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African Temporalities:
Race and the Augustinian Philosophy of Time

A recent issue of the journal *South Atlantic Quarterly*, edited by Habiba Ibrahim and Badia Ahad, bore the title "Black Temporality in Times of Crisis." Its cover featured a banner asking: "After hope, then what?" For communities seeking emancipation, the question of the future is always also the question of hope. Augustine bound future and hope together in his *Confessions*, too, though he never guaranteed our hopes would soon be fulfilled. That same ambivalence concerning hope can be sensed in the discourse around black temporalities.

Our tendency to pluralize—to move from temporality to temporalities—is a tacit recognition that time does not have to mean the same thing to every community. Cultural pluralism goes hand in hand with chronological pluralism. Augustine acknowledged hermeneutical pluralism when he remarked that there can be multiple true interpretations of the same Biblical passage. Chronological pluralism would mean acknowledging that there can be multiple true ways of experiencing time.

This parallelism risks suggesting that time stays the same, even as modes of temporal experience shift. And that does come close to capturing Augustine's argument. On the one hand, he does think about time in a cosmological and eschatological context, treating it as an objective dimension that would exist even if humans did not, as can be seen in his exegesis of time's beginning in Genesis 1 or its end as foreshadowed in Revelation. On the other hand, he remains sensitive to the fact that modes of temporal experience could differ greatly across individuals and

communities, as can be seen in his careful treatment of the subjective colorations of memory or what is at stake in our adoption of differing attitudes toward the future.

This openness to chronological pluralism is what enabled Augustine (2020) to pluralize time and start saying, as he does in Sermon 80.8, that "we are the times." Rather than fossilizing Augustine as an artifact in the history of the philosophy of time, we should seize the opportunity afforded by this pluralization to put him into conversation with voices like those of Ibrahim, Ahad, and their fellow authors in that special issue, who look less to Augustine than to Toni Morrison and W. E. B. Du Bois. But as Morrison (1996) reminded us, there is no need to dispatch with older ways of thinking about time, even as we reach out for something new. And as Du Bois cautioned us, the apocalyptic and universalizing tendencies in Augustine's Christianity were no less universal for being African. In what follows, I aim to do justice to the insights of all these authors by arguing: first, that Augustine effectively pluralizes temporality by theorizing *tempora* rather than just *tempus*; second, that the Augustinian interplay between subjective and objective time makes the most sense when framed as double time-consciousness (à la Du Bois); and lastly, that the fugitive temporality of the maroon—of *marronage*—represents the truest chrono-political legacy of Augustine's anti-imminent apocalyptic eschatology.

PLURALIZING TIMES

It makes sense to read Augustine in light of a general sort of pluralism, which some would link to the temporal space of the *saeculum* he carved out as a defensive maneuver against credible accusations that the Theodosian project of imperial Christianity had faltered (Markus, 2009; Wood, 2015; Forster, 2023; Feichtinger, 2023; Rivera, 2018). Charles Mathewes (1998) has dubbed Augustine the "master of engagement" (p. 83), laying the groundwork for modern encounters within a religiously pluralistic (if not quite 'secular') world. But whereas Augustine's

reputation as a pluralist about Scriptural exegesis seems firmly established, it feels less intuitive to read him as a pluralist about time.

Mathewes (1998) notes that Augustine's openness to other ways of thinking and living is rooted in a rejection of the primacy of the individual subject:

> [W]e understand Augustine's larger worry about accounts assuming the primordiality of human agency. For Augustine, the real problem with all such accounts is that they are fundamentally subjectivist—fundamentally committed to the primacy of the human's action in securing its relation to reality—and in being so subjectivist, deny the priority of God's action on the soul. Their basic problem is that they insist that the self is its own *principium*, which generates for itself its relationship to other things, including its epistemic relation to the world. (p. 99)

The same could be said of Augustine's approach to time. We can no more reduce time to the temporal experience of any given subject than we can reduce the self to its own *principium*. Rather than generating our worlds from scratch, we find ourselves hurled into worlds not of our making. It is in that sense that the community comes before the individual.

