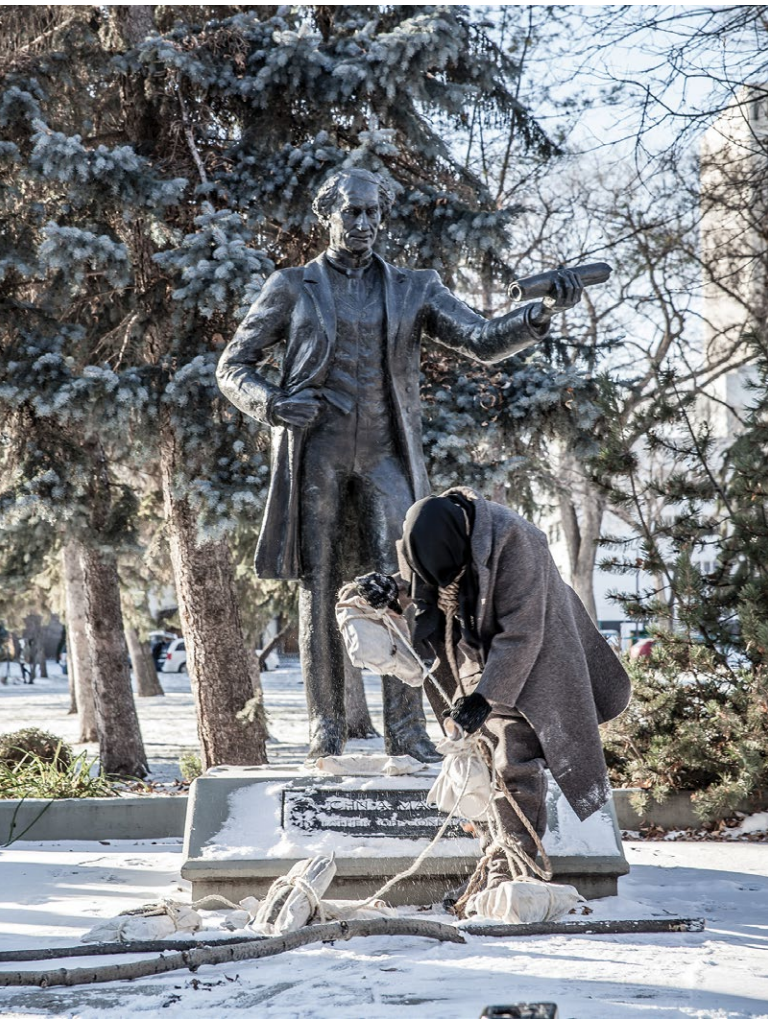
Extra-Rational Indigenous Performance: *Dear John; Louis David Riel*

by David Garneau

On a freezing winter afternoon in Regina's Victoria Park, about fifty people gather at a sculpture of John A. Macdonald (1815–1891). The gathering was not a celebration but a reckoning.



Dear John; Louis David Riel performance in Regina, Saskatchewan, 16 November 2014.
Photo by Eagleclaw Thom, courtesy of the Dunlop Art Gallery

Macdonald was Canada's first Prime Minister. He also stewarded policies designed to subdue and aggressively assimilate the original inhabitants of northern Turtle Island. These measures included reserves; pass laws restricting First Nations travel, trade, and political organizing; the Indian Act, which, among other things, outlawed traditional cultural, spiritual, legal, and governance practices; and Indian residential schools, which separated children from their families, land, and languages and were meant to extinguish Indigenous ways of being and knowing, and eventually title, for future generations. Macdonald also oversaw the deliberate starvation of Native people on the Plains (Daschuk) and the mass hangings of eight First Nations men at the Battlefords[1] and of Métis leader Louis Riel (1844–1885) in Regina, for their parts in the Resistance of 1885.

