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Reconciling Relationships with the Land through Land Acknowledgements

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Source Publication:

McGregor, D, Emma Nelson. 2022. Reconciling Relationships with the Land through Land Acknowledgments. In Sacred Civics: awakening seven-generation cities. Routledge. (eds). Ayne Engle, Julian Agyeman & Tanya Chung-Tiam-Fook.

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RECONCILING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LAND THROUGH LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Deborah McGregor and Emma Nelson

Introduction

One of the limitations of current Canadian conceptions of reconciliation is the underlying assumption that reconciliation applies, virtually exclusively, to relationships among peoples. There is no doubt that reconciliation among peoples, especially where conflict and violence have characterized (and continue to characterize) such relationships, is critical, as pointed out by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (TRC 2015a). There are, however, other dimensions to reconciliation that are just as important from an Indigenous point of view. As Mi'kmaq Elder Augustine suggests, "other dimensions of human experience—our relationships with the earth and all living beings—are also relevant in working towards reconciliation" (TRC 2015a, 122). Elder Reg Crowshoe confirms this view, explaining that:

> Reconciliation requires talking, but our conversations must be broader than Canada's conventional approaches. Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, from an Aboriginal perspective, also *requires reconciliation with the natural world. If human beings resolve problems between themselves but continue to destroy the natural world, then reconciliation remains incomplete.*
>
> *TRC 2015a, 123, italics ours*

Indigenous conceptions of reconciliation extend beyond peoples to the natural world and are informed by direct relationships to the land. We must, the Elders say, reconcile with the Earth itself (TRC 2015a, 123).

This chapter has been written by an Anishinaabe scholar living and working in her own Lands (Deborah) in collaboration with a "settler" urban planner (Emma). In it, we explain how Land, spirit, and relationships with the natural world have endured through time and can

DOI: 10.4324/9781003199816-12

offer profound insights and knowledge. We choose to frame this topic through an examination of Land Acknowledgements. In so doing, we will address the following themes:

- **Land Acknowledgements:** their meaning and purpose, and how they are shared in practice;
- **Methodologies and Pedagogies:** re-centering land and relationships in education and planning teaching and practice;
- **Reconciling with the Land:** how relationships with, and *responsibilities* to, the land and future generations can be established through the process of acknowledgement.

Positionality

Deborah McGregor

Deborah McGregor n'dizhnikaaz (I am called). Wiigwaaskingaa n'doonjibaa (Birch Island, I am from). I am Anishinaabe from Whitefish River First Nation and currently I am Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Environmental Justice at York University in Toronto, Canada. I have been teaching for three decades in areas relating to Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous environmental governance and Indigenous research methodologies. I have lived much of each year in Toronto since the early 1980s, and my life's work is to help ensure a sustainable future for human and all other life on our planet. My interest in Land Acknowledgements emerged out of efforts to facilitate student engagement with the Land, including developing relationships and assuming responsibilities with respect to it as well as to future generations.

Emma Nelson

I am the descendant of settlers from Scandinavia and the British Isles who arrived in so-called Canada and the USA sometime in the late 1800s. I moved to Tkaronto/Toronto (Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, Wendat, and Mississauga territory) in 2017 from Bozeman, Montana (Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, Apsalooke, Shoshone-Bannock, and Salish Kootenai territory) to complete a Master's degree in English and later a Master's in Environmental Studies. I have moved across the prairies all my life. I am interested in futures without capitalism and spend much of my time organizing with the Movement Defence Committee, a legal collective that provides support to progressive activists. For my Master's research, I produced a four-part podcast in which I interviewed settler planning-stream students about Land Acknowledgements after sensing a disconnect between the truths of those statements and the actions taken to address such truths. As a Queer and non-binary person, all of my writing, organizing, and creative work is imbued with my own experience of oppression and is done through an anti-colonial, antiracist, and anti-oppressive lens.

What Is a Land Acknowledgement?

