To Shoot an Iraqi: Wafaa Bilal's *Domestic Tension* in Post-9/11 America

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Introduction

This paper explores the ways in which the convergence of the virtual and the participatory in contemporary art practices, particularly performance-based work, reveals about the ongoing demonization of brown Muslim bodies in contemporary culture. I argue that the alignment of this convergence animates the connection between Michel Foucault's "carceral archipelago" and Tony Bennett's "exhibitionary complex," which exposes and further legitimizes the surveillance of racialized bodies in museological spaces, and beyond.[i]

This paper centers a work of art – Wafaa Bilal's *Domestic Tension* (2007) – which was primarily disseminated through the project's website (now archived in the Net Art Anthology, initiated by Rhizome), to identify and, by extension, critique modes of surveillance that circulate through digital culture. Calling upon Raymond Williams's definition of culture as a distinct mode of living for a group of people, Charlie Gere defines digital culture as a set of, "artefacts and systems of signification and communication that most clearly demarcate our contemporary way of life."[ii] In his book, *Digital Culture*, Gere goes on to fix digital culture as an offshoot of previous cultures, rather than a radical "rupture," which can be useful in connecting historical and contemporary ways of surveying the bodies and behaviours of Others.

Through Bennett, I attempt to recover nineteenth century museum formations, which informed the ways in which Western curators staged the Other in museum settings for public encounter. The second section demonstrates interactive and performance art's power to dislodge and highlight the hierarchical binary set up between Western audiences and the display of Others. The third and longest section looks at the Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal's use of the brown body as an object of surveillance in his performance-based installation *Domestic Tension*. Bilal's autobiographical text, published with Kari Lyderen, supports my claims and provides retrospective insight on the piece. The fourth section, driven by Bilal's *Domestic Tension*, moves into a discussion on the place of Muslim "others" in post 9/11 America to illustrate the discomforts of being brown, or Muslim in the 21st century.

The "Carceral Archipelago" and the "Exhibitionary Complex"

Before getting into the problematics around the display and surveillance of brown bodies in post-9/11 America, I take a necessary detour with an examination of two post-Enlightenment disciplinary apparatuses: the "carceral archipelago" sketched out by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, and the "exhibitionary complex" as explored by Bennett in, "The Exhibitionary Complex." Returning to the *ancient regime* and its carnivalesque perpetuation of the spectacle of punishment, Foucault theorized that the nineteenth century development of the carceral system, with its connection to the enclosed architecture of the Panopticon, was hegemonic society's way of rerouting systems of power away from spectacle and into surveillance. Borrowing the method of "hierarchical observation" from institutions such as the military camp and the classroom, he posited that discreet ways of making the object visible while the eyes carrying out the observation maintained invisibility contributed to the development of "new knowledge of [and power over] man."[iii] The panopticon, in Foucault's writing, was a confined space, in which all bodies – living, sick, or dead – were under constant surveillance and underneath the thumb of power.[iv] The criminal's body as a public site, or a canvas, of punishment was moved behind closed doors, where it could be surveyed without having the power to know the bodies carrying out the work of reformation, or what Foucault called the "technical transformation" of the condemned.[v] The "carceral archipelago," thus, drew walls around bodies that were Othered in the process of criminalization, "rendering everything visible to the eye of power." [vi]

Nearly two decades later, Bennett wrestled and renewed Foucault's "carceral archipelago." In his bid to resolve what he considered to be a gap in the French theorists' canonical work, Bennett employs the model of the museum to trace historical relations of power in the nineteenth century. His Foucauldian inflected "exhibitionary complex," simultaneously stands apart and in close proximity to the "carceral archipelago." Bennett acknowledges the overlapping of these systems as they shared the desire to discipline the general public, and were born around the same time. Foucault's model for the modern carceral system can be traced to the opening of Mettray in 1840 and the Pentonville Model Prison in 1842, while art historians link the model of the modern museum and exhibition practices to the Great Exhibition of 1851.[vii] These systems ran parallel to each other, but as Bennett articulates there have been moments of overlapping – more specifically where the separate apparatuses exchanged meanings.

