Never the End: Narrating Future Ancestors in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*

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Abstract

Drawing on Indigenous scholarship, this essay investigates two narrative implications of a spiraling sense of time in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* to explore how an Anishinaabe epistemology contends with past actions and events by placing characters in dialogue with ancestors. *The Marrow Thieves* presents a spiraling sense of time through the novel's embedded oral tale, called Story, and dreams. The first argument I make in this essay is that the unique chronology posited by Story is such that it collapses concrete distinctions between the past and present, showing how ancestral experiences with settler colonialism inform characters' present-day experiences. I then argue that spiraling narratives convey an intergenerational, collective voice that strengthens attachments to place and relationships with ancestors, community, and nonhumans. Spiraling time clarifies ways in which Indigenous characters respond to, and reflect on, the experiences of ancestors who endured previous apocalyptic events; it's an intergenerational dialogue that supports a thriving Indigenous present and future.

Keywords: spiraling time, narratology, Indigenous studies, apocalypse

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The frontmatter of Cherie Dimaline's novel *The Marrow Thieves* contains the following dedication: 'For the Grandmothers who gave me strength. To the children who give me hope'. Casual readers might glance at these two sentences and think they express nothing more than a heartfelt message, but these readers would be overlooking something central about the way time works in the text. By dedicating her book to grandmothers and children, the Métis author Dimaline simultaneously gestures toward the past and the future. This dedication is an example of a paratext, material separated from the body of the text, but which acts as framing for how readers should engage the rest of the novel. I open with Dimaline's dedication because what it implies about time provides a structure for thinking about the book in its entirety. In this case, the simultaneous gesture toward the past and future presents to readers an Indigenous sense of time, called 'spiraling time', that considers ancestors and descendants alongside the present.

Engagement with an ancestral presence through spiraling time distinguishes an Indigenous sense of time from a Western paradigm of progress. In his essay 'Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene', the environmental philosopher and Potawatomi citizen Kyle Powys Whyte theorizes spiraling time as 'varied experiences of time' representative of an Anishinaabe perspective on intergenerational time 'in which it makes sense to consider ourselves as living alongside future and past relatives simultaneously' (Whyte 2018: 228-29). Whyte points specifically to dream-like scenarios and narratives of cyclicality, among others, as science fiction techniques that capture the way Indigenous knowledges guide future actions (232). While Whyte delineates an Anishinaabe worldview, spiraling time and cyclical, non-linear temporalities describe temporal views held by other Indigenous peoples, like the Syilx, Abenaki, Mohawk, and Laguna Pueblo, to name a few (De Vos 2022: 6-7). Spiraling time shifts attention away from progress—the linear march toward a destination, an end—and instead to a present that contains the past and the seeds for living a transformed future. This essay investigates two narrative implications of a spiraling sense of time to explore how an Anishinaabe epistemology in *The Marrow Thieves* contends with past actions and events by placing characters in dialogue with ancestors. *The Marrow Thieves* presents a spiraling sense

of time through the novel's embedded oral tale, called Story, and dreams. The first argument I make in this essay is that the unique chronology posited by Story is such that it collapses concrete distinctions between the past and present, showing how ancestral experiences with settler colonialism inform characters' present-day experiences. I then argue that spiraling narratives convey an intergenerational, collective voice that strengthens attachments to place and relationships with ancestors, community, and nonhumans.

The premise of this young adult science fiction novel is that Canadian authorities hunt down Indigenous peoples, place them in residential schools, and extract dreams from their bones to supply the dominant non-indigenous people who have stopped dreaming. The residential schools the novel depicts echo the destructive boarding schools established in Canada in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Along with worsening climatic conditions, the residential schools make up much of the apocalyptic conditions portrayed in the novel. The residential schools in the text frame apocalypses as recurring, multiple, and located in the past rather than oriented toward a future endpoint or eschaton. Although the narrative structure of *The Marrow Thieves* follows a general linear path from beginning to end, Dimaline invokes Anishinaabe storytelling techniques in the form of dreams and a sweeping oral tale called 'Story' that takes up a handful of chapters within the larger narrative.

