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Visit to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

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Introduction

One of the most impactful elements of the exhibit was a quote on the second floor which immediately stood out because it stated “Vindicating evidences of individual achievement have as a matter of fact been gathered and treasured for over a century”. This quote in the exhibit is significant not only for what it represents historically but also for how it connects to New York City’s cultural identity. It's very paramount for individuals walking into this exhibit to view these words written on the wall. This quote is a direct response from Arturo Schomburg to a grade school teacher who once told him that African Americans had no culture. It also challenges the countless ignorant people throughout history who have repeated this harmful belief. His use of the phrase “Vindicating evidence” helps to pronounce that once one leaves this exhibit they will have no doubt in their mind about the impact of African Americans. This exhibit placed in a city like New York known for its diversity and cultural influence makes this message especially powerful because it reinforces the idea that African Americans are deeply ingrained in the story of the city itself.

Description of Neighborhood

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is located at the intersection of West 135th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard in the heart of Harlem, a neighborhood known for its deep cultural history, vibrant street life, and strong sense of community. Walking around this area gives you a clear sense of how history, culture, and everyday life blend together in Harlem. The streets surrounding the Schomburg Center are full of small businesses, murals, playgrounds, and neighborhood landmarks that reflect the lives of the people who live there. At the same time,

the neighborhood also reveals the challenges many residents face, including poverty, homelessness, and limited access to healthy food.

On almost every corner near the Schomburg Center, there is a bodega or corner store. These small stores are an important part of daily life in Harlem. Residents stop in to buy snacks, drinks, household items, or quick groceries. The shelves are often filled with chips, soda, candy, and packaged foods, while a small refrigerator may hold milk, eggs, or deli meat. These stores are convenient and familiar, and many people know the owners personally. However, they also reflect a larger issue in the neighborhood: access to healthy food. In Harlem and nearby communities, there are far more bodegas than full grocery stores. In some areas of Harlem, there can be more than ten bodegas for every supermarket. Because bodegas usually carry limited fresh produce, residents often struggle to find affordable fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods close to home. This is one of the reasons Harlem is sometimes described as a food desert, where healthy food options are harder to access than in wealthier neighborhoods.

The neighborhood is also shaped by its public transportation, which keeps Harlem connected to the rest of New York City. Just steps from the Schomburg Center is the 135th Street subway station, which serves the 2 and 3 trains and is only about a one-minute walk away. Several bus routes also run along the nearby streets, including the M2, M7, and M102 buses that travel along major avenues like Lenox Avenue and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard. Throughout the day you can see people heading to work, school, or appointments, climbing the subway stairs or waiting at bus stops along the avenue. These trains and buses are essential for many residents because they allow people to commute across the city even if they cannot afford a car.

Another striking feature of the neighborhood is its public art and murals. Harlem has long been a center for Black art and culture, and that spirit shows up on the walls of buildings, basketball courts, and playgrounds throughout the area. Many murals celebrate African American history, civil rights leaders, or community heroes. One nearby example is the mural painted on the basketball court at Howard Bennett Playground on West 135th Street, which honors the historic New York Rens basketball team. These murals transform ordinary spaces into powerful visual reminders of Harlem's cultural legacy. In other parts of Harlem, colorful murals and graffiti-style artwork cover playground walls and park structures, making the streets feel like a gallery.

Playgrounds and parks are also important parts of the neighborhood's landscape. Families gather in these spaces after school and on weekends, and they provide a place for children to run, play basketball, or ride bikes. Not far from the Schomburg Center are parks such as St. Nicholas Park and smaller playgrounds scattered between residential blocks. Some of these spaces include murals or art installations, making them both recreational and cultural spaces for the community. Harlem River Park, located nearby along the waterfront, includes walking paths, benches, and murals that reflect the area's history. These parks are important because they provide open space in a neighborhood where most buildings are densely packed apartment complexes.

Despite the strong community culture, Harlem also faces serious economic challenges. Many families in the area live below the poverty line, and poverty rates in parts of Harlem are significantly higher than the city average. In some sections of the neighborhood, close to one-third of residents live in poverty, and many households struggle to afford rent, food, and other necessities. Because of these economic pressures, issues like housing instability and

homelessness are visible in parts of the neighborhood. It is not uncommon to see people sleeping on subway benches, sitting on the steps of buildings, or resting in parks during the day.