Mathewes brings temporal experience into the equation when he argues that an Augustinian sense of *memoria* enables the subject to ground itself in this world it has not made. One of Augustine's (1981) trickiest insights in *conf.*, 11.14.17-11.15.20 (as well as in 11.21.27) is that the present moment does not appear to actually exist (Hannan, 2020, pp. 9-25). In the absence of such a present, there is a risk of the self coming apart in time. Temporal experience might collapse into a litany of detached contents lacking narrative coherence. Mathewes thinks that Augustine brings in memory—working alongside *exspectatio*, its futural analogue—to supply that missing coherence and enable the subject to overcome its alienation from its past and

future self, mirroring the overcoming of alienation between the subject and its community. By grounding itself in something other than itself, the memory-laden Augustinian subject finds itself at home both in time and in community.

This is a tidy story. But are we really meant to overcome alienation right now via the coherence-producing powers of memory? One of Augustine's constant refrains is that we are not, in fact, at home in this world. This is not because we are from another world (that would be far too Manichaean), but because we remain alienated from and incoherent to ourselves until some future final moment: the eschaton, the end of time, which is always getting deferred.

Conf. 11.23.29-30 (read alongside 11.29.39) leaves us with anxious feelings of alienation as self-estrangement. *Distentio animi*, the force that time wields against us, leads to a splitting of the self. *Conf.* 11.20.26 and 11.28.37 affirm that *memoria* and *exspectatio* do not work together to suture this split or bridge this rift. The former is a desperate attempt to hold on to what has passed us by. The latter is not so much an anticipatory command over the future as it is a vulnerable awaiting of what might come to pass. As Julius Fleming (2022) has argued in a reading of Alain Locke, "anticipation is a slippery act" because it tries to take hold of that which is not yet there, as if it were possible to colonize the future without setting foot there (p. 131). But it is we who are vulnerable to the future, not the other way around. The wound of time remains. Memory does not so much heal it as testify to its trauma.

There is power in Augustine's alienated sense of our relationship to time. Rejecting triumphalism, it attends to our chronological vulnerability, though it need not be taken as a call to pure passivity. It can also help us understand the movement from singular *tempus* to pluralized *tempora* (Van Dusen, 2014, pp. 234-245). Sometimes, *tempora* means "time-spans," which could range from the amount of time it takes to sing a song all the way up to seasons or years.

Elsewhere, as in Sermon 80, Augustine connects these pluralized times to the temporal experience of a community.

Sermon 80 begins as a reflection on belief, trust, and faith, before transforming into an inquiry into what we can or cannot ask for from the divine. It is one thing to ask God to increase your faith. It is quite another thing to ask God for money or fame. We need to distinguish between what benefits us temporally and what benefits us eternally. Health and wealth might help us out down here in the realm of time, but they do not count for much when it comes to storing up treasure in heaven. This does not, however, mean that health (or the control of economic resources) is bad in itself. The error enters in when we mistake things that happen in time for things that transcend time.

What about history? Can we ask God to make history better for us? And what about time itself? Is it inherently good or inherently evil? It is neither, answers Augustine (2020) in Sermon 80.8. Here is my translation of the relevant passage:

> People talk about "bad times" and "hard times." Let's live good lives. Then the times would be good. "The times" are us. What we are, the times are.

Time gets pluralized, but we are not talking about time-spans for the purposes of measurement. We are instead becoming the times. When a community faces a struggle, it is not time itself that becomes evil. People are doing evil things to others. If those same people could be converted to doing good on behalf of others, the times would not be so evil. The *tempora* are coloured by the moral character of human beings.

This line of thinking goes hand in hand with a sense that Augustine is, on some level, infusing time with a dignity not commonly found in other ancient thinkers. If we look to a non-Christian Neoplatonist like Plotinus, for instance, we encounter a sense of time as simply fallen.

Psyche, the third hypostasis, fell from the intellectual realm; time is the sorry residue of her fall. The Stoics, too, could be accused of devaluing time by asserting its circularity and then negating the importance of its ups and downs. Augustine, meanwhile, deems time a creature of God. In keeping with the start of Genesis, time cannot therefore be evil in its nature.

But this tells us little about the modes of temporal experience undergone by those engaged in struggle or facing down the hard times of oppressive circumstances. They continue to live in the same time shared by every entity in the cosmos (even those evil people whose assaults they must bear), but their experience of that time is coloured by the trials they confront within it. These people are the times. And when the people have it hard, the times are hard; when the people have it bad, the times are bad.