One of the differences between the "carceral archipelago" and the "exhibitionary complex" lay in the latter's mobilization of double surveillance, by which I mean that the eyes carrying out the acts of looking were now themselves exposed to surveillance. Bennett constructs an inverse relationship between the need to remove punishment from the public gaze and the need to be regulated by seeing and being seen, which was starting to take place in museological settings. It was through the "carceral archipelago" and the "exhibitionary complex" that the nineteenth century public became a "disciplinary society," with its sinister affinity to mark and order bodies around them.[viii]

In the second half of his essay, Bennett begins a discussion on objects of an "authenticated past," such as human remains and humans as living artefacts, which is key to understanding the complex relationship between historical constructions of museums and historical narratives of race and racial difference.[ix] Writing of the international exhibitions, Bennett makes clear that at their core, they "sought to make the whole world, past and present, metonymically available in the assemblages of objects and peoples they brought together and, from their towers, to lay it before a controlling vision."[x] This "specular dominance," as he called it, mimicked hierarchical positions of power previously organized by the panopticon in Foucault's "carceral archipelago," in that surveillance was a power wielded by the colonial empire and exercised by the museum pubic while the objects themselves remained dumb for their study.[xi]

Interactive Art

As introduced through Bennett's exploration of the "exhibitionary complex," museums are cultural sites fraught with tension and contestation. While the overtly racist and imperialistic display of foreign cultures and bodies has become rightly inappropriate in contemporary museums, public perceptions of Otherness continue to be

informed by histories of Othering. In the last few decades, artists from marginalized communities – whose identities are informed by their indigeneity, dislocation, blackness, or their movement in what Homi Bhabha refers to as the "third space" – have begun to challenge the autonomy of the museum and use their art practices to decolonize museological spaces and narratives for themselves, and for future generations.[xii] By "decolonization," I am specifically referring to the critical deconstruction of colonial modes of knowledge. James Clifford characterizes decolonial artists as "emergent subjects" that refuse museological marginalizations as they stand on behalf of both "endangered 'traditions'" and "crucial human futures."[xiii] In engaging with and being engaged by the problematics of the past and present, these subjects have the power to steer their cultures' futures.

Claire Bishop observes that despite its connection with specific makers or a group of makers, much of contemporary art is "collectively produced."[xiv] She seems to imply that contemporary art – at least work produced after the 1960s – is no longer the product of artistic seclusion (imagined and executed in the artist's studios); rather, it is half-formed till it comes into contact with its audiences, who, in turn, are set to collaborate with the artist through the various stages of production and exhibition. In her text, Bishop outlines two forms of participatory art that are prominent in contemporary art: the first is an "authored tradition" that finds significance through provocation, and the second is a "de-authored lineage," which encourages and is determined by the audience's spontaneous responses.[xv] The project under study in this paper is located somewhere between the authored and the de-authored traditions. Writing specifically about performance art, Susan Jarosi adds to Bishop's discussion by lamenting the hyper-celebration of the artist as author and the exclusion of "attendant and attentive audience" from the field of contemporary performance art.[xvi] In her view, the audience – through their untrained gestures and responses – become active ingredients in the "performance-making" process.[xvii] Together, Bishop and Jarosi's sympathies with the role of audience in the field of participatory and performance art enhances my own belief that in the contemporary age, a work of art can no longer exist in isolation or stasis, under the sole discretion of the artist or curator. Instead, it must be presented to its audiences as malleable in form and potential.

Bilal's *Domestic Tension* finds precedence in Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peńa's 1992-1993 project, titled *Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West.* The two performance artists masked themselves as newly discovered Guatinauis for a tour to celebrate (read: condemn) the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus's so-called discovery of the Americas. The tour, exhibited at select museums such as The Covent Gardens in London, the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., and the Australian Museum of Natural History in Sydney. In the museums, the artists set themselves up in a cage, presenting themselves as newly discovered Guatinauis, offering the visitors full specular access to their seemingly primitive way of life. As they engaged in activities such as lounging, sleeping, and eating, to dancing to hip-hop music, the museum audiences stood in amazement outside their cages. At times, certain members of the audience even felt comfortable enough to grope the bodies on display and at other times, some paid extra money to the male and female Guatinaui to expose their genitals.