In front of the monument, a young white man beats a tattoo on a snare drum. Joining him, a two-spirit Métis throbs a softer pulse on a hand drum. The tempos intertwine, complementing each other through what follows. Across the park, an awkward figure ambles through the snow toward the group. He is dressed in a bulky grey felt suit, head draped with an ominous black hood cinched at the neck with a noose, and his progress is hobbled by a long rope tied to his right ankle and strung with ten heavy canvas bank bags. He also struggles with three long branches and a briefcase. Arriving at the ringed audience, he drops his burdens and mimes a greeting to the statue. Then, sitting at its metal feet, he unties the moneybags, a gift for Macdonald. Facing the bronze, the hooded figure unfurls a document, gesticulating a narrative, an explanation, perhaps a plea. Frustrated with the unresponsive effigy, he rolls the page into a scroll and imitates the sculpture's pose. Next, he tries to communicate with the statue using a beaded tin-can telephone. No response. Disgusted, he ties a thin Métis sash around Macdonald's bronze eyes and turns his back on him. He removes his hood and noose to reveal himself as a Métis man with long, dark, and silvered hair, and an Idle No More T-shirt. He pulls beaded moccasins onto his feet and ties a wide Métis sash around his waist. Using the noose as a binder, he fashions the branches into a tripod and drapes his coat over the structure. Taking sweetgrass from the briefcase, he smudges in the makeshift tipi. After the ceremony, he reshapes the tipi into a travois[2] and

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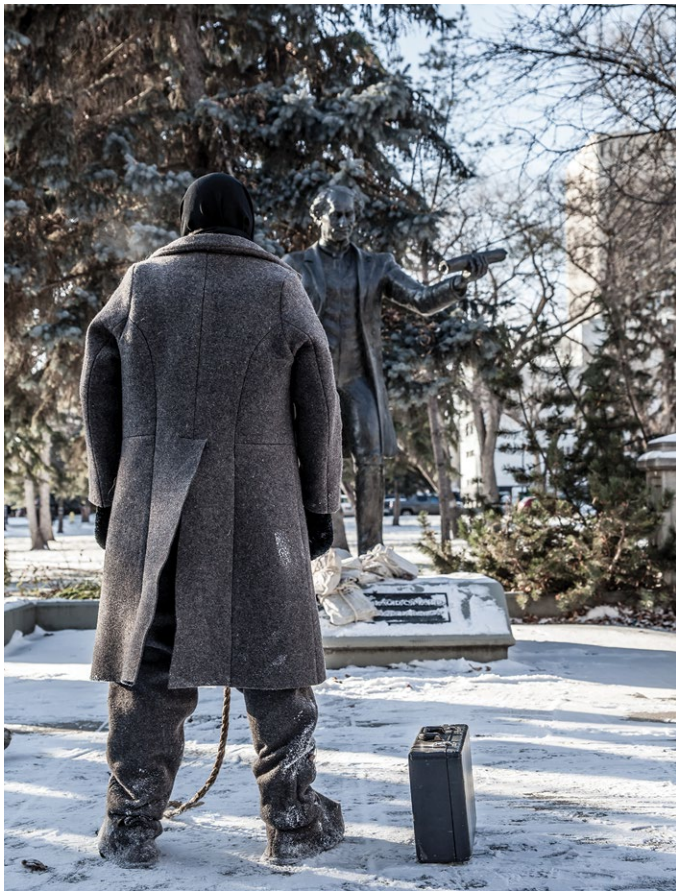

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bundles his belongings onto it. Retrieving a cellphone from his pants, he calls for a lift, then drags the travois to the street.

Dear John; Louis David Riel is an itinerant performance in which the spirit of Louis Riel confronts statues of John A. Macdonald across Canada.[3] I was inspired to create this sort of performance by Peter Morin, Adrian Stimpson, and Rebecca Belmore, First Nations artists who create moving performances in which they engage colonial monuments in public spaces rather than art sanctuaries.[4] Indigenous people recognize that everything is animated and in relation. These artists engage these sculptures not merely as things, or even only as representations, but as having being. I think the excitement settler defenders show for preserving effigies of Macdonald demonstrates that they too recognize that some things are more than things.

The project had challenges: I froze in Regina, fell off the statue in Kingston, and felt out of place at Ottawa's 150 celebration. But the main obstacle was my own nature. A socially anxious introvert, a studio artist, not an actor or activist, I am unsuited to this sort of work. And yet I was compelled to transform personal frustration into social action. I wanted Canadians to see these monuments from an Indigenous point of view, to nudge them to reconsider their celebration of Macdonald and Canada. I also wanted Métis to rethink our own fetishizing of a single great man of history. I share the following reflections because I was asked to, and as an example of how Indigenous contemporary artists struggle to create third spaces of creative sovereignty between the demands of customary culture and the commodity culture of the dominant art world.