Homelessness is a citywide issue in New York, but neighborhoods with higher poverty levels tend to feel its effects more strongly.

Food insecurity is another issue closely connected to poverty in Harlem. Studies show that many residents rely on SNAP benefits, food pantries, or community programs to help feed their families. The lack of supermarkets combined with the high cost of healthy foods means that people often depend on fast food or inexpensive processed foods. This contributes to health issues like obesity and diabetes, which occur at higher rates in neighborhoods with limited access to nutritious food. Community organizations have tried to address this problem through urban farms, community gardens, and nutrition programs designed to bring fresh produce to local residents.

Even with these challenges, Harlem is also famous for its soul food restaurants, which are an essential part of the neighborhood's identity. These restaurants serve dishes that come from African American culinary traditions, such as fried chicken, collard greens, cornbread, macaroni and cheese, and sweet potato pie. Some of the most well-known soul food spots in Harlem are located along or near 125th Street, not far from the Schomburg Center. Restaurants like Sylvia's Restaurant, Amy Ruth's, and Melba's Restaurant attract both locals and visitors from across the city. These restaurants are more than just places to eat, they are community gathering spots where families celebrate birthdays, friends meet after church, and visitors experience Harlem's culinary culture. Soul food in Harlem reflects generations of Black history, resilience, and creativity.

Walking through the streets near the Schomburg Center, you can see all of these elements at once. A person might pass a mural celebrating Black history, a playground full of children, a corner bodega with music playing inside, and a bus stop where people wait for the M102 bus. Just a few blocks away, someone might walk into a famous soul food restaurant or a community garden growing fresh vegetables. At the same time, the neighborhood also shows the effects of inequality, with signs of poverty and homelessness reminding visitors that Harlem's history is tied to larger social and economic struggles.

Overall, the neighborhood surrounding the Schomburg Center reflects both the strength and the complexity of Harlem. It is a place where culture, art, food, and community are deeply rooted, yet it is also a place shaped by ongoing challenges related to poverty, food access, and housing. The Schomburg Center itself stands as a symbol of Harlem's intellectual and cultural legacy, preserving the history of people of African descent while remaining deeply connected to the neighborhood that surrounds it. Together, the corner stores, subway stations, murals, playgrounds, soul food restaurants, and community spaces create a neighborhood that feels alive with history and daily life. Harlem is not just the location of the Schomburg Center, it is the living community that gives the institution its meaning and purpose.

History of The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture



Figure 1. *Arturo Schomburg*, 1896, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture/The New York Public Library.

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture was founded in 1925 in Harlem. The center came into fruition after the New York Public Library purchased Arturo Alfonso Schomburg's collection of art, literature, and manuscripts. Schomburg was a Puerto Rican, Black, and German American scholar and activist who collected and documented history in efforts to prove the impact of individuals of African descent. According to an article from the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Schomburg was motivated to begin his collection after a teacher in San Juan, Puerto Rico, told him that Black culture lacked significance (National Museum of African American History and Culture). As a result Schomburg spent his life promoting Black culture, intelligence, accomplishment, and historic importance through his collection, which amassed over 10,000 items.

When the center was first opened, it was known as the Division of Negro Literature, History, and Prints and was opened as an extension of the 135th Street Branch Library, featuring artifacts related to the African Diaspora. In 1926, when the New York Public Library purchased Schomburg's collection for 10,000 dollars, which would be worth 140,000 dollars now, the research division gained international recognition. This purchase was made during the peak of the Harlem Renaissance, when there were many Black trailblazers in the librarian field; one of them was Arturo Schomburg, who in the 1930s was hired by the New York Public Library to be the curator of the Division of Negro Literature, History, and Prints at the 135th Street Branch. Two years after Schomburg's death in the year 1940, the Division of Negro Literature, History, and Prints was renamed the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature, History, honoring his legacy and impact.

A center that once started with 10,000 pieces now holds over 10 million items.