In the public sphere, Land Acknowledgements are a relatively recent phenomenon which have already achieved widespread adoption in Canadian academic institutions (Daigle 2019;

Hewitt 2019). Such prevalence has led scholars such as Cree professors Jeffrey Hewitt and Michelle Daigle to point out that in many instances, Land Acknowledgements have become scripted spectacles, "performative acts" devoid of meaning with little or no effort to actually decolonize or achieve "right" relationships with Indigenous Peoples (Daigle 2019; Hewitt 2019).

As Hewitt writes, "I view the practice of land acknowledgments as good, necessary and important" (p.28). He adds, however, "the overwhelming majority of land acknowledgments are scripted. Typically, an organizer or host of a meeting will read from an institutional script approved by way of committee. Almost always the scripts read like a history in land occupation" (p.31). Daigle observes that Land Acknowledgements can be "respectful and meaningful as [long as] the people undertaking them—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—do so in a manner which activates the relational accountability that is embedded in this legal and political practice" (p.711). However, like Hewitt, Daigle writes that in many cases:

> Non-Indigenous peoples on campus seem to be more preoccupied with learning how to recite a territorial acknowledgment—"can you say that again so I can write it down properly?"—rather than learning about the place where they live and work, with all of the complexities of historical and ongoing colonial dispossession and violence.
>
> *p.711*

They become "hollow gestures and performances" (p.711). Hewitt emphasizes that Land Acknowledgements "should not make the reader or listener feel good" (p.40). If we are not careful, he warns, "land acknowledgments are in jeopardy of becoming part of the apparatus of colonial comfort that further displaces Indigenous Peoples" (p.40).

How then can we avoid reducing Land Acknowledgements to such platitudes? How can we as educators and planners work with Land Acknowledgements as a way to unsettle settlers, yet empower Indigenous Peoples? How can Land Acknowledgements be broadened to consider ontologically different relationships with the natural world as outlined by the Elders in the TRC report?

Different Perspectives on Land Acknowledgements

In 2016, I (McGregor) initiated a project at York University to develop a video that would offer deeper meaning and explanation of Land Acknowledgements from a variety of Indigenous perspectives, namely those of Indigenous faculty, administrators, staff, and students at York University. In the resulting video, "Understanding the Land Acknowledgment," Amy Desjarlais, a Knowledge Keeper with Aboriginal Student Services at York University, points out that Land Acknowledgments in academic and institutional settings are not necessarily for Indigenous People, but are rather tools to engage non-Indigenous people with the land and the active treaties to which they are subject (CASS yorku, 2019, "Understanding the Land Acknowledgement" [00:20]). For many non-Indigenous audiences, a Land Acknowledgement can be a call to begin a relationship with the land, the people, and the history of the land upon which they now reside, as well as with their own settler colonial identities. Land Acknowledgements have thus been touted as, "a small but essential step toward the reconciliation process" (Randy Pitawanakwat, in "Understanding the Land Acknowledgment" [3:40]).

Indigenous nations continue to "recognize each other often on the basis of clan, language, and nation … [and] engage in acknowledgment of each other [as] a cultural and political practice" (Wilkes, Duong, Kesler, and Ramos 2017, 91). Mary Bordeaux, a Sicangu Lakota person interviewed in the video "#HonorNativeLand," published by the US Department of Arts and Culture (2017), stated that when she heard a Land Acknowledgement read in a room "full of non-Native people," it was "like it pulled away this layer that's always there." She states that after hearing the acknowledgment of the Native history and culture of the land she was on, she was "relaxed" and felt more at ease ("#HonorNativeLand," [1:30–1:50]). Desjarlais also states that in her culture, Land Acknowledgements are done "when [they] wake up, when [they] breathe in and out, when [they] take care of [themselves]" ("Understanding the Land Acknowledgment," [0:00–0:26]). Land Acknowledgements can thus provide a chance to bring awareness of surroundings into a space which otherwise might not address them. Equally important, they bring settler colonialism to the forefront in spaces where it is unquestioned or normalized.