DOUBLE TIME-CONSCIOUSNESS

Augustine can hold different ideas about temporality in his head at the same time. The alienated subject is never simple. It encounters itself as other and encounters the other within itself. Set within the context of a community, it cannot make itself the *principium* of its own existence. We are the times. Augustine did not say: "I am the times," let alone "I am time." It is the community that constitutes temporal experience based on its own history, and history has not yet ended.

A double time-consciousness emerges out of the ground of this alienated subject. On the one hand, there is the universal time Augustine explores in *conf.* 11 or his *De Genesi ad litteram*, both of which share a cosmological framework; this is the time of stars, planets, trees, and people. On the other hand, there are context-dependent modes of temporal experience shaped by specific communities; these are more times than time. The trick is realizing that we live somewhere between these two. It is as if our souls were split not just between past and future, but

between cosmologically objective and culturally subjective temporalities (Augustine, 2018; Chakrabarty, 2007; Clark, 2012; Alimi, 2023).

Here Augustine's alienated subject comes into contact with Du Bois' double consciousness. James Manigault-Bryant (2013) has called this concept the key to making sense of "a socio-historical subjectivity" situated within multiple "matrices of modern space and time" (p. 70). Paget Henry (2021) called it the "core" of Du Bois' "Africana phenomenology" (p. 253). Still, the phrase may date back to William James (Campbell, 1992, p. 573) or Ralph Emerson, who wrote that the "worst feature of this double consciousness is that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul […] really show very little relation to each other: one prevails now, all buzz and din; the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise; and, with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves." Only in brief "moments of illumination" does paradise pierce the din (Bruce, 1992, p. 300).

But what even is a moment? Augustine was skeptical of the existence of moments (particularly the present one). The problem with thinking of time in terms of moments is that, when we try to isolate them within the timestream, we can never quite do it. These purported instants slip away before they can be caught and conceptualized. Even Augustine at his most mystical—at Ostia in *conf.* 9.10.24—struggles to pin down the precise moment at which illumination is supposed to flood in. It is as if we always have to wait a bit longer for enlightenment to arrive.

Du Bois needed neither to commit himself to transcendentalist flashes of enlightenment nor to accede to Manichaean dualism, which Augustine also rejected. "Two souls, alas, reside within my breast," as Goethe had oversimplified it, "and each withdraws from and repels its brother" (Bruce, 1992, p. 302). For Du Bois as for Augustine, it was not that there were two

souls. Rather, what we mean by 'soul' already contains a plurality of experiential modes, not all of which cohere with one another. That is what makes overcoming alienation feel impossible, at least for now. There remains for Du Bois (1997) a "peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" and measuring one's life against a timescale set by others (p. 38).

We can catch a glimpse of the difference between the two tiers of double time-consciousnesses by examining the present. At the level of cosmologically objective time, the present moment does not exist, according to Augustine. If he does leave any room for the transcendentalists, it is only at the level of subjective temporal experience, where he locates the 'threefold present' of *memoria* and *exspectatio* (which we have already mentioned) and *contuitus* (which is best translated as something like 'awareness'). Living with double time-consciousness means that we live somewhere between the objective absence of the present and our ever-failing attempts to gather ourselves up in a subjective quasi-present.

This problem of the present is integral to any project aiming to make sense of our own moment in history. According to Charles Lemert (2000), modern time refuses

> to account for the possibility that the present is nothing at all because all of its meanings are always somewhere else—waiting to be said, heard, written, acted on. The present races so fast as to be virtually always somewhere else. The question that could, therefore, be asked is: what does the race of time have to do with the time of race? (p. 222)

The decentering of the present is a political act. Just as the now gets displaced as we reflect upon time's flux, so does the historical present get displaced as we come to see that it never settles into place. Any sense that 'this is just the way things are now' falls apart once we realize that there is no 'now.'

Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* sought to dethrone the historical present in order to counter modern attempts to solidify it into place. Lemert (2000) characterizes it as "a book not about Reconstruction but about the perverse nature of historical time and its effects on the democratic ideal and the future of civilization" (p. 236). The problem with narratives around the Reconstruction era was that they had to simultaneously account for the ideal of historical 'progress' and its absolute failure. If there was any progress towards a justice that could overcome slavery, it could only be a progress that was always getting deferred. Matthew Elia (2024) has reminded us that, for the enslaved subject, fugitive time is the only time (pp. 120-158). Just as Augustine saw a perfectly just society as an ideal to be deferred until the eschaton, so Du Bois hinted at a kind of eschatological deferral of racial justice. Far from representing a quietist silencing of the potential for change, this eschatological framework opposes itself to naivete and opens itself up to appropriation by twenty-first-century Afro-Pessimism.

For Du Bois as for Augustine, we are always looking backward even when we are trying to look forward. Because there is no present moment, we cannot catch up to what is happening to us, meaning that we are always looking a little bit behind, at what just happened to us. The same thing happens historically: we cannot grasp any historical present as we live through it, and so we are always looking back at the past and trying to make sense of it. "The present is sought in the course of times [*in transcursu temporum*]," as Augustine (1955) puts it in *civ. Dei*, 13.11, again using the plural, but "it is not found."

Augustine learned this lesson about the historical present by living through the era of Theodosius and tasting the bitter fruits of its failed triumphalism. The *tempora Christiana* would be no utopia. Du Bois learned the same lesson from the failure of Reconstruction. The progress narrative about what would become possible in the wake of a Union victory proved hollow. What

do you do when your hope for change lies shattered on the ground? How does that alter your experience of time? Augustine and Du Bois realized not only that progress was a mirage, but that our sense of our own present situation was likely an illusion. “The problem in reading *Black Reconstruction* is not its length and heft nor its varieties of parts but its defiance of our usual ideas of History—hence of our orientations in time,” wrote Lemert (2000), “The time of race is, as Du Bois thought, the time of truths that are never present, even though they, in their absence, are always there” (p. 247). They are there at least in part due to the fact that, if the present does not exist, the past is just as real as the present, if not more so. The past lingers, whereas the present never even has the dignity to arrive.

Augustine and Du Bois were not alone in their sensitivity to the absence of the present and the illusion of progress. Morrison, too, felt this unsettling of the present, which gives way to a plurality within and a temporal logic of suspension. Taking inspiration from Morrison’s comments about the multiple present tenses in AAVE (African American Vernacular English)—some of which mix in elements of the past and future tenses—Margo Natalie Crawford (2022) has gestured toward a “multitudinous present tense that destroys any need for a distinct past or future tense;” this would be a “new type of grammar that can hold on to an awareness of everything that keeps making black people into captives and, also, hail everything that could somehow, some way, set the captives free” (p. 170). When Augustine cast about for a word to capture the middle term of his threefold present, he found *contuitus*: not any kind of direct vision, but instead a ‘seeing-together’ or an ‘awareness’ that straddled both past and future. Maybe what is needed in order to share the vantage point of Augustine and Du Bois is a twenty-first-century *contuitus*: a seeing-together beyond the limits of the present that would also be an awareness of how our claims of progress continue to fall short.

APOCALYPSE CLOCKS

One consequence of this critique of progress and the present is that it invites us to adopt the vocabulary of apocalyptic eschatology. Salvation arrives not now, but later. At the eschaton—the last possible moment—the world as we know it will draw to a close, with all accounts being settled. Ideals like 'justice' could only take on their full meaning at such a moment. As a result, authors like Amaryah Shaye Armstrong (2022) have warned us that we are now living in 'apocalyptic' times. This could denote catastrophic fears of collapse, which may be justified. But what we ought to be thinking about when we adopt an apocalyptic-eschatological mindset is the fact that, whatever our fate might turn out to be, it cannot be augured out on the basis of the supposed moment in which we are living.

In their preface to the aforementioned special issue on "Black Temporality in Times of Crisis," Ibrahim and Ahad (2022) identify the idea of such a moment as an obstacle to properly understanding both time and history: "while a crisis is generally considered a moment that necessitates urgent action, the constancy of crisis manifests in the experience of an enduring, unending, and unfinished past" (p. 2). The word crisis should not conjure up some instant of decision. Crises unfold open-endedly. Again our temporal horizon becomes eschatological. Again we must adopt the temporal logic of suspension, according to which nothing has yet been settled.