Childers and Menendez point out that the turn to the past made by Dimaline through storytelling and dreams invoke the past to represent 'a temporal mode of understanding […] that reject the Western narrative of modernity and its linear progression' (Childers and Menendez 2022: 212). Dreams and Story in an Anishinaabe context are knowledge forms shared across generations, and they likewise undergird an Indigenous ontology, as characters in the novel draw on previous generations to thrive despite current apocalyptic events deriving from settler colonialism. These techniques suggest the resilience of Indigenous communities who have dealt with past apocalyptic events and persevered; they likewise show how the past reemerges in, and is inseparable from, the present and future.

As the boarding schools and Indigenous ancestors who occupied them render apparent, 'new' apocalyptic events carry the residue of past ones. Apocalypses for Indigenous communities in the novel are thus 'more like the experience of déjà vu' emanating from existing settler colonial structures (Whyte 2016: 1), while spiraling time is the temporal framework guiding characters through those experiences. In considering spiraling time the organizing structure of Dimaline's text, De Vos also emphasizes that the 'spiral' of spiraling time is not a move backwards toward archaic traditions but rather 'a continuing history of cyclical return, with essential transformations' (De Vos 2022: 5). Spiraling time is a disruption—an unsettling—of linear time to

the effect that the past pervades the present. This essay builds on the work done by De Vos, Whyte, and others to suggest that an Indigenous sense of time, illustrated by dreams and Story, decenters linearity and progression, and indicates themes of reconnection and resurgence in apocalyptic times.

That project rolls out below in two segments. In my section titled 'Spiraling Narrative Time', I utilize concepts of time in Indigenous scholarship to argue that the representation of spiraling time in Dimaline's novel connects current apocalyptic conditions to previous ones. This expanded timescale pushes back against universalizing notions of an apocalypse, emphasizing, instead, Indigenous survivance and perseverance. Second, in 'Narrating Future Ancestors', I suggest readers engage the oral tale and dream events in Dimaline's novel through a collective ancestral voice that showcases how characters look to the past to structure reciprocal environmental relations, reflect on ethics, and orient actions that engage the past and future. Ultimately the function of spiraling time in *The Marrow Thieves* clarifies ways in which characters respond to and reflect on 'the actual or potential actions and viewpoints of […] ancestors and descendants' (Whyte 2018: 229) to support a thriving Indigenous present based on relationships across time (De Vos 2022: 6).

Spiraling Narrative Time

The Marrow Thieves takes readers to the year 2050 in a Canada altered drastically by global warming and socioeconomic collapse. Western society has stopped dreaming, and to solve this existential crisis, Recruiters from the Canadian government capture the still-dreaming Indigenous peoples and place them in residential schools to siphon dreams from their bone marrow and sell to clientele. The novel begins with the main character Frenchie running away from authorities north through a dense wood called 'the bush'. There he encounters Miig and other displaced Anishinaabe characters, including Frenchie's soon-to-be love, Rose, and the elder Minerva. While traveling, this group meets another Indigenous resistance group, among whom is Frenchie's lost father. Toward the end of the novel, Minerva blows up the recruiter's marrow-harvesting plant by harnessing the power of her ancestors through dreams and singing in her native tongue.

My analysis focuses primarily on the group's time in the bush, where Frenchie and the others honor collective stories and practices as means to foster community and learn from past experiences to prepare for a precarious future. Throughout the novel Miig shares parts of a sweeping oral tale referred to as Story, written with a capital 'S', with the other displaced characters. Story appears in the text in the form of two chapters, 'Story: Part One' and 'Story: Part 2'. Its

contents are wide-ranging and span a variety of time periods. Frenchie indicates the expansiveness of time in Story when he says it was sometimes 'focused on one area, like the first residential schools: where they were, what happened there, when they closed. Other times [Miig] told a hundred years in one long narrative, blunt and without detail' (Dimaline 2017: 25). We might think of Story as an anthology of memories or as a kind of living generational dialogue that communicates ancestorial experiences. As Frenchie goes on to inform readers, Story is a 'memory' that Miig needed to set in 'perpetuity' (Dimaline 2017: 25). Containing historical accounts of Indigenous violence and cultural practices, Story 'serves as teachings and guidance' for Frenchie and others 'while they try to find a way to escape the mortal danger of the Recruiters' (De Vos 2022: 27). Those teachings connect events and people across timescales.

