Aderinokun’s well-thought and meticulously documented point was that Nigeria has a grand, important history with textile. In the gift shop she sold a few contemporary, socially conscious brands, and a collection of traditional fabrics from different parts of the country.

On one wall she posted “Is Ankara African?” A brief text outlined the history of wax print. It was manufactured by the Dutch for the Indonesian market, then found its way to Africa where it became so wildly popular that it evolved into the widespread cliché of the African fashion aesthetic. Young intellectuals like to smirk and say, “wax print is not African”. The argument that wax print is not African contrasts it with historical textiles designed and produced in Nigeria like adire and aso-oke. After spending enough time in elite, erudite fashion scenes, I almost intellectualised myself out of any awareness of wax print; I started to find the reference gauche. Yet when I left the islands where this crowd gathers, and rolled through mainland Lagos again, I saw mamas in their wrappers and young women in their perfectly tailored up-down combinations. The literary scene is awash in wax print cut into pencil skirts and blazers. Are these people not African? Are their fashion choices not African?

“Tracing indigeneity in a historical way is endless,” Abosede George, professor of African history at Barnard College told me. We were talking about the question of belonging in the city, but the concept is the same. “I end a lot of interviews with the question, ‘Who is a Lagosian?’ Not to find the answer but to understand how they situate that,” she said. “Everyone situates themselves at the centre.”

In 2018 how do we talk about indigeneity? Is Versage African?

The urban world is a stacking of millions of distinct universes, millions of distinct worldviews all in one place. What do you want to go back to? This everywhere, this nowhere, this fusion is itself distinctly Lagosian. What makes it unique is the direction that people are looking, the position they are looking from, how they organise the world from their own centre. What they aspire to, what they combine, how they express themselves, their own definitions of beauty and success. This cosmopolitan kaleidoscope becomes its own flavour, its own taste, its own meaning — as complex, as layered, as tangled as the city itself.

I went clubbing in Victoria Island one night. Blue lights danced over ice buckets filled with champagne bottles. I had already been staring at Versage for months. I had bought my first piece, a hoodie with diamonds in neon yellow, green and white bowing across the midsection and on the side the Medusa stencilled in white, surrounded by twists of pink and blue. Suddenly, between the pounding beats a man strolled across the floor. He dripped wealth, from his smugness to his shirt: soft silk that seemed to float around him. I stared. This was not Versage. This was Versace. Suddenly all the swirling threads braided into a perfect tapestry. Versage is Lagosian because Versace is. Versage comes from the luxury that slips past parking attendants on the way to the club, rude and self-important: ‘Do you know who I am?’

It also comes from between those parking attendants. It comes from Balogun where the hawkers bought their shirts for their own Saturday night, mingling in the crowded market with distributors who come to buy stock, each themselves a fashionista, curating their own wares to take along spidery pathways to hip, androgynous Fulani teenagers and plump, trendy students in Benue. In Balogun the importers are watching how they curate and what they buy, and then calling their brothers in China to tell them the latest hot idea: geometric patterned squares on hoodies for rainy season, or the latest version of the printed chain. And the brothers in China are rifling through warehouses to buy fabrics and taking them to loft factory buildings to describe their new vision to their Chinese counterparts, riffing creativity, until Chinese hands are sewing Nigerian designs and shipping them across the world, back to the parking attendants outside this club, and the oga sliding past in the new season’s Versace, ripped from the street to the runway and back. I stared, dizzy, smiled, then went back to dancing.

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