

NEW MEXICO

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JOURNEY

Novel Country

The Land and Lore
of Writer Tony Hillerman



July/August 2006

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Tony Hillerman's novels lead one reader through the back roads of the Navajo Nation.

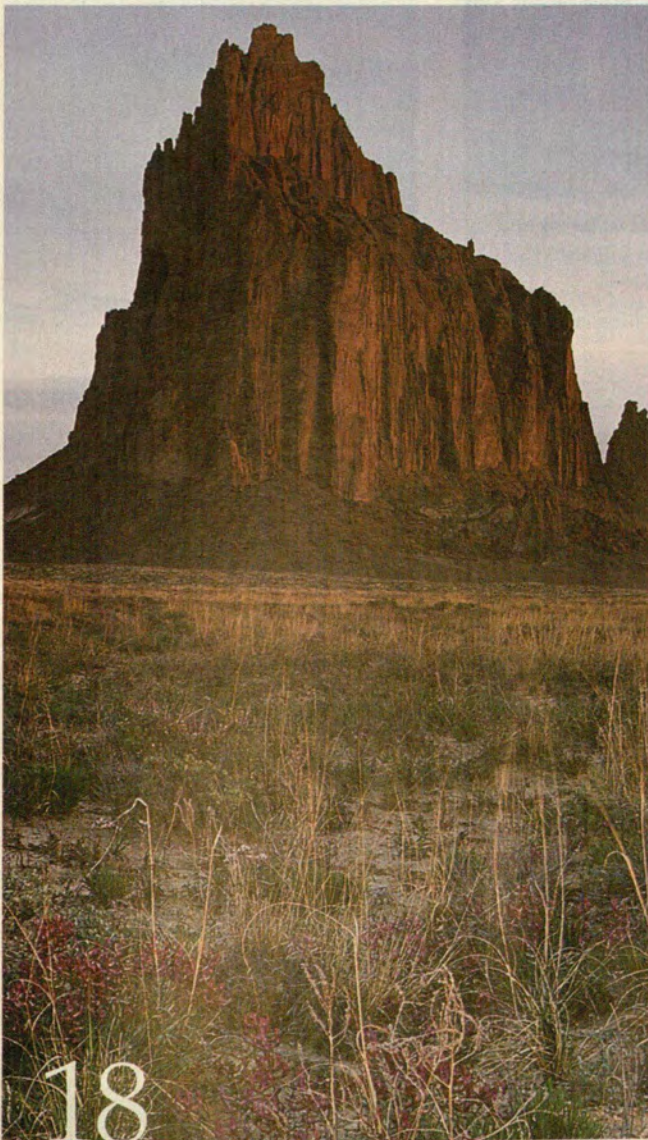
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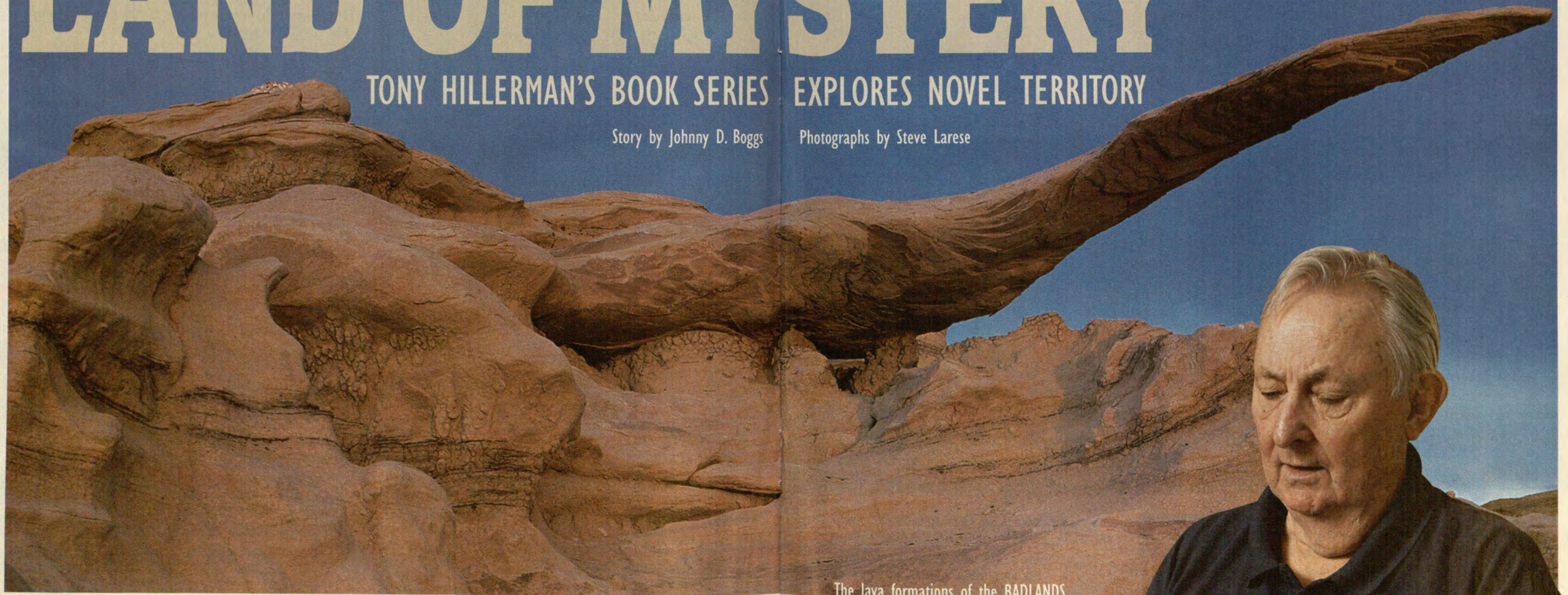
Tony Hillerman may have had this scene in mind when he chose Shiprock Peak in Northwest New Mexico as a focal point for one of his novels. Story on page 18. PHOTOGRAPH BY EFRAÍN M. PADRÓ