Finally, Land Acknowledgements are place-based announcements which draw audiences into thinking about the spaces they share with others. Larsen and Johnson (2017) state that "Place teaches coexistence, not consensus … Place is a 'scale of relation' that 'encompasses the infinite within the immediate,' and it is in these messy, agonistic scales of coexistence that [communities can] find themselves" (Hewitt, in Larsen and Johnson 2017, 9). Places are not equalizers, nor do they affect each inhabitant the same way. By understanding the "infinite" individual experiences within a community, "coexistence" becomes a show of respect, a central tenet of Indigenous–settler relations. "Native space must be constantly recognized and made visible through daily practices" (Barnd 2017, 15) so that it is not subsumed into the Canadian hegemony. Recitation and preparation of Land Acknowledgements are ways settlers can participate in disrupting this hegemony.

Reconsidering the Script

To help decolonize scripted Land Acknowledgements, the Native Governance Center (NGC 2019), based on an event they hosted on the topic, created a guide to assist organizations in avoiding the pitfalls described by Daigle and Hewitt. In response to the question "Why is the Indigenous Land Acknowledgement important?", they state:

> It is important to understand the longstanding history that has brought you to reside on the land, and to seek to understand your place within that history. Land Acknowledgments do not exist in a past tense, or historical context: colonialism is a current ongoing process, and we need to build our mindfulness of our present participation.
>
> *Northwestern University in NGC 2019*

As an outcome of this event, tips were shared for generating appropriate Indigenous Land Acknowledgements. Table 9.1 shows the suggestions of the organizers for people writing Land Acknowledgements.

In taking in the advice offered, we, the authors of this paper, begin with self-reflection. Both of us reside, work, and educate in an urban context, specifically in Toronto. In my teaching, I (McGregor) require students to engage with the York University Land Acknowledgement by engaging in self-reflection and walking methodologies. Students must then generate their

TABLE 9.1 Suggestions for writing Land Acknowledgements

Start with self-reflection Before starting work on your Land Acknowledgement statement, reflect on the process: • Why am I doing this Land Acknowledgement? *If you're hoping to inspire others to take action to support Indigenous communities, you're on the right track. If you're delivering a Land Acknowledgement out of guilt or because everyone else is doing it, more self-reflection is in order.* • What is my end goal? *What do you hope listeners will do after hearing the acknowledgement?* • When will I have the largest impact? *Think about your timing and audience, specifically.*
Do your homework Put in the time necessary to research the following topics: • The Indigenous People to whom the land belongs; • The history of the land and any related treaties; • Names of living Indigenous People from these communities; • Indigenous place names and language; • Correct pronunciation for the names of the Tribes, places, and individuals that you're including.
Use appropriate language Don't sugarcoat the past. • Use terms like *genocide*, *ethnic cleansing*, *stolen land*, and *forced removal* to reflect actions taken by colonizers.
Use past, present, and future tenses Indigenous People are still here, and they're thriving. *Don't treat them as a relic of the past.*
[Understand that] Land Acknowledgements shouldn't be grim They should function as living celebrations of Indigenous communities. • Ask yourself, "How am I leaving Indigenous People in a stronger, more empowered place because of this Land Acknowledgement?" • Focus on the positivity of who Indigenous People are today.

Source: NGC (2019)

own Land Acknowledgements based on lived experiences acquired by engaging with the natural world.

As a planning student in the Master of Environmental Studies (MES, now the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change, or FEUC) program at York University, and in acting on this call to re-engage with Land Acknowledgements, I (Nelson) engaged in research on the statements, local history, and current movements, and possible paths forward for the planning profession. I prepared several Land Acknowledgements over the course of the research as a way to reflect on what I'd learned through the research process. We reflect upon these processes in the following pages.

Methodologies and Pedagogies: Re-centering Land and Relationships

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous thinkers express the importance of understanding our relationship to each other through the land. Indigenous scholars refer to this as an Indigenous relational ontology (Daigle 2019; Todd 2016), whereas non-Indigenous planning scholars tend to call it "place-based" knowledge. Planning projects, especially in an urban context, while they may superficially engage with Indigenous perspectives of the land, often end up catering more to developers than to the community.