Throughout the years the center has acquired pieces of documents from Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou and art from Augusta Savage. The center is also in possession of archives from Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and the Schuler family. It holds art from Aaron Douglass as well as photographs from Ella Baker and Duke Ellington.

Though the center opened almost 101 years ago, its value and impact remain significant in society. While the center features many diverse pieces, portraying and promoting Black history and culture to its visitors, it also performs many various roles in the Harlem community. The center serves as a community space, hosting exhibitions, lectures, performances, and public forums. In fact, in the month of March, the center is hosting “Mondays in March” featuring the talent of Grammy, Tony, and Oscar-winning women such as Lisa Fischer, Kandace Springs, and Dee Dee Springs. In this way not only does the center promote Black culture through its historic artifacts, but also through live and living history within the arts and literature.

The Schomburg’s Center Significance to New York

The exhibit reflects the work and dedication of Arturo Schomburg who spent years collecting and preserving these materials. The term reflects his care and commitment for the preservation of work from marginalized communities who were overlooked and forgotten. It also highlights Schomberg's ambition and appreciation for the arts. His story is a reminder that if someone deeply believes in an idea they should not allow others to dismiss it as impossible because once it has been envisioned it already exists as a possibility. By preserving these works in New York the institution helps ensure that the voices, achievements, and experiences of African Americans remain visible in one of the most influential cities in the world. This

demonstrates how New York serves as an important center for cultural preservation and education. New York is a hub for opportunities so when one visits the Schomburg center and views all that was accomplished they can then become inspired to not let other people slam the door in their faces but to break down barriers like the people in the past had to.

The location of this exhibit in New York also adds symbolic value. New York has historically been a place where African American culture, activism, and artistic expression have flourished particularly in neighborhoods such as Harlem (Harlem Renaissance) and The Bronx (Birth of Hip Hop). Because of this history the exhibit contributes to the city's ongoing role as a space where marginalized voices can be documented, celebrated, and shared with the public. Visitors from around the world come to New York(The Big Apple) and institutions like this help tell a more complete story of the city by highlighting the contributions of the underrepresented communities that helped shape it.

During the years he lived in Harlem, American painter Jacob Lawrence spent a great deal of time at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, what is now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. There he took classes as part of the Harlem Art Workshop and conducted research for many of his narrative paintings of historical events and figures. This work on paper, made decades after Lawrence moved from the neighborhood, celebrates the library and its collection. The figures are each engrossed in their reading materials, suggesting the eagerness with which they seek to learn about their history("The Schomburg Library"). The artist uses very vivid colors to depict the lively environment. Additionally, the library hosts many programs for young individuals and the kids are able to see how influential and talented people who look like them were. This appears to have been Arturo Schomburg's mission. To have all

these spectacular works of art on display with the hopes of motivating others. He was granting African Americans pride in themselves by allowing them to witness the “individual achievement” housed at the center.



Figure 2. Jacob Lawrence, *The Schomburg Library*, 1986–1987. Serigraph. Collection of The Studio Museum in Harlem.

Overall, the exhibit demonstrates how New York is not only a place where history happened but also a place where history is preserved and shared. By showcasing the art, literature, historical documents, and achievements of African Americans the institution connects

the past to the present and reminds visitors that African American culture and accomplishments are an essential part of New York.

Featured Artifacts

Fab Five Freddy

At the Schomburg Center there were many images by Fred Brathwaite, more popularly known as Fab 5 Freddy. Fab 5 Freddy is a hip-hop pioneer, visual artist, filmmaker, and cultural figure who played a major role in bringing hip-hop culture from the streets of New York City into the global spotlight. Born and raised in Brooklyn in 1959, he became an important bridge between the downtown art scene and the emerging hip-hop movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