LAND OF MYSTERY

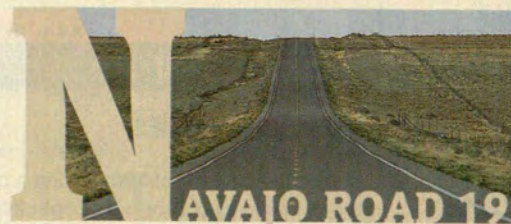
TONY HILLERMAN'S BOOK SERIES EXPLORES NOVEL TERRITORY

Story by Johnny D. Boggs

Photographs by Steve Larese



The lava formations of the BADLANDS



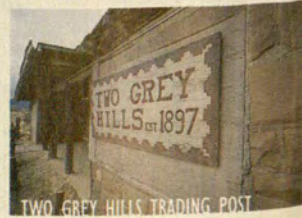
leads straight to Tony Hillerman country. Sheep graze alongside a road as a Navajo woman silently approaches them. Nothing else stirs in this burned-over desert of broken rocks and loneliness. Its vastness is overwhelming. A few miles later, the pavement ends, but a new country emerges: a land of mountains, trees, and blessed shade on New Mexico's northwestern edge, in the heart of the Navajo Nation.

It's no mystery why I'm here: In one long day-trip, I want to see how much Hillerman country I can cover in New Mexico and find out how real his realistic mystery series is.

Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, Hillerman's fictional Navajo tribal policemen, have brought me here. Well, actually, I used the AAA *Indian Country Guide Map*, although mine is not full of the colorful pins and shorthand notes that Leaphorn marks his map with to discover links between crimes.

In Hillerman's string of best-selling mystery novels, Leaphorn and Chee solve crimes while trying to balance Navajo harmony with non-tribal law. Their jurisdiction is the Navajo reservation—27,000 square miles across New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah—a land of natural beauty and cultural diversity.