Story serves the direct narratological purpose of expanding timelines by connecting events in the past to the present. An immediate way in which Story sheds light on this larger timescale is by linking the present-day residential schools to the ones that existed in actual history.[1] In Miig's telling, the Canadian Government 'turned to history to show them how to best keep [Indigenous peoples] warehoused […] That's when the new residential schools started growing up from the dirt like poisonous brick mushrooms' (Dimaline 2017: 89-90). The link between the old and new schools captured by Story gestures toward a timeline stretching hundreds of years, joining one apocalyptic event to another, and the ancestors who survived the old schools, to those enduring the new ones. The calamitous impact the real-world residential schools had on Indigenous lives cannot be understated. The Canadian government built residential schools to 'eradicate the cultures, languages, and identities of Indigenous peoples', and the schools not only resulted in the death of 6,000 children but also 'in serious health inequities among survivors and subsequent generations' (Rowe et al. 2020: 156). This catastrophic event and its pervasive degradation on Indigenous society in Canada is but one of a series of catastrophic incursions resulting in genocide, sexual and physical abuse, and the loss of language and traditional lifeways, all apocalyptic in scope, that emanate from settler colonialism. Despite *The Marrow Thieves* taking place in a distant future, these old schools provide the backdrop for understanding the novel's residential schools popping up across Canada.

[1] Other scholars have considered the temporal function of Story in narratological terms. For example, the narratologist Erin James developed the term 'pseudo-singular' to describe how the old schools exist within a larger context of events that extend beyond the time of the narrative. The pseudo-singular considers a particular event within a sequence of events that, taken together, creates a much larger timeline, like the link between the new residential schools and the historical extra-narrative involving the old residential school not explicitly narrated, but which readers must consider nonetheless to grasp the relationship between events (James 2022: 102).

Reflective of an Anishinaabe sense of time, Story both pushes back against Western notions of progress and troubles the apocalypse as an end point by conveying how the past rematerializes in the present. The view of time signified by Story is meaningful for not only connecting the residential schools of old to the novel's present ones, but also in affiliating anthropogenic climate change with settler colonialism. In making this connection between events, I turn to Whyte once more, who writes that 'boarding schools and other problematic forms of education strip Indigenous peoples of languages that express knowledge and skills related to particular ecosystems, seasonal change and knowledge' (Whyte 2016: 6). Referred to as 'containment', these structural attempts to box-in Indigenous communities severely limit abilities to adapt to climate change (Whyte 2016: 5). Gerald Vizenor couches containment in similar terms, calling such suppression and its representation in literature the 'manifest manners of dominance', or the domination of tribes that stems from Manifest Destiny (Vizenor 1994: 5-6). The containment emanating from boarding schools, treaties, and colonial violence is a form of déjà vu indicating that environmental change derived from settler violence is not unlike anthropogenic climate change writ large. In this regard, colonialism takes on a cyclical shape that Story clarifies by drawing connections between the first schools where ancestors suffered, the fictional 'Water Wars' where 'America reached up and started sipping' lakes with a great metal straw, the government-backed push to force Indigenous communities off their lands, and the new residential schools (Dimaline 2017 23-24, 88-89). Story strings these events together on a timeline that stretches past first settler contact, combining numerous experiences of apocalyptic-scale events and reframing the end times as another iteration of settler violence.

The events narrated in Story say something about apocalypses in general—that they are not a singular, equalizing event yet-to-come but rather multiple, enduring, and particular to communities. A spiraling temporality differs from Western views of time in the respect that spiraling time shifts attention away from a model of progress that moves toward an end. In 'Story: Part 2', Miig explains how the dystopia framing the novel's setting stems from the self-same resource extraction that underwrites progress: 'The Earth was broken. Too much taking for too damn long, so she finally broke…and all the pipelines in the ground? They snapped like icicles…people died in the millions when that happened' (Dimaline 2017: 87). The consequence of catastrophic environmental degradation and population loss for Westerners, Dimaline goes on to write, is madness: 'The suburban structure of their lives had been upended. And so they got sicker, this time in the head. They stopped dreaming. And a man without dreams is just a meaty machine with a broken gauge' (Dimaline 2017: 88). That 'broken gauge' indicates a lack of direction. Following a broken Earth, a sense of madness and nihilism pervades Western culture, but 'adapting'