Styres and Zinga (2013) encourage researchers to think about "Land, not solely as a geographical and material place, but as a spiritual and relational place" (p.295). "Land", they write, "is a spiritually infused place that is grounded in interconnected and interdependent relationships, [and] cultural positioning" (p.301). They state also that:

> Land from an Indigenous perspective carries with it the idea of journeying, of being connected to, and interconnected with, geographic and spiritual space—in other words a deep sense of identification through a cosmological and ecological connection to both natural and spiritual worlds.
>
> *p.302*

Anishinaabek scholar Darlene Johnston adds, "Connecting people to place requires an exploration of how people understand themselves in relation to their place. For the Aboriginal peoples of the Great Lakes, there is both a physical and spiritual aspect to identity and landscape" (Johnston 2006, 3).

During a Zoom presentation for Dr. McGregor's "Indigenous Perspectives and Realities" course, I (Nelson) asked students to listen closely to their surroundings for several minutes, then report back to the class what they had heard. Many joked that they had had a hard time hearing at first, whether it be over a dog barking, a housemate watching TV, or loud appliances. They then realized, however, that these noises—originally being regarded as a din *covering up* the "natural" noises they *thought* they should hear—told them as much about their surroundings and how they related to them as the other sounds they strove to hear. One student, for example, mentioned being struck by the implications of the sound of their furnace: the privilege of a warm home, heating bills, the climate's impacts on our lives, the gas required to run the furnace, and so on. By reconnecting with other senses not privileged in academic spaces, students were able to reflect on the presence of the land within their lives at that (and every) moment.

Relationships and History Visible in City Design

Land Acknowledgements in particular help to unveil these connections as they call our attention to the world outside of the event or setting in which they're being presented. Especially in cities, concrete and glass buildings seem to hide connections to land and non-human beings, but these connections can be revealed if we look at the design of city layouts. Arterial roads now carrying vehicle traffic to and from Canada's largest cities were once deer paths, which became foot paths as hunters followed the animals, which were later retraced by travelers, and eventually became host to small shops and subsequent four-lane highways (Mills and Roque n.d.). The roads that provide patterns of human movement through urban space have their roots in Indigenous history and in the land.

In contexts where the land plays an active role in shaping planning or engineering decisions, such as in a mountainous area or near marshes or wetlands, the land can appear to be more present. Yet the myths of greatness propagated by colonialism are not able to contend with the fact that the land determines settling patterns. The Doctrine of Discovery[1] tells a story of unused and uninhabited lands, one in which settlers were capable of bending and working the land into what it was "meant to be," either through building cities or by attempting to conquer it. As places steeped in mythologies of supremacy (Tomiak 2016), cities

can also be a major site of disruption of the myths upon which colonialism was built. Land Acknowledgements often provide the starting point for settlers in grappling with the colonial history of their presence and surroundings.

Education through Land Acknowledgements

Educators who take seriously the TRC of Canada's "Calls to Action" report (TRC 2015b) must begin to take an active role in teaching the importance of Indigenous history and perspectives. The TRC calls upon the Canadian Council of Ministers of Education to develop and implement a curriculum and resources on the history of Aboriginal people in Canadian history, as well as to build "student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" (TRC 2015b, Section 63, i–iii). Their responsibilities therefore lie in both educating students about and aiding in self-reflection on their relationships to settler colonialism and the settler state of Canada. Janet Csontos' article (2019) and workshop on settler responsibilities places the onus on settlers to explore the privileges they are afforded by the state as well as the interventions they can make toward unsettling them. Csontos' call for "action beyond words" summarizes the TRC's recommendations and highlights the potential limits of practices, such as Land Acknowledgements and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, as they exist today.

In decolonizing education, learning to re-engage with Land is referred to as "pedagogies of the land" (Haig-Brown and Dannemann 2002). Zoe Todd (2016, 90) writes that it is often a struggle to "situate the material we read in class within the physical realities that we inhabit as student–teacher–interlocutors moving through academic and civic spaces in Ottawa." Todd encourages her students to ground-truth their abstract, theoretical work by engaging with the natural world in the city in which she teaches.