"A lot of people driving down Triple-6 [former U.S. Highway 666, now U.S. Highway 491] or along I-40 only see desert," Toadlena Trading Post

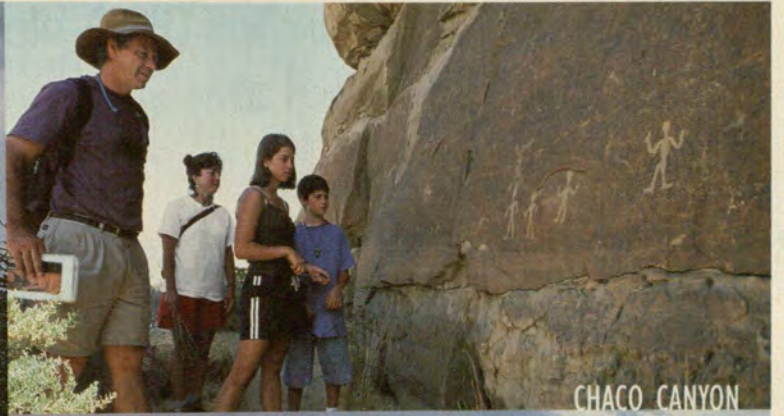


owner Mark Winter says. "But in the center, there are really beautiful high mountains, beautiful forests, and springs and lakes. A lot of people never get off the main beaten path to see what the real Navajo reservation is like."

This is real. I've driven past the Toadlena Trading Post, which stands like a buttress against the Chuska Mountains, and I've walked around nearby Two Grey Hills Trading Post, where only a dog stirred outside. Both trading posts are mentioned often in Hillerman novels; but if the old boarding school at Two Grey Hills that Chee attended does in fact exist, I can't find it.

TONY HILLERMAN

SHIPROCK PEAK, with its “soaring black gothic spires,” is a focal element in *The Fallen Man*.



For me, part of the fun in reading a Hillerman novel is detecting which places are real and which aren't. Some are easy to find. Mount Taylor, the sacred peak known to the Navajo as Tsoodzil, or Turquoise Mountain, marks the southern pillar of Navajo country, near Grants. I've hiked the Badlands featured in *People of Darkness*, and I prefer the Navajo legend (Monster Slayer killed Yé'iithosh, whose dried blood formed the lava beds) over any geological explanation. Finding other places requires detective work.

Hillerman's *Dance Hall of the Dead*, which won an Edgar Award from Mystery Writers of America, introduced Leaphorn, and me, to Zuni culture. Located 37 miles south of Gallup, Zuni is the largest of New Mexico's 19 pueblos, with more than 11,000 residents and more than 700 spectacular square miles of tree-lined mesas. In this book, Hillerman describes “Halona

Itawana, the Middle Ant Hill of the World,” as “a hillock beside a bend in the now dry bed of the Zuñi River, a hillock of red stone houses jammed together to form the old village and surrounded now by a sprawling cluster of newer houses.”



Hillerman novels are read in Zuni schools, and *Dance Hall of the Dead*, the local librarian informs me with a giggle, is overdue. The tribal council remains sensitive about the impact of tourism inspired by the novel. Like most Pueblo cultures, the Zuni people are deeply religious, and they are highly private about their religion. *Dance Hall of the Dead*, in which the Sha'lak'ó ceremony is prominently featured, is a touchy subject.

“We won't utilize religious sites as attractions,” Zuni Governor Arlen Quetawki Sr. tells me. “We invite guests, but we want them to focus on scenic areas and not go looking for fictional characters who don't exist.”

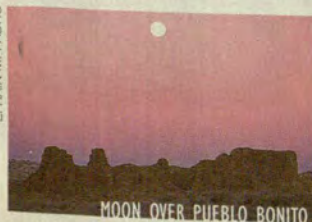
Sometimes, I guess, there is such a thing as too real. Perhaps that's why Hillerman created the fictional Tano Pueblo as the scene of a crime in *Sacred Clowns*. Then again, in this novel, a murder

also takes place at Saint Bonaventure Indian Mission and School in Thoreau, which is quite real.