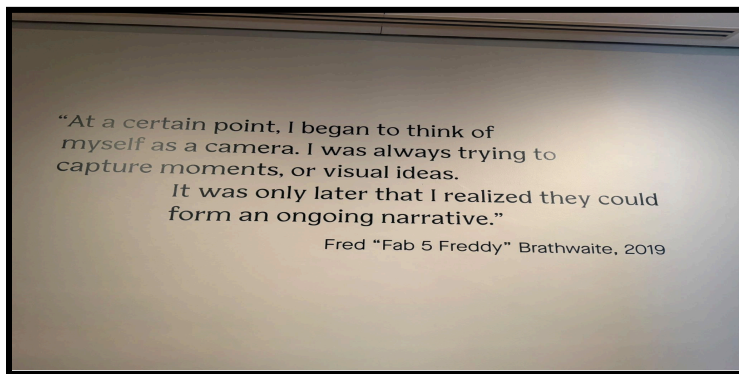


Figure 3. Fred “Fab 5 Freddy” Brathwaite Quote, 2019, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture/The New York Public Library.

Freddy first became known as a graffiti artist and member of the Fabulous 5, a graffiti crew that gained attention for painting subway trains across New York City. At a time when

graffiti was often dismissed as vandalism, he helped frame it as a legitimate art form connected to the larger hip-hop culture developing in neighborhoods like the Bronx and Brooklyn.

Beyond graffiti, Fab 5 Freddy became deeply involved in music and film. He worked closely with artists, DJs, and rappers during the early years of hip-hop and helped introduce the culture to wider audiences. One of his most famous appearances is in the film *Wild Style*, widely considered the first major movie about hip-hop culture. The film showcased graffiti, breakdancing, DJing, and rap music, capturing the creativity of the movement at a time when it was still largely underground.

Fab 5 Freddy also became well known for his role as the host of *Yo! MTV Raps* in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As the show's first host, he helped introduce hip-hop music videos and artists to millions of viewers around the world. The program became one of the most influential platforms for rap music, helping artists reach audiences far beyond New York City.

Throughout his career, Freddy has continued to work across different creative fields, including directing music videos, producing films, and creating visual art. His work reflects the original spirit of hip-hop, creative expression, cultural pride, and storytelling about life in urban communities. Because of his influence in connecting graffiti, music, film, and television, Fab 5 Freddy is widely recognized as one of the key cultural ambassadors of early hip-hop.

In 2019 the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture acquired his full archive. The collection contains more than 120 boxes of materials that document his major role in the early development and global spread of hip-hop culture. The archive provides insight into the

genre's beginnings, as well as Fab 5 Freddy's creative work, collaborations, and business efforts that helped bring hip-hop from an underground movement into mainstream culture.

The collection includes rare VHS recordings of early rap music videos, shows, and events, including episodes of Yo! MTV Raps, which Fab 5 Freddy hosted and helped direct. It also contains original scripts and screenplays from influential hip-hop films such as Wild Style, New Jack City, and Juice. Photographs in the archive capture moments with major artists like Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, Queen Latifah, and the band Blondie.

Additional materials include personal notebooks, business files, magazines, CDs, flyers, and audio recordings made by Fab 5 Freddy's father that document early hip-hop history. Together, the archive preserves an important record of hip-hop's cultural origins and Fab 5 Freddy's lasting influence.

Aaron Douglass

When visiting the Schomburg Center, one of the most notable pieces of art one can analyze is the marvelous Cubist Art Deco-inspired oil paintings by Aaron Douglass. The center features a four-panel mural series by the artist titled "Aspects of Negro Life" that portrays the African American experience, detailing a story of African roots from slavery to the Great Migration to the Industrial Age. The paintings tell different transitions of Black life throughout



history.

Figure 4. *The Negro in an African Setting*, 1934, Norman Rockwell Museum

The Negro in an African Setting depicts themes of African heritage through entertainment such as dance and music. The painting features what appears to be a dance circle, with people dancing in the middle and musicians surrounding the dancers as they hand out drums. At the center of the painting there is a sculpture of some sort with faint circles surrounding the sculpture, getting closer to it as the circles get smaller. Furthermore, according to a piece published by the Norman Rockwell Museum, purple was used to represent royalty in Western culture. By painting this piece using various shades of purple, Douglass elevates African culture and paints it as a culture of high status.