Ibrahim and Ahad consider the possibility that this problem of momentariness can only be overcome by rejecting linear models of time in favour of circularity. A full adoption of cyclical temporality would be difficult to square with Augustine, since he was such a vociferous opponent of the cycle as articulated by ancient schools of thought like Stoicism. Nevertheless, referencing the far-reaching writings of Michelle Wright (2015, p. 172), Ibrahim and Ahad

(2022) ultimately boil down their sense of "an alternative temporal register" to "the 'continual updating of intersecting interpellations in the 'now'" (p. 4). Fittingly, they add: "So, what is the 'now?'"

We find ourselves returned to double time-consciousness. On the one hand, culturally embedded experiences of crisis summon up new modes of temporal experience, coloured by times of oppression. On the other hand, time remains time: those old puzzles of linearity and the now stay intractable. Acknowledging this, Ibrahim and Ahad call back to the distinction between "clock people" and "not clock people" in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. The tick of the clock leads us to think instants are real, because the second-hand ticks discretely. But who says we have to live according to the clock? It could instead be the case that, as Ibrahim and Ahad (2022) have it, "time is a site of constant struggle, and Black temporality is the sensory route to what is not yet here but could possibly be" (p. 9). Or, as Frederick Staidum (2022) has it, we could appeal to temporal pluralisms that take us beyond quantitative clock-time and get at some qualitatively different mode of experience. Du Bois himself pushed back against what his teacher Santayana called "the time of the philistine," marked by non-stop rushing and the equation of time with money (Posnock, 1995, p. 513). Against this, Du Bois "urges his audience to suspend the onrush of time, to bracket off life's ordinary urgencies" (Posnock, 1995, pp. 513-514). If we were to follow in the footsteps of Ibrahim and Ahad and Du Bois and Augustine, we would have to de-center the present and embrace the future, not as part of the philistine's daily grind, but in the temporal mode of awaiting. We need to get into the mode of "suspension" that Shaun Myers (2022) has isolated in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*: an awaiting that resists the "imperative time" that exerts fresh pressures with every tick of the clock.

In late ancient North Africa, the pressure felt was that of the apocalyptic-eschatological future. Was it going to be imminent? Christians could be forgiven for reading Paul's epistles as promising an imminent end of this world as we know it. Three or four centuries after Paul, expectations for an impending eschaton had for some only increased. Certain groups, like the Donatists who saw themselves as the remnant of the true church in Africa, inferred from this a new apocalyptic clarity (Hoover, 2018). As time drew to a close, the purity of the remnant shone forth still more brightly. At the eschaton, the sheep and the goats would be separated for good; as the eschaton approached, should not that division become ever more apparent?

Augustine opposed the Donatists, who have increasingly come to be seen as indigenous African Christians, with Augustine painted as the universalist interloper, projecting values belonging to the entire world of Roman-Hellenistic Christianity onto an unsuspecting local population. It would make more sense to frame his anti-Donatist stance as itself a position rooted in an African context. This means, as Mommsen (1886, p. 345) long ago observed and Du Bois (1965, p. 146) reiterated with gusto, that the birth of many characteristics we now associate with 'European' Christianity was in fact African by way of Augustine. When Augustine makes the case for a universal community, he is doing so not as a European imposing an ideal from the outside. He is, as Mommsen and Du Bois recognized, creating a new form of Christian universalism that did not exist before it began to coalesce in ancient Africa. Likewise, Augustine's opposition to imminent apocalypticism was an African creation. The Donatists, on Augustine's construal, envisioned a legible present. The times were now bad, but they would soon be made good. And yet, as Augustine phrased it in Sermon 80, "we are the times." Historical time will remain as obscure as we are, at least until there is no time left. But we have no idea when that might happen.