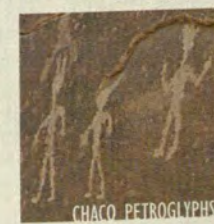
So is Shiprock Peak, with its “soaring black gothic spires.” The cathedral of volcanic rock juts more than 1,700 feet from the desert plateau in northwestern New Mexico. To the Navajo, this “Rock with Wings” is sacred, so rock climbing is prohibited. But the peak becomes a focal element in *The Fallen Man*, when climbers discover the body of a man who died on the peak years earlier.

Nearby Shiprock is a real Navajo town, where Chee is said to own a trailer home under the cottonwoods along the San Juan River. When I visit, the river is muddy from spring runoff.

“A couple of times people have come in asking for Jim Chee,” says Sally Begay, an economic development specialist at



Shiprock. “We say there are a lot of Jim Chees on the reservation. That's a common name.” And what about the Thunderbird Café, which Chee calls “the only café in Shiprock with napkins?”



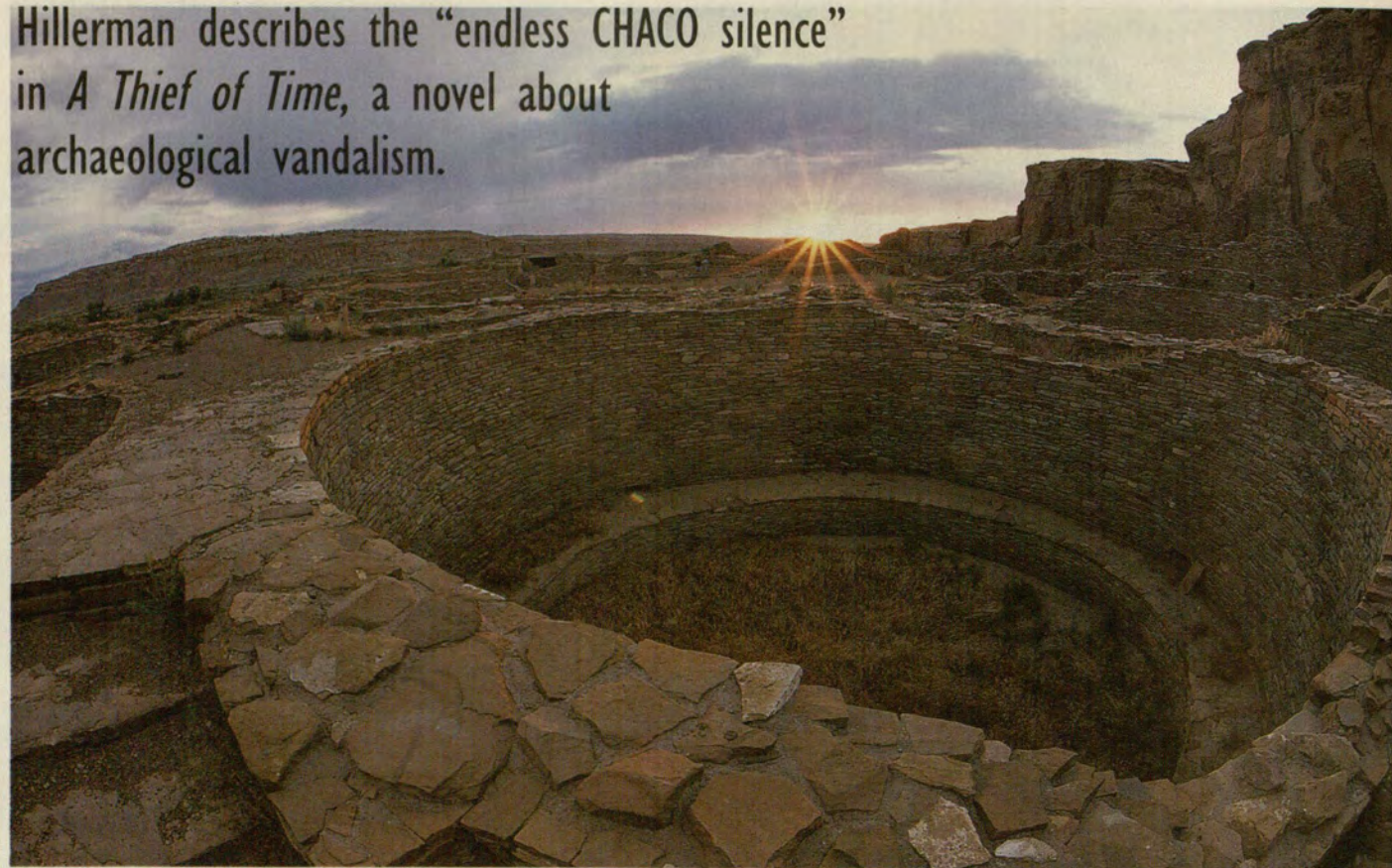
“No Thunderbird in Shiprock,” Begay answers. Best not to use Hillerman as a reference for dinner, because the Carriage Inn in Farmington, which is mentioned in *The Fallen Man*, doesn't exist either.