The project mimicked the ways in which the Indigenous Other has been displayed in nineteenth century museums. As discussed by Bennett, the purpose of setting different bodies on display was twofold: firstly, they fit into the classification schema developed by the Europeans in their efforts to differentiate between themselves and the mysterious foreign Others; secondly, displays of human beings functioned to discipline the European audiences on ways of behaving. Unsurprisingly, the contemporary audience's behaviour also mirrored the position of the nineteenth century museum-going publics in that they were both encouraged to survey and be surveyed by others. Much to the chagrin of the audience, this position was challenged in the interview segment of the exhibition, in which visitors were asked about their encounters with the "finally discovered" primitives. Following one outdoor performance, a woman raised her eyebrows before admitting, "I feel like I'm being put on… yeah, yeah. It's kind of offensive, I guess, in that it feels like a slap in the face." With another woman taking on a less-victimized stance: "My favourite part is seeing people go up and getting their pictures taken in front of the cage, um, because we all posed against that cage and we all look like tourists."[xviii] In both accounts, the women were aware of the satirical elements of the performance, but responded differently about their own enrolment in it. While the second participant awkwardly laughed about the touristic or tasteless ways in which she and others interacted with the performs, the first woman's desire to save face signals a discomfort in being physically present in such a primitivized farce – as if the offense was not in the history of such performances but in the fact that she was made a subject and an object of surveillance, without her consent.

In the end, Fusco and Gómez-Peńa's collaborative piece thinks alongside the critical work of Bishop and Jarosi to demonstrate the dynamics of interactivity as they unfold in the space of the museum, performance art, and all other space-based contemporary art projects. Through their attention to real life interactions – face to face in the case of Fusco and Gómez-Peńa's project – they posit interactivity as an opportunity to create a non-linear narrative that can reengage histories and reimagine the potential directions of such spaces. In their hands, interactivity and the sheer demand for authorship becomes an impeding threat to the system and architecture of surveillance, which according to both Foucault and Bennett was influential through the very distance it maintained from its objects of looking. In the end, Fusco and Gómez-Peńa's collaborative piece thinks alongside the critical work of Bishop and Jarosi to demonstrate the dynamics of interactivity as they unfold in the space of the museum, performance art, and all other space-based contemporary art projects. Through their attention to real life interactions – face to face in the case of Fusco and Gómez-Peńa's project – they posit interactivity as an opportunity to create a non-linear narrative that can reengage histories and reimagine the potential directions of such spaces. In their hands, interactivity and the sheer demand for authorship becomes an impeding threat to the system and architecture of surveillance, which according to both Foucault and Bennett was influential through the very distance it maintained from its objects of looking.

Interactive art, as discussed in this section, gestures towards sousveillance, what is the act of looking back and recording from beneath the apertures of surveillance. With this reference, I am moving on to think about Wafaa Bilal's *Domestic Tension*, in which the brown Muslim body counters the colonizing practices of drone warfare by turning the camera in on itself. The move to the digital platform and towards digitally mediated interactions can broaden the scope of interactive art. As communications theorist Christoph Neuberger writes, interactivity is not and cannot solely be linked to face-to-face dialogue but must accommodate instances where real life meetings may be "obstructive" to realizing the full potential of these exchanges.*xix* Disembodied interaction, in other words "indirect interaction," can further materialize the distinctions between surveillance and sousveillance.

Wafaa Bilal's *Domestic Tension*

Wafaa Bilal is an Iraqi American artist, who works primarily in video and new media art. He was born in Najaf, Iraq in 1966 as the third of seven children.[xx] After refusing to participate in the military, Bilal fled Iraq in 1991,

living in refugee camps till he moved to America a year later, where he completed his BFA at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque and his MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In his work, Bilal is largely concerned with issues of race, terrorism, war, politics, and memory. According to Bilal, he lives and creates work within the "relative comfort zone of the United States," while continuously returning to the "conflict zones he has left behind" through his art.[xxi] Anthony Downey cites this distance as a productive potential, which "generat[es] a poignant creative friction."[xxii] His work calls on the participants to acknowledge their own place in society as well as their distance form zones of conflict. For a number of projects, but most significantly for *Domestic Tension*, Bilal has stated that he wishes to share an open dialogue with his audience in the hopes of broadening their perspective. His desire to remain outside the realm of the pedagogical while not occupying a position of power over his collaborators and audience has interpellated diverse publics to come into his exhibitions and engage with his art.