In 1999, I left Calgary for a job at the University of Regina. While walking around, getting a sense of the city, I was surprised to see a larger-than-life-sized sculpture of Macdonald in the main civic square. There are John A. statues across southern Ontario, where he lived. If folks want to celebrate him there, that is their business. But having a bronze figure of him here, a place he never visited and where Riel was hanged, is not only in bad taste but an obvious provocation. To put this in perspective, there are no other John A. statues in Saskatchewan.[5] Nor are there any in Alberta or Manitoba. And even though he was their member of Parliament, the City of Victoria recently removed their statue of Macdonald in the spirit of reconciliation. Regina's metal Macdonald is now the only one west of Hamilton, Ontario. Some might dismiss the statue as a historical artifact, but its persistence in Victoria Park is clearly a colonial continuance. Erected in 1967, during the rise of the Indigenous civil rights movement, it was—and remains—an official reminder to First Nations and Métis people of who is boss, and what happens to Natives who challenge white rule.[6]

A few years after my first visit, on the anniversary of the state-sanctioned homicide of Riel (16 November), I began leaving miniature nooses at Macdonald's feet. I once left a full-sized one. While these gestures offered some personal satisfaction, they were thin as social expression, more ritual than communication. *Dear John; Louis David Riel* was a public salve for a private itch that my preferred mediums could not scratch.

The most famous quotation attributed to Riel is "My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back" (qtd. in Poitras 114).[7] I take Riel's prophecy seriously. Because I identify as a Métis *contemporary* artist, my art is not just a personal expression but also participates in a collective Métis political and aesthetic genealogy and includes responsibilities that define and contextualize my work. While informed by and aligned with traditional Métis culture, my work is not limited to those traditions. As a Métis artist

"Legacy," photograph, 16 November 2010.
Photo by David Garneau.

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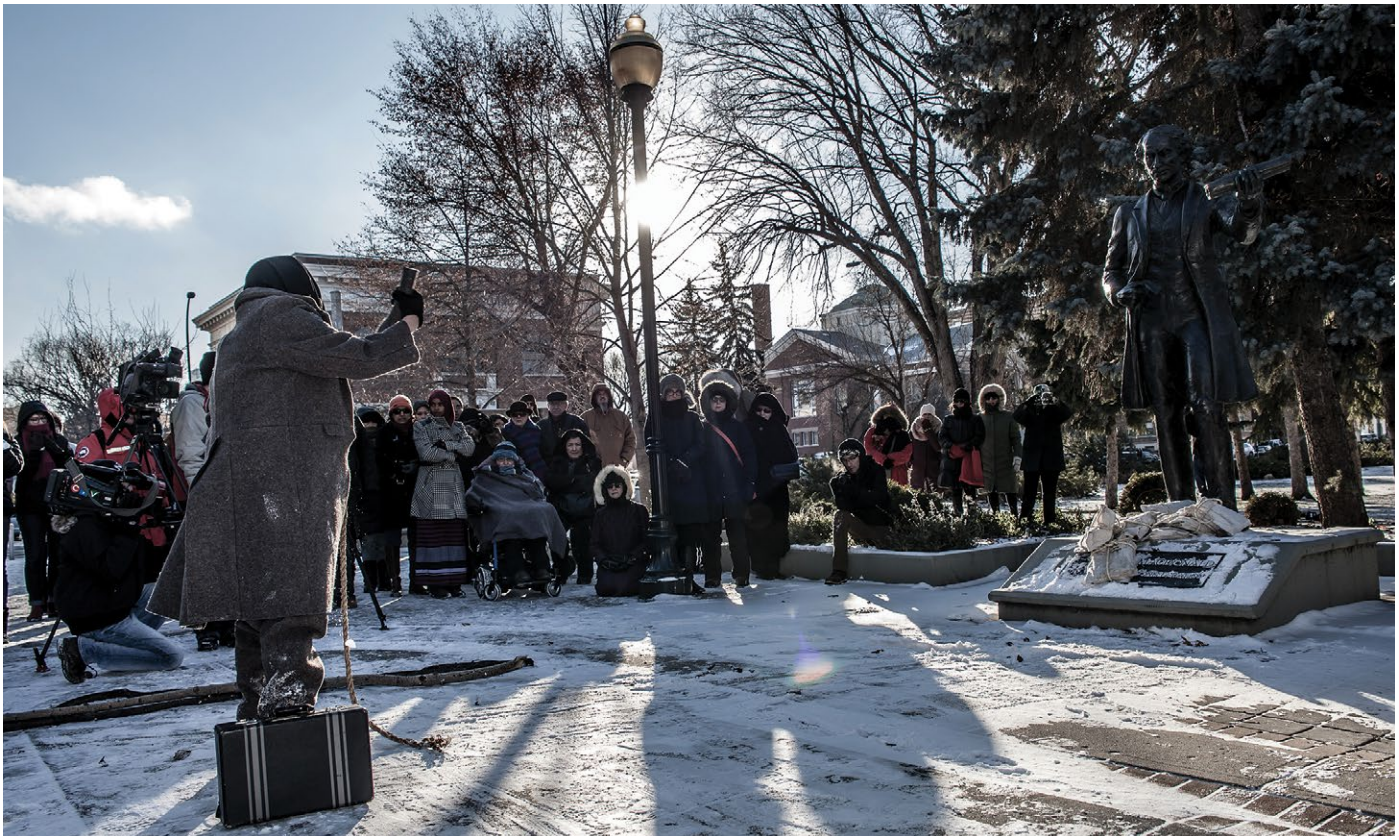