to these apocalyptic conditions takes on the same look settler colonialism always wore. Government and Church leaders draw inspiration from the past to warehouse Indigenous bodies and siphon their dreams. Westerners 'have nothing to guide them', as De Vos puts it, and in the face of a growing existential threat, they turn to Indigenous peoples with the same extractive tendencies, treating them 'like another resource to exploit' (De Vos 2022: 17-18). An extractive relationship to people and place conditions the linear timescale of progress that invokes an encroaching 'end times'. For similar reasons, Whyte cautions against fitting 'Indigenous peoples' knowledge systems or ways of life' into discussions about the Holocene and Anthropocene because such attempts risk treating Indigenous communities as 'survivors' of the Holocene at threat of extinction from the Anthropocene (Whyte 2017: 236). The doomsday narrative Dimaline subverts in the text is problematic from an Indigenous perspective for the very reason that it denies previous apocalyptic events catalyzed by settler colonialism.

The representation of spiraling time through Story conditions a timeline that places the residential schools of old alongside the present-day ones. While that expansive view of time positions the past much closer to the present to draw comparisons between apocalypses, it's important to note that resurgence and survivance through events are also key components of Story. Following the decline of the first schools, Miig tells Frenchie and the others:

> We sang our songs and brought them to the streets and into the classrooms—classrooms we built on our own lands and filled with our own words and books. And once we remembered that we were warriors, once we honored the pain and left it on the side of the road, we moved ahead. We were back. (Dimaline 2017: 24)

Teaching Frenchie and the others that ancestors built their own schools, honored their past, and moved ahead, centers on the significance of remembering and maintaining Indigenous identity, a theme I elaborate on in the next section. As forms of intergenerational dialogue, Story and dreams strengthen those relationships with ancestors. Apocalyptic understandings and their narrative significance thus hinge on *experience*. Grace Dillon, when discussing a 'Native apocalypse', defines the concept in terms of balance and imbalance where 'imbalance further implies a state of extremes, but within those extremes lies a middle ground and the seeds of *bimaadiziwin*, the state of balance…a condition of resistance and survival' (Dillon 2012: 9). The crux of spiraling time then is that it brings previous apocalypses to light by accounting for an intergenerational, collective voice that relays experiences of the past, which in turn orient characters to thrive in the present and future.

Narrating Future Ancestors

A spiraling temporality challenges the idea that the Anthropocene wreaks havoc equally or that it poses a 'final' threat to Indigenous peoples who remain somehow unaffected by previous doomsday-caliber events; it instead shows how the apocalyptic experiences had by ancestors in the past guide and frame the experiences had by characters navigating present deleterious conditions. This collective voice indicates the apocalyptic conditions Indigenous peoples already lived through. The oral tale unfolds over two chapters separated from the rest of the narrative and void of speech signifiers, a detail that creates distance between Miig and readers and which minimizes his role in presenting the tale. When sharing Story, Miig refers to past events, but he uses 'we' and 'us' pronouns rather than distinguish ancestors from himself or the young Anishinaabe crowd listening. Indeed, the two 'Story' chapters are rife with the following passages that use 'we' in opaque terms: 'we suffered [at the first schools]. We almost lost our languages. Many lost their innocence, their laughter, their lives. But we got through it, and the schools were shut down' (Dimaline 2017: 23-24). One imaginative effect the frequent and ambiguous use of 'we' has is that, because ancestral characters remain unnamed, it causes readers to transpose the characters they are already familiar with to acts done in the past to suggest the pronoun refers to both ancestors and present characters alike.