Domestic Tension was conceptualized as the artist's double response to the news of his brother Hajj's death in Iraq at the hands of drone warfare, and as an embodied reaction to the short-televised interview the artist had watched during the period of mourning. The interview was centred on a young, "perky" American soldier, who activated predator drones from her computer console in Colorado.[xxiii] Bilal imagined this woman, in her state of disconnection, was implicated in the death of his brother, and the countless other Iraqi civilians who lost their lives to the bloodied play of drone warfare. Initially angry with the woman, Bilal gradually became discomforted by the "comfort zone" he shared with her, the other American soldiers, and the majority of American population.[xxiv] In 2007, he decided to create work, which was "interactive and dynamic," and forced the "rest of the American public" who he imagined as locked in their own comfort zones to enter into the dialogue, which at first did not concern them.[xxv]

The architecture of surveillance and optics of distance doubly informed Bilal's critical piece. His consideration of surveillance was manifested in the installation of the home in the gallery space for the period of thirty-two days. Bilal set up a makeshift apartment in the back room of FlatFile Galleries in Chicago.[xxvi] He brought a set of clothes, protective armour (constructed from everyday objects), and his keffiyah, a traditional cloth worn as a headdress or scarf by men in a number of Arabic countries. Equipping the ephemeral space with a robot, set up to function as a camera and a paintball gun connected to online platforms of spectatorship, extended his private space into the public. Virtual subjects were left anonymous, save for the IP addresses, which helped Bilal track down the global breadth of the project. The project websites had about 80 million hits, 2,000 pages of comments with 65,000 paintballs being fired from 132 countries.[xxvii] During the entire performance, the paintball gun was turned on and aimed at the artist.[xxviii] The online public could fire shots at him at whatever time of the day by going on the sites, *flatfilegalleries.com* and *crudeoils.us*. They were also allowed to join forums, leave comments or have conversations with the artist, who was connected to the network through the computer set up in the middle of the room. In addition to minimal furniture, Bilal created a protective screen, made from Plexiglas, aimed to provide partial coverage when he was sleeping or replying to comments.[xxix] The screen protected the artist's body but the medium of Plexiglas still rendered him visible at all times.

Although Bilal takes up the position of the artist and author, his invitation to gallery and online audiences to take part in the project through means of looking, shooting, and commenting turns the work into a participatory dialogue, which Claire Bishop refers to as the "collective dimension of social experience."[xxx] The work of art is no longer held or shaped by the artist, but becomes entangled in the broader public discourse. To be clear, *Domestic Tension* was not born in a vacuum. It is not simply about the spectacle of technology, or the artist's ability to connect the real to the virtual. He has stated that his years of making art taught him that "the project should determine the medium, not the other way around."[xxxi] So when we move beyond the medium, the technology constructing the project, we are left with the content. The work is a profound commentary on the cultural milieu in which it was created, that of the anti-terrorist paranoia of post-9/11 America. Following the attack on the World Trade Center, America demanded revenge from the terrorist groups as well as the anonymous millions that they felt were naturally complicit in the terrorist global movement threating America. The Iraq War, alongside the Afghanistan War, was part of the "grand, post 9/11 strategy" to take over and transform the Middle East.[xxxii] Iraq was pictured through an Orientalist lens as a "desert wasteland outside civilization from which Americans can maintain distance."[xxxiii] It was through this distance that the technology and psychology of drone warfare was justified when treating the terrorist nature of Iraqi people living far beyond the borders of America.