In my own teaching, I (McGregor) refer to (and assign to every class) Darlene Johnston's seminal work *Connecting People to Place: Great Lakes Aboriginal History in Cultural Context*, her submission to the Ipperwash Inquiry. She sought to demonstrate that the "Great Lakes region is more than geography. It is a spiritual landscape formed by and embedded with the regenerative potential of the First Ones who gave it form" (Johnston 2006, 6). She also notes that,

> As a descendant of the Great Lakes Aboriginal Ancestors, I have been taught that our people come from the land and that we are shaped by the land. Aboriginal history and self-understanding is conveyed across generations by stories and teachings that are grounded in particular landscapes.
>
> *2006, 2*

I follow a similar logic and ask students to consider their own perspectives and knowledge in understanding their connection (or lack thereof) to place (in this case, Toronto). They each have a relationship with place, it just may or may not be recognized, and may or may not be positive. As such, self-reflection is critical. In Indigenous pedagogy, engaging with self is particularly important. Who you are, what motivates you, and what informs how you know—it all matters. Learning to position yourself, or explicitly stating your self-location and relationship to place, is an important way to begin this "coming to know." Within Indigenous, particularly Anishinaabek, knowledge, this means *acting* on your knowledge. An important part of Indigenous inquiry and pedagogy is therefore to understand the obligations and responsibilities that one assumes (i.e., the actions you must take) once you have come to "know"

TABLE 9.2 Deepening the Land Acknowledgement

Get outside	*Reflect*	*Act*
• Go outside and participate in the natural world (e.g., take a "self-reflection walk," "First Story" tour, etc.); • Describe the "experience(s)" undertaken to better understand their sense of place; • Specifically describe what they observed, how they felt, what they learned from the experience.	• Describe your relationship to place and with Indigenous Peoples of that place; • Describe Indigenous worldview, philosophy, intellectual/knowledge traditions and systems with an emphasis on relationship to place, land and language; • Identify your personal biases and positionality. Address how they might influence your experience, analyses and interpretations; • Reflect thoughtfully on how Indigenous presence is expressed or known in an urban setting; • Explain how your experiences as part of this class have deepened your understanding of the broader context of Canadian society and its institutions in relation to Indigenous Peoples.	Answer the following questions: • What does the Land Acknowledgement mean to you? • Who is the Land Acknowledgement for? • What responsibilities can be thought to derive from the Land Acknowledgement? • Having read a Land Acknowledgement, identify any responsibilities you feel you may have with regard to learning from place/people; • Prepare your own Land Acknowledgement for the Land/Place where you live; • Do you feel comfortable and ready to assume your role with the personal responsibilities you have identified? What factors/ considerations might inhibit or enable you?

something. It is during the "coming to know" process that one begins to appreciate these obligations and responsibilities.

Even entering into this process, of course, assumes a certain degree of readiness (McGregor, Sritharan, and Whitaker 2020). I expect students to begin their own process of inquiry. Learning about the "place" in which they live, study, and work, is an important step along this path. I ask students to formulate an understanding of their responsibilities to place/people/ land where they currently reside. As a starting point, they reflect upon York University's rather scripted Land Acknowledgement and the video *Understanding the Land Acknowledgment*, and are then asked to get outside, reflect on and share their insights, and asked to consider what actions they might take after the exercise.

Considering the Colonial Roots of Planning through Land Acknowledgements

Canada has yet to adequately address the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism on Indigenous communities. City planning has played a large role in land and societal development driven by settler colonialism in this country (Roy 2006; Stranger-Ross 2008). Planners, as counsel to private developers, employees of municipal or provincial governments, or practitioners at non-profit organizations, can and often do perpetuate

unacknowledged tenets of settler colonialism. This is especially prevalent in the valuing and usage of land. As a planning student, I (Nelson) searched for a way to engage with the history of the land, knowing that the past uses of a particular plot of land determine its future uses (i.e., is it a "brown site"? Are there pre-existing structures with "heritage value"?). If planners are truly committed to responding to the TRC's recommendations (2015b), we must also explore how human history—settler colonialism in particular—can be considered in the development of land. Opportunities for such engagement within the planning field are few and far between, but recognition of an area's history often comes in the form of Land Acknowledgements.