Dear John; Louis David Riel performance in Regina, Saskatchewan , 16 November 2014.
Photo by Eagleclaw Thom, courtesy of the Dunlop Art Gallery

and writer, I am called to use my tools to improve the lot of Indigenous people. This includes reminding Métis of who we were and who we are, and proposing possibilities for who we might yet become. My skills are in the symbolic economy: the creation and disruption of signs, symbols, and narratives.

The performance began as an intuition, a persistent mental picture of a suit. Rather than interrogate it, I commissioned Candace Cardoso to realize it. Cardoso, the costume designer for *The Trial of Louis Riel*,[8] produced a suit reminiscent of what Riel wore in court. The thick felt is a nod to the beaver felt industry that initially fuelled colonization. The costume also recalls performance artist Joseph Beuys's felt suits and Chester Brown's comic renderings of Riel (see Brown). I wanted a costume that would hide and overwhelm me. I wanted to be wrapped in an identity related to but beyond me. And I was.

My original plan was to dress as a Riel statue and deliver a Shakespearean soliloquy to Macdonald. But as soon as I put on the costume, I knew the suit was creating something else—a spirit rather than a sculpture. During rehearsals in the park, the figure felt he would be misunderstood if he spoke, that people would get more from actions than oratory. It made me wonder whether part of Riel's failing at trial was his faith in words. The value of actions became clear when I slipped on the icy monument in Kingston, smashing my knee. Folks rushed to my aid, propped me up. They became participants rather than audience. As an observer later quipped, "You couldn't have planned the accident more expertly to gain empathy." During the same performance, the figure felt Macdonald might like a drink, so we brought him one. I was invited by the National Arts Centre in Ottawa to remount the work as a counter to their absurd Riel opera.[9] It was a dragonfly on a dung heap, but I welcomed the opportunity because you never know who you might reach. At the base of the Ottawa Macdonald statue is a female figure representing Canada. She was more approachable than the remote Prime Minister.

Non-Indigenous reception of *Dear John; Louis David Riel* tended to focus on Macdonald and white veneration of his legacy. But Métis reception—especially in the raucous conversation hosted by Métis scholar and artist Dylan Miner at the Regina Public Library immediately following the first performance—also included a critique of Riel and contemporary Indigenous leadership. For example, many Metis recognized that the moneybags signified Riel's corruption by the Canadian government.[10] When Riel's spirit, his best self, returns the money, he is not only personally atoning but also critiquing capitalism's role in colonization and calling out Métis complicity. Similarly, many Indigenous spectators understood that when Riel turns his back on Macdonald, it signifies not only disgust with a specific person but also a rejection of Indigenous emulation of a deeply flawed model of European colonial governance, hyper-individualism, and masculinity. Spirit Riel re-turns to Indigenous ways of being and knowing. The moment he casts off the suit, hood, and noose, the figure is no longer Riel but a contemporary Métis person, one who struggles to integrate the best of Indigeneity with non-colonial contemporaneity. Few of these ideas preceded the performance. They arose in the