Bilal's temporary home comes to resemble the prison complex developed by Foucault, in that it is imbued with the structure of the prison, where the prisoner is deprived of liberty in a world in which liberty belongs (or should belong) to every subject.[xxxiv] This deprivation connects the prisoner's lot with broader society, which has become victimized and insecure through the individual's actions. Interestingly, the virtual audience for *Domestic Tension* remained virtually anonymous. When Bilal was designing the interactive program, he decided to grant his shooters and commentators anonymity, save for their nationality, which in the end, served as articulation of the global reach of the project. The anonymity of the audience and the hyper-visuality of the object/subject deconstructs Bennett's conceptualization of the "exhibitionary complex" as a disciplinary force. The audience is no longer regulated by the acts of watching and being watched, so the ensuing chaos from the gun and comments creates an unregulated structure that exposes the very real, tortured base for contemporary socio-political relations.

From its disarticulation of the "carceral archipelago" and the "exhibitionary complex," Bilal's embodied performance challenges the universalizing discourse surrounding virtual communities, where the anonymity afforded by the Internet is often enrolled in a utopic, post-racial schema. In her study of post-racial neutrality in the digital context, Lisa Nakamura hones in on the political climate of the mid-90s. In particular, she considers the New Democratic Platform constructed by Bill Clinton and Al Gore, which for the first time in nearly fifty years did not tackle issues connected to racial differences in favour of ones that were seemingly more "universal."[xxxv] She overlaps this political refusal to enter discussions on race – in fear of acknowledging racism – with the opening up of the Internet as a mass technology. What Nakamura's critique makes explicit is that neo-liberal strategies of refusing to see racial difference, or an adamant colour blindness, were transferred to the Internet paradigm in such a way that the digital was imbued with feelings of openness, where everybody was free to express themselves and connect with each other. Yet racial difference, alongside combinations of economic, social, and gendered differences, continued to be barriers in full access and connectivity. So, it is what Nakamura has termed the "visual bent," as opposed to the textual, that has made it possible for individuals to create holes in the smooth surface of the digital.[xxxvi] In particular, the racialized virtual subject's insistence on embodiment creates a rupture, but more importantly a platform to discuss race and the effects of racism.

In the case of *Domestic Tension*, the tool for surveillance – low-resolution webcam – comes to stand in for the tool of torture for the brown body. Outfitted with the paintball gun for the audience to more easily follow and

target the moving body of the condemned, Bilal, the webcam atop the gun is an important symbol for the lens through which brown bodies are continuously sifted through to be read for traces of terrorism. Through the course of the installation, Bilal's body receives, sometimes unwillingly the blunt of racist comments left online, the warmth from curious or supportive online audiences, the stench of fired paintballs, the stain of fired paintballs, and the stress of living in a simulated warzone. When thinking about the aesthetics of digital art, Jay David Bolter and Diane Gromola rightly argue, "not that we look through the experience to a world beyond, but rather that we look right at the surface."[xxxvii] In *Domestic Tension*, the primary surface of focus is undoubtedly the brown skin of the performer.

For the purposes of linking race with the potential reach of the project in post-9/11 America, it is useful to consider race as technology as fleshed out by Beth Coleman. In her work, Colemen lifts race out of its abject readings into one which recognizes and demands agency, because according to her, "the goal of thinking race as technology is greater mobility for the subject and for society."[xxxviii] By stepping out of the seemingly neutralized position of the artist and back into the more racialized and Islamic other – one he shares with his deceased brother and countless other Iraqis, made anonymous through the onslaught of drone warfare – Wafaa Bilal wields race as a technology that has the power to unlock the realities of violence and marginalization that are endless and endlessly imprinted on the brown Muslim body. For the duration of the installation, his body is the primary receiver of the paint bullets and online comments. Bilal suffers both physically and psychologically, but throughout his performance his trauma-inflicted skin is centered to reflect the pain and hurt of those bodies that are invisible but hyper-imagined in the minds of Americans. The staging of the room as a warzone and the representation of the artist as the racialized other generated a drama that could be accessed by gallery visitors and online gamers alike, and yet the openness of the structure prompted a consideration of another world, an uncomfortable world.