Figure 5. *From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, 1934, New York Public Library

The *From Slavery through Reconstruction* piece depicts topics such as the Emancipation Proclamation and the rise of paramilitary groups such as the KKK and race-based segregation laws such as Jim Crow. This painting displays the struggles of the period of time between enslavement and post-Civil War. The painting is to be analyzed from right to left. On the right side of this piece, slavery is depicted; one can see figures bending down to pick up cotton. As we

move towards the middle, there is a figure in the middle holding what one can assume is the Emancipation Proclamation document; this symbolizes a shift in the painting. Straying away from bondage on the right side of the painting, we can now see the themes of hope. On the far left, there are men holding trumpets; this could be a representation of the jazz age. On the left there is also a figure with chains that have broken, representing the freedom Black people were granted post-civil war. Towards the back of the photo, one can see armed men and a church; this is representative of the KKK, showing that despite Black people being liberated from enslavement, their livelihoods weren't fully secured as new forms of racial oppression began to take shape post-enslavement.



Figure 6. *An Idyll of the Deep South*, 1934, New York Public Library

An Idyll of the Deep South hones in on the rural agricultural life of African Americans in the South. This piece explores themes of community, heritage, and social transformation. In this painting, there are men gathered around with instruments. Some of them have opened mouths, which can represent singing. It can be assumed that the people in this painting are making music, which can represent musical and cultural endurance during times of oppression. Towards the corners of this painting, there are figures with shovels, which can be perceived as a

representation of enslavement. At the top corner of this piece, there is a light that shines down on the figures within this piece. This might be a symbol of hope and better times approaching.



Figure 7. *Song of the Towers*, 1934, Norman Rockwell Museum

The last piece represents urbanization through the Great Migration, the Jazz Age, and economic struggle in the

North. This painting features a saxophonist at the very center. Surrounding the saxophonist there are skyscrapers, and behind him is the Statue of Liberty. In this piece one sees a man attempting to conquer what appears to be a wheel as he holds a briefcase. This can symbolize the redundancy of working and striving to succeed in a society that aims for you to fail and/or aims for one to never escalate from their current position. Overall this piece represents the promises of freedom and social mobility for African Americans in urban environments. While the piece depicts struggle, it also shows triumph, specifically with the featuring of the saxophonist, who is a figurehead for the cultural revolution and success Black people had in cities such as the Harlem Renaissance.

Langston Hughes Auditorium-Fun fact!Ashes

The auditorium at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture enabled the development of African American theater professionals primarily by providing a rent-free, dedicated space for training and performance in Harlem, notably hosting the American Negro Theatre (ANT) in the 1940s (“The 75th Anniversary of the American Negro Theatre”). The

center allowed for Black people who weren't allowed to be on Broadway often because of the color of their skin, a place to perform and have their voices heard. It was the birth of many successful Black creators. With very little budget they were able to host many different performances. Proving that talent and creativity could flourish even when resources were limited. The artist didn't give up on their goals and allowed themselves to be written out of history.

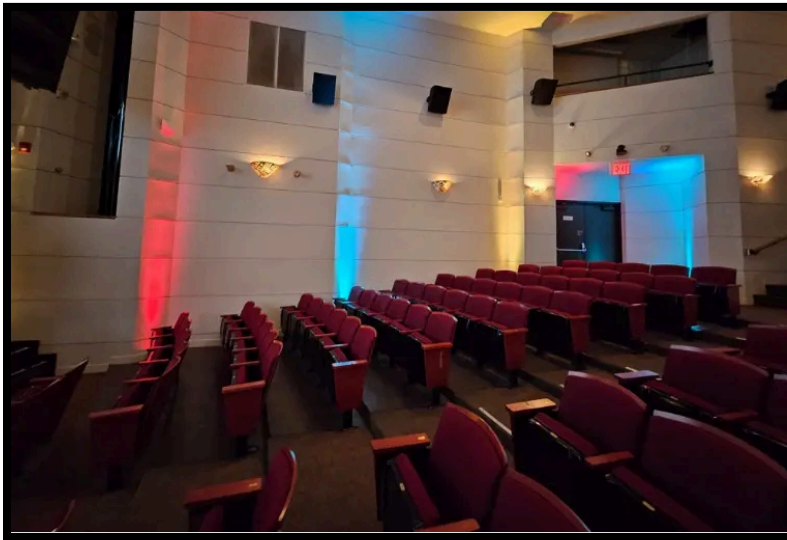


Figure 8. *Langston Hughes Auditorium at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a 321-seat theater with advanced audiovisual technology. Photo by Michael Bowman.*