The Donatist stance was not unique. In Epistle 199, Augustine (CSEL 33) countered the exegesis of Hesychius, the Bishop of Salona in Balkan Dalmatia, who thought he could map foreboding passages from the New Testament onto the crises plaguing his world. With Acts 1:7 looming, Augustine framed the debate around the question of whether we can "know the times" (*scire tempora*). Parrying any tendency to assume we can read the seasons, *ep*. 119.15 allegorizes various eschatological passages from Scripture, not to imply that time will never end, but to suggest that we really have no idea when it will end. He adds that the Gospel must be preached to every community around the globe, not just to the Romans. Until this multicultural grafting onto the root of Abraham occurs, the eschaton is unlikely to be imminent (*ep*. 199.47). Imminent apocalypticism amounts to cultural chauvinism, which Augustine meant his universalism to counter. That casts his universalism in a light other than that of a Roman colonizer; we would have to make room in our minds for a universalism rooted in an African context. Ultimately, Augustine argues that the best stance toward the eschaton is a Socratic learned ignorance applied to time and history (*ep*. 199.52). We do not know that change is coming soon. Nor do we know that change is coming in the distant future. What we do know is that we do not know when change will come. The stance we ought to adopt toward the future is not secure knowledge or probabilistic prediction, but an open-ended awaiting for what might arrive. Such awaiting would be irreducible to quietism, since it by no means rules out a messianic transformation, even if it would never assume the messiah is just around the corner.

And so, living in the absence not just of the present but of a securely dated future terminus, our existence is marked by awaiting. The present is not there; we cannot depend upon it. The future is unclear; we must wait for it, animated by a mix of despair and hope. Those who fail to await are attempting, like little devils, to grasp prematurely what is not yet theirs to

possess (*civ. Dei*, 17.20). Transposing this sense of awaiting to postcolonial times, authors like Tao Leigh Goffe (2022) have dubbed it the temporality of *marronage*:

> One vital form of Black time is found across the Black diaspora, Maroon time. The Maroon clock is centuries old, anchored in a deep sense of history. Frantz Fanon described such waiting as definitive of who he was: 'If I were asked for a definition of myself, I would say that I am one who waits; I investigate my surroundings, I interpret everything in terms of what I discover, I become sensitive.' (p. 126)

For Sarah Stefana Smith (2022), *marronage* connotes resistance against "romantic narratives of overcoming in the past, present, and future" (p. 18); for Ronald Cummings (2018), it is "an experience of time which 'invite[s] futurity even as it refuses to script it'" (p. 15). In Goffe's reading, *marronage* takes on the aspect of an alternative clock (recall Morrison). It is not so much that the linearity of time comes to a halt. Instead, we inhabit the time of awaiting, which leaves itself open to a future that may arrive later rather than sooner. But this is no more quietist than was Fanon in Algeria. An Augustinian stance toward time, reckoning with its linearity and its deceptive pseudo-presence and its eschatological deferral, could hope to become part of a similarly non-quietist project here in the twenty-first century.

At the same time, Elia (2024) has expressed reservations about the compatibility between Augustinian thought and modern projects of Black liberation. At the root of these reservations is a sense that Augustine was never able to shake free of the logic of the ancient slave-master. Stopping short of complete pessimism about any rapprochement, Elia does leave open some room for fresh thought about time and fugitivity in the wake of Augustine. He too turns to maroon experience as an inspiration: more specifically, to what he calls "sociogenic *marronage*" (pp. 81-82), which might prove capable of generating new socio-temporal modalities. To Elia, I

would only add that it is in Augustine's critique of the present that we might be able to find the most effective resources for mobilizing Augustinian thought with an eye to *marronage*.

CONCLUSION

If our goal is to put Augustine into conversation with various discourses surrounding Black temporality today, then we might be risking the essentialization of racialized experiences of time, for which there would be no warrant. "There are perhaps as many forms of Black time as there are Black people," Goffe (2022) cautions us, "The time zone extends across the multiplicity of geographies and ecologies of Black life" (p. 126). In suggesting parallels between Augustine and Du Bois and *marronage*, we need not assume that any temporal modes hold exclusive priority.

All we can do instead is indicate three points of intersection where conversations have begun and ought to continue. Via double time-consciousness, Augustine holds together the objective sense of a time without present and a subjective sense that temporal experiences vary as widely as do human experiences. And by transposing the absence of the present onto historical time, Augustine likewise holds that we cannot make sense of our own historical moment, but must await the arrival of a future that may or may not confirm our hopes of overcoming our ongoing crises. Finally, the fact that Augustine appeals to a universalizing framework to solve the puzzles of time need not render him any less African, at least insofar as Mommsen and Du Bois were right to say that it was in Africa that universalism was truly born.

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