The narrative effect of this ambiguous use of 'we' and 'us' pronouns blend past events and characters with characters and events in the broader storyline. It's this collapsing of past characters on the present that helps make it easier to understand the new schools in the context of the old ones. In the chapter 'Story: Part One' Miig tells readers that after colonizers brought diseases, 'we lost a lot…[and] that's when they opened the first schools (Dimaline 2017: 23); while 'Story: Part Two', narrating the new schools, jumps to the present tense: 'we go to the schools and they leach the dreams' (Dimaline 2017: 90). The 'we' in this case simultaneously refers to a collective group hundreds of years ago and to a group in the present, making it appear as though that same group endured both schools. These passages highlight how Miig does not do the telling alone; rather he speaks in relation to a larger narratorial presence that transcends temporal scales and likewise bears audiences into the past. 'We', in other words, becomes a component of spiraling time by which a pervasive and expansive ancestral presence influences the telling of the narrative. Of relevance here is Natalya Bekhta's formulation of 'we' narratives in *We-Narratives: Collective Storytelling in Contemporary Fiction*. We-narratives play a narrative role distinct from I-narratives by constituting 'sites of expression of human collectives' that create the impression the reader is confronted by a collective statement (Bekhta 2020: 3, 16). By merging an ancestral 'we' that survived past residential

schools with a 'we' surviving ones in the novel's present, the novel's expression of an Indigenous collective draws attention to the 'long histories of survivance and relations across time and space, cultural resurgence, and traditional knowledges' (De Vos 2022: 19). 'I' becomes less distinguishable in Story, replaced by a spiraling 'we' that vocalizes relationships of shared histories and experiences.

As the narrative mechanism collapsing past and present distinctions, the representation of spiraling time in *The Marrow Thieves* supports Vizenor's evaluation that Indigenous stories create 'a new sense of survivance' that reflect the courage of their ancestors (Vizenor 1994: 4). Hearing Story even incites courage, making the boys puff out their chests when they listened and causing the women to straighten their spines (Dimaline 2017: 23). Placing Story in the context of a we-narrative takes on special significance when we consider how Indigenous tales of shared survivance push back against the 'simulations of dominance' that literature traditionally expresses by depicting themes of surveillance and domination and making absent 'the tribal real' (Vizenor 1994: 4). While *The Marrow Thieves* paints a dystopic world brought that way by colonial oppression, the novel combats such simulations of dominance by focusing on an Indigenous group that prospers in precarity. Story enables that flourishing in large part by utilizing a collective voice that allows listeners to remember. Ancestors resurged after the initial schools, by remembering and maintaining an Indigenous identity: 'we remembered that we were warriors, once we honored the pain and left it on the side of the road, we moved ahead' (Dimaline 2017: 24). De Vos makes a clear connection between remembering, speech, and healing when she writes, 'The power of language to help Indigenous people "remember themselves," to be a tool for healing from colonizer violence, to be a path to cultural continuance, explains why [stories]…are so important to Indigenous resurgence' (De Vos 2020: 9). As an anthology of memories, Story facilitates survivance by instructing Indigenous ways of thinking and being in the face of settler colonial violence.

Pushing further on how spiraling time illuminates an Indigenous epistemology and ontology, the depiction of both oral tales and dreams in *The Marrow Thieves* cast them as knowledge-types drawn from past connections to inform responsible ways of being in the world. As the Indigenous environmental justice scholar Deborah McGregor explains, Anishinaabe environmental knowledge is about relationships—not only with people, but also with plants, animals, the spirit world, ancestors and those yet to come (McGregor 2013: 78). Anishinaabe environmental knowledge incorporates spiraling forms of time that instruct responsibilities necessary for maintaining reciprocal relationships with others. The ancestral presence suffusing dreams and Story facilitates reciprocal ties to the nonhuman world. Frenchie exemplifies this relational purpose of dreaming when he dreams of a moose after determining not to shoot one the

day before while hunting in the bush because he feared the meat would go to waste. 'In a way', he tells readers, 'I got that moose. He visited me in my dreams' (Dimaline 2017: 52). The dream facilitates Frenchie's ability to reflect on his actions and determine how those actions shape the future. An important note to make is that after Frenchie decides not to kill the moose, something in his chest burns brighter, because he is content with his decision (Dimaline 2017: 50). His choice is an ethical one that takes into consideration future generations who will also depend on the health of the bush for survival. The dream instructs an ethical way of living in the world, one that moves away from extractive relations responsible for the novel's degraded environmental conditions. The moose would not have appeared in his dreams had he took its life, and thus its appearance solidifies for Frenchie his relationship with nonhuman entities.