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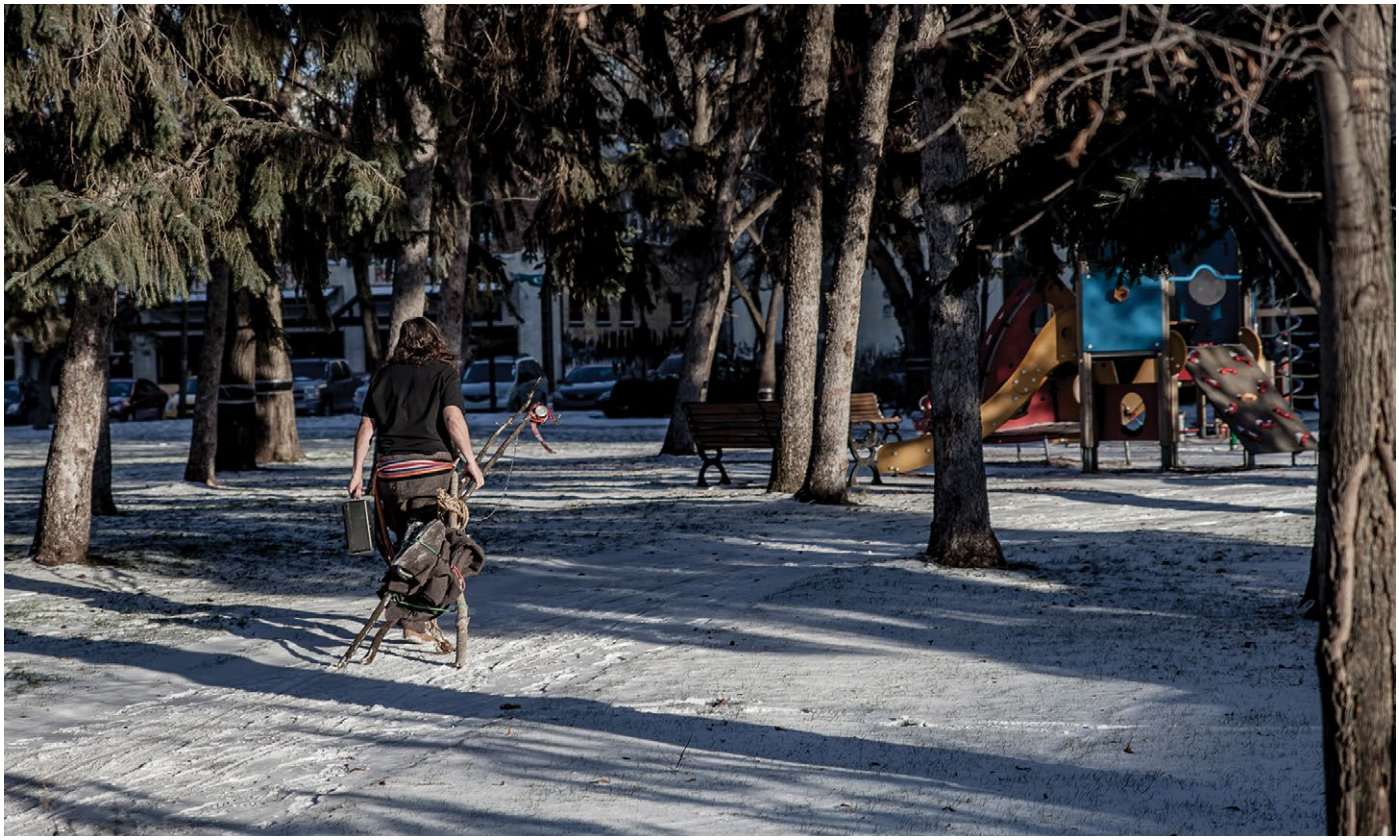

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doing, in collaboration with the character, in submitting myself to a process beyond reason(ing).