To come across *Domestic Tension* in May of 2007 might have at first seemed like a return to the grand exhibitions of the nineteenth century, or even, to the Guatinaui Tour in more recent history. Imagine a bearded brown man dressed in homemade combat gear and the traditional keffiyeh, hysterically running around the room dodging yellow smatterings of paint. If not that, then imagine the same man hiding behind a stained Plexiglas scarfing down an entire pizza or Pakistani takeout, while his eyes frantically glanced around to a spot just above where you, the viewer, were witness to his every movement. However dramatic, this imagery was intimately harnessed to the chaotic simply because to tame it would have meant denying the everyday tumults and traumas of the Iraqi people, whose life the artist desperately wanted to publicize for the global audience.

Post 9/11 American Culture
At the outset, Bilal had aimed for his project to shed light on the inhumane practices of drone warfare so that average human beings, outside of the gallery publics, could learn from his personal stories, and sympathize with those that were located at the *other* end of the spectrum of war and suffering. In his autobiography, Bilal's feelings of peace and rest occur when such understandings have taken place. For example, moments like when an ex-military officer arrives at the gallery un-announced, the day after a traumatic incident, to offer his condolences for Bilal's loss and reflect on his own actions in the war are seemingly precious and appear to legitimize the artist's efforts of recreating trauma through his body.

Invoking Mahmoud Darwish's words, "'A people with no poetry is a defeated people,'" the writer Pablo Lafuente champions thoughtful exhibitions of contemporary art produced by marginalized people in the West because, in his view, it is when people are allowed space and time to materialize artistic, and cultural forms that they can articulate themselves in relation to the particular conditions, thus, imagine opportunities for change.[xxxix] Although, the artistic forms might not hold the power to enact immediate change, it is their creative energy that gestures to the potential for change and justice. Bilal's project did not end the Iraq War, nor did it terminate the persecution of brown bodies at home and abroad. Rather, it introduced new publics into critical discourse on issues of comfort/discomfort, Us/Other, drone warfare/video games so that they could become politically and virtually conscious in an era that requires complicity to be effective.

About the author
Noor Bhangu is an emerging curator and scholar of South Asian descent, whose practice employs cross-cultural encounters to interrogate issues of diaspora and indigeneity in post- and settler-colonial contexts. She completed her BA in the History of Art and her MA in Cultural Studies: Curatorial Practices from the University of Winnipeg. She has presented her academic research at numerous national and international conferences, including ones held in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her written work has appeared in academic and public journals, including *Black Flash, gal-dem, Moveable Type: The University College London English Journal, Public Parking, Uncommon Sense,* and *C Magazine*. In 2018, she began her PhD in Communication and Culture at Ryerson and York University as an Edward S. Rogers Graduate Fellow.

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7. Ibid., 74.
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21. Anthony Downey. *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014. p. 13.
22. Ibid.
23. Bilal 10.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 11.
26. In *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun*, Bilal shares that the gallery also hosted two weddings in the front space during his exhibition that were planned before Bilal was commissioned to do the piece. This goes to show just how “normal” everyday life was for the gallery and its visitors while Bilal held himself as the condemned body in the back.
27. Gabriella Calchi-Novati. "Paradigms of Participation Wim Delvoye and Wafaa Bilal'sTattooing Performances." *Performance Research* 16, no. 4 (2011): 34-45. Accessed March 19, 2017. doi:10.1080/13528165.2011.606048. p. 39.
28. The paintball was temporarily unavailable a few times when the web server was incapable of carrying out the large number of firing requests. By the middle of the project, people had found ways around the specified route. They learned they could open multiple browsers at a time to shoot the artist in the fashion of a machine gun.
29. In his book, Bilal also notes that over the course of the installation, the screen was barely held together after the hundreds of bullets it had endured.
30. Bishop. *Participation.* p. 10.
31. Bilal. *Shoot an Iraqi*. p. 15.
32. Ezra Klein. "Bin Laden's war against the U.S. economy." The Washington Post. May 03, 2011. Accessed April 7, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/post/bin-ladens-war-against-the-us-economy/2011/04/27/AFDOPjfF_blog.html?utm_term=.5946f54216f6.
33. Downey. *Uncommon Grounds*. p. 193.
34. Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*. p. 232.
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36. Ibid., 5.
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ISSN 1558478X