Over time the objectives of spaces like the Schomburg auditorium have shifted. In the 1940s, its main goal was to provide access and opportunity for Black artists who were excluded from professional theater. It functioned as both a foundation and a cultural hub where performers could build skills and confidence while also addressing issues affecting the Black community. These opportunities were extremely valuable at a time when formal training programs for Black performers were rare. Today, while opportunities for Black artists have expanded compared to the past, the Schomburg Center continues to play an important role in preserving and promoting

Black cultural history. Its purpose has evolved from simply creating access to also protecting the legacy of earlier artists and educating new generations about their contributions.

Although representation in theater and media has improved, many artists still struggle with unequal access to funding, recognition, and leadership roles in major projects. Spaces dedicated to Black culture and history provide not only artistic opportunities but also a place for community and cultural preservation. Furthermore, the theater allowed artists to perform roles that went beyond the stereotypical characters often given to Black actors in mainstream productions. By creating their own productions they could present more complex and authentic portrayals of Black life, culture, and struggles. The Schomburg Center reminds audiences that the success of many Black performers today was built on the efforts of earlier groups like the American Negro Theatre (“The 75th Anniversary of the American Negro Theatre”).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture stands as both a testament to the vision of Arturo Schomburg and a vibrant reflection of Harlem’s community, history, and cultural identity. From its extensive archives and powerful art collections by figures like Aaron Douglas and Fab 5 Freddy, to its dedication to nurturing Black talent through spaces like the Langston Hughes Auditorium, the center preserves and celebrates African American achievements while inspiring future generations. Situated in a neighborhood rich with murals, soul food, playgrounds, and everyday life yet shaped by economic challenges, the Schomburg Center connects the past to the present reminding visitors that African American culture is not only deeply rooted in New York City’s history but continues to shape its identity and possibilities today.

Appendix

Thoughts and Impressions

Shalyssa

My personal impressions about this museum is that, you can tell that it clearly fosters a community across generations because I saw people of many different ages including people my age, younger, adults and the elderly. This showed me that the museum is successfully sharing and preserving African American culture. However I do wish it were a little bigger, especially considering it's in a city like New York, but I understand why it's not as big as it could be. There weren't a lot of exhibits I thought there would be more, but I still enjoyed the exhibits that I went to. A goal of mine was to go to at least one museum related event in the city and the Schomburg Center can help with that with all their events. More specifically the Black On Screen event they will be hosting on the 25th of March.

Anna

I really enjoyed visiting this museum. Prior to this project, I hadn't known this museum even existed, I appreciated learning and immersing myself with Black history and culture. I also liked that the museum was free as it made it very accessible for anyone and everyone to stop to buy and learn about Schomburg's collection and in turn learn about Black accomplishments. My only con is that I wish that the museum was larger. There were only 3 floors for me and my group mates to explore and the exhibits were rather small. In fact one of the floors featured one exhibit and it was the length of a small wall. My peers and I found ourselves saying "That's It?",

not realizing how small the exhibits are. For a center that started off with 10,000 items and has collected over 10 million artifacts in the past 100 years it's been open, the exhibits do not reflect the center's extensive collection. Regardless, for the information and exhibits my peers and I were able to see, everything was really well displayed and almost everything had a small explanation next to it and or featured the title of the piece and its creator.

Judea

I really enjoyed the exhibit because of its successful goal of inspiring the next generation. I felt very inspired by the pieces showcased and of the African American achievements. My main goal was learning something I didn't know before which I succeeded in by learning about the off-broadway performances there. The most interesting aspect of the site is that some of Langston Hughes ashes were buried under the exhibit which felt spiritual walking on top and it really placed me in appreciation of all that was accomplished at the site. However, I only wished that the exhibit was bigger and perhaps had more floors to visit. I also think that the site could benefit from better marketing so that more people are aware of this amazing site.

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