I am a reluctant performance artist. I am primarily a painter and writer, and my bliss is hours in the studio, alone. I shy from social attention. However, sometimes inconveniently, I am overwhelmed by drives that demand extraverted expression. These intuitions appear as images but also manifest as emotions and physical sensations, as relations with other bodies and with specific sites, as being rather than re-presenting. Head-strong—that is, more confident in my mind than my body—when these forces well up, I try to sublimate them through my go-to media. I feel more affective, for example, when presenting my images and texts in person, in illustrated talks, in exhibitions of my work, and in conversations, where content and experiences are co-created. But such events only go halfway. Performative intuitions resist full apprehension by images and text and defy conversion into discourse. Stubbornly sensual, they are only activated through participation, through sense-ability rather than conceptualization. When possessed by a performative intuition, the body is not merely a medium of communication; it is an occupied vessel. Was it Martha Graham who said, "If I knew what it meant, I wouldn't have had to dance it"?

Performance art is a process in which form, content, site, author, and audience coalesce into an uncomfortable but thrilling unique moment. Being an artist, rather than identifying with a discipline—that is, as a dancer, potter, poet, and so on—means leaving the comfort of your established skills when the necessity of a compelling aesthetic or political vision warrants. Performance art is the undisciplinary conversion of intuitive pre-content into compelling social actions in a surprising way. Performance art exceeds representation and explication to stimulate extra-rational sense. I loathe the exposure but prize the process. I am learning from it still.

Notes

1 The executed men were Kah-Paypamahchukways (Wandering Spirit), Pah Pah-Me-Kee-Sick (Walking the Sky), Manchoose (Bad Arrow), Kit-Ahwah-Ke-Ni (Miserable Man), A-Pis-Chas-Koos (Little Bear), Itka (Crooked Leg), and Waywahnitch (Man without Blood).

2 A travois is a type of sled used by Plains First Nations people. It consists of two long poles with a load suspended between them and the ends harnessed to a dog or horse.

3 *Dear John; Louis David Riel* was performed three times: first, in Regina's Victoria Park on 16 November 2014, curated by Blair Fornwald for the Dunlop Art Gallery; second, in Kingston's City Park on 10 January 2015, curated by Erin Sutherland as part of her "Talkin' Back to Johnny Mac" performance series; and, third, at the Canadian Parliament Buildings, Ottawa, produced by the National Arts Centre. There was a fourth, related but substantially different version, *Dear Prince Albert, Dear kistahpinanihk*, which was curated by Michel Boutin for the Two Story Café, Indigenous Peoples Artist Collective, at the Mann Art Gallery, Prince Albert, 16 September 2015.

4 In *Coal Jubilee*, Stimpson, as Shaman Exterminator, engaged an equestrian statue of Edward VII in Toronto's Queen's Park (2012).

As part of *Cultural Graffiti*, Morin sang to west coast carvings incarcerated in museums, and to a statue of Pocahontas in London, England (2013). In her performance as part of the Stronger than Stone conference, Belmore interacted with sculptures of bison and First Nations hunters at the entrance to the Wanuskewin Heritage Park in Saskatoon (2015).

5 Fundraising for Regina's statue began shortly after Macdonald's death and six years after Riel's execution. It was erected in 1967, Canada's centennial year, owing to a federal grant.

6 There is a small plaque in the park that memorializes not Riel but his trial.

7 This quotation first appeared in print in *New Breed Magazine*, vol. 16, no. 3, March 1985. See Poitras.

8 *The Trial of Louis Riel* is performed every July in Regina (rielcoproductions.com/).

9 On 15–17 June 2017, the National Arts Centre, Ottawa, revived for Canada's 150 celebrations the 1967 Harry Somers (music) and Mavor Moore (libretto, assisted by Jacques Languirand) opera *Louis Riel*. Aside from not casting an Indigenous lead, the production included a traditional Nisga'a song despite their objections. The Nisga'a First Nation has nothing to do with the Métis. The song was given Cree lyrics!

10 Macdonald made secret payments to Riel to ensure he would stay out of Canada following the 1869–1870 Red River Resistance (Gwyn 150–55).

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