Blanco Trading Post, south of Bloomfield off U.S. Highway 550, is real and friendly. Like Toadlena Trading Post, it has been restored to resemble an early post. It also stocks supplies such as flour and mutton.

Also real is that “endless Chaco silence” that Hillerman describes in *A Thief of Time*. Chaco Culture National Historical Park is an important archaeological site. Many lonely, rough miles off Highway 550, it draws few casual tourists. The ruins of this settlement, which thrived between A.D. 850 and A.D. 1250, are astounding. Without blueprints or diesel engines, the people built a city of roads, irrigation ditches, and towering pueblos. In an author's noté, Hillerman explains “Many Ruins Canyon has had its name changed and its location tinkered with to protect its unvandalized cliff ruins.”

WELCOME TO THE NAVAJO NATION
Yé'í'eeh Dine' Bik'eyah

Hillerman describes the “endless CHACO silence” in *A Thief of Time*, a novel about archaeological vandalism.



Near Pueblo Bonito, I learn why Chaco is an appropriate place to set a novel dealing with vandals. The real-life Richard Wetherill was an unscrupulous rancher who gathered and sold artifacts, similar to several of Hillerman's villains. An angry Navajo man killed Wetherill in 1910, and he is buried in a cemetery west of Pueblo Bonito. Wetherill's unethical behavior led Congress to pass the 1906 Antiquities Act, protecting historic and prehistoric sites on public land.

The sun has set behind the Chuska Mountains as I drive down Highway 550, and I recall the words of Terry England, a native New Mexican, a Hillerman fan, and the book page editor for the *Santa Fe New Mexican*: “Following [Chee and Leaphorn] on these sometimes-tedious travels gives you an idea of the scope of the American Southwest.”

I wind up putting close to 700 miles on my SUV—and I've only covered a small portion of Hillerman country. ☺

JOHNNY D. BOGGS is a Western novelist based in Santa Fe.



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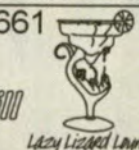


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NEW MEXICO COVER TO COVER

In 2003, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, writer and college instructor Larry Portzline began leading trips to independent bookstores in other cities. He called it bookstore tourism, and during the last few years his concept has caught on throughout the country. We asked Portzline to recommend some road trip-worthy New Mexico bookstores that capture the spirit of their surrounding communities. Here are his picks.

—EDITORS

BOOKWORKS (right) offers a dizzying array of books, but it has a warm, relaxed atmosphere, even on a busy Saturday. The store is big on author appearances, as well as community events. The Flying Star Café adjoins the bookstore, allowing bibliophiles to grab a cup of coffee before browsing. 4022 Rio Grande Boulevard NW, Albuquerque; 344-8139; www.bkwrks.com



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BOOKSTORE PHOTOGRAPHS BY EFRÁIN M. PADRÓ

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