Enabling Frenchie to reflect on ethics and environmental relations, dreams express an Anishinaabe environmental knowledge that revolves around relationships. Miig makes a more direct connection between ancestors and the environment late in the novel when he relays a story to Frenchie in which he steals vials of dreams from one of the residential schools. After pouring the vials out Miig remarks that 'it rained, a real good one, too. So I know they made it back' (Dimaline 2017: 145), implying the rain was a signal that 'they', those robbed of their dreams, returned to the earth. The novel presents dreams as a material connection between characters and place, implying that this connection is lost when characters lose the ability to dream. Frenchie's dream of the moose, and the vials of dreams returning as rain, all highlight an Anishinaabe worldview centered on interdependent relationships. Whyte further relates the concept of interdependence to an Anishinaabe worldview, clarifying that interdependence can be thought of as the social networks between generations, other tribes, nonhuman agents, and collective identities which motivate 'relatives to exercise their reciprocal responsibilities to nourish and support one another in diverse ways' (Whyte 2018: 127-28). Interdependent social models have a unique relation to time in that they draw from past knowledges and teachings from knowledge holders, like Elders, who inform younger generations. One implication here is that dreams as they're presented in the novel are a form of knowledge that reveals to character how they should 'be' in a deeply interconnected world.

Story also encodes responsibilities passed down through time regarding how to live and care for places. Characters utilize this practice of intergenerational dialogue when considering how to inhabit the bush. Toward the end of the novel, for example, the elder Anishinaabe character Clarence insists on the importance of returning to their homelands. 'I mean we can start healing the land', he says. 'We have the knowledge, kept through the first round of these blasted schools…When we heal our land, we are healed also' (Dimaline 2017: 193). Clarence gestures

toward a model of living based on interdependence and reciprocity, acknowledging that when they heal the land, they heal also. That knowledge and its insinuations reflect an Indigenous understanding of time and space. And because that knowledge draws from the past to shape future actions, characters engage the presence of innumerable generations when looking to heal that land. Drawing on ancestral knowledge to heal the land (and being healed in return) is an attempt to seek balance between humans and the nonhuman world. *The Marrow Thieves* thus fits nicely within Dillon's designation of apocalyptic storytelling that 'shows the ruptures, the scars, and trauma' and provides 'healing and a return to bimaadiziwin', or balance (Dillon 2012: 9). An Anishinaabe environmental knowledge encoded in Story exemplifies those ways of thinking and being that are considerate of past and future people and nonhuman entities, and it informs responsible ways of being in the world that orients actions toward the past and future.

All of this is to say that spiraling time accounts for an Indigenous worldview and contrasts the linear representation of time that positions the apocalypse as an end. What settler colonialists lose most by not dreaming or being in dialogue with ancestors through oral tales is this ability to dialogue with ancestors who act as guides for navigating the present and future. Evidence of the dominant Western society in *The Marrow Thieves* failing to engage with how its own actions affect the future lies in the environmental destruction wreaked leading up to the story's present day. As apocalyptic conditions loom, they become directionless, losing their minds and fostering a sense of fatalism that leads to people killing themselves and others (Dimaline 2017: 88). A linear view of time emphasizes 'hierarchical ways of thinking about humans' relationship with nonhuman realities (including animals) and processes (such as climatological trends)' (Caracciolo 2021: 11). When the apocalyptic conditions of their own making pose a threat to that hierarchy, Western society loses something integral to their sense of self. That loss of self separates characters from their own actions, diminishing culpability and the ability to contend with actions. We can likewise view that loss as an enforcement of the notion that Westerners largely lack a relation to ancestors and all that it implies—a connection to place, the past, and the future—and rather than change, Western society steals that link from others to uphold the very colonial systems responsible for their own demise. As the slow-burning climate crises continue to push against an 'end times' narrative, it's imperative that descendants of settlers reconcile with that past, and accordingly, adopt actions that prepare for a more equitable, sustainable future. Honoring an ancestral presence gives place cultural and spiritual significance, factors that contribute to how Indigenous groups manage resources.

Analyzing spiraling time in *The Marrow Thieves* points to how an Anishinaabe connection to ancestors sustained by oral tales and the like results in healthier land relations and encodes the knowledge to heal the environment when conditions deteriorate. At the center of these

relationships lies the power of stories. Stories strengthen connections. It's the stories we tell that condition our actions, our thinking, our relationship to time and space; it's stories that shape our ties to this precarious planet and that determine whether we face those problems with doom or hope.

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