When considering my Master's research subject, I became curious about the Land Acknowledgement's (in)ability to instill a sense that something must be done to reconcile—a word fraught with ambiguous expectations—Canada's history of genocide with its current self-image as a benevolent refuge. I wanted to study the impact Land Acknowledgements have had on both listeners and speakers, and, reflecting on these results, analyze how Land Acknowledgements are understood by settler-identified planning students as well as how their education and training within settler constructs influenced their understanding. In talking with other settlers and grounding my research in Indigenous scholarship, I expanded my own settler understanding of what it means to think with/through the land and how this informs "place-based" projects in the settler colonial state of Canada. This podcast project included an analysis of the colonial roots of planning alongside a discussion of the treaty-making process and a consideration of how planners reflect the shady history of Canada's development in their choices. I ended by suggesting that planning as a field, in its current iteration as a tool of organization by the Canadian state, must undergo immense change so that it does not perpetuate colonialism/capitalism/racism if it is to have real decolonizing potential. I also emphasized that planners who aspire to undermine colonialism through their work should also engage in decolonial activism.

Emma's Acknowledgements: An Ongoing Process

After moving to Toronto, I started to think less and less about the land, as I believed it wasn't really "here" anymore, having been long since covered up by concrete and streetcar tracks. But reading about place-based thinking (Barnd 2017; Larsen and Johnson 2017; and Walker, Jojola, and Natcher 2013) and exploring it through listening practice unveiled the possibilities for reconnecting with the land/Earth while in the city. These possibilities forefront the history of the land as being continuous and present.

In my experience, doing research and learning more about Toronto, about the unequal development of the Toronto Purchase, about the diversity of cultures and peoples living here before (during, and after) contact, and about the history of urban planning in the area, completely changed my relationship to the phrase "stolen land." I had known the statement to be true at some level, and I had already acknowledged that many treaties, and especially the ways in which they were implemented, were questionable at best, but learning about the area radically deepened my understanding of settler colonialism.

At the end of each podcast episode, I wrote a Land Acknowledgement to reflect on what I'd learned from the interviewee and how that had changed my relationship with my surroundings. The conversations led me to do further research on things like movements, planning history, and the development of Toronto. As a reflexive practice, Land Acknowledgements have

become a methodology for exploring how I related to urban spaces on stolen land and where I could positively enact the privileges and responsibilities I have as a settler.

What Kind of Ancestor Will You Be? Reconciling with the Land

> In Anishinaabeg culture, there is an ongoing relationship between the Dead and the Living, between Ancestors and Descendants. It is the obligation of the Living to ensure that their relatives are buried in the proper manner and in the proper place. Failure to perform this duty harms not only the Dead but also the Living. The Dead need to be sheltered and fed, to be visited and feasted.
>
> *Johnston 2006, 24*

Anishinaabek relationships between the Living and the Dead tell us about "their connection to land and their ancestors, both human and other than human" (Johnston 2006, 24). In her research and understanding, Johnston notes that for the Anishinaabek "the remains of their Dead retained a spiritual essence which required ongoing respect" (p.27) and that "Human remains return to the earth with their spiritual essence intact, continuing the spiritual cycle of birth and re-birth" (p.28).

In my (McGregor's) role as a scholar and teacher, I am often asked to give presentations, serve on panels and facilitate workshops. Every time I give a Land Acknowledgement it is different. Like Johnston, I carry with me similar teachings, recognizing the continuity of the Living and the Dead and the importance of the Land in mediating this ongoing relationship. In my Land Acknowledgements, I like to remind all listeners to reflect upon what kind of ancestor they want to be for future generations. I spur them to recognize that they have ancestors and that they are in fact descendants, benefiting from a Land that is home, stolen, exploited, suffering, or healing. Recognition of the Living and the Dead in the Anishinaabek tradition is a recognition that we are all descendants and that we will all be ancestors: it is the Land that connects us.

Note

1 Starting with 15th-century Papal Bulls, or official letters regarding the future of the Catholic Church, the Doctrine of Discovery was a continuation of the same ideological, colonial underpinnings that spawned the Crusades. These official doctrines ordained new settlements as being divinely righteous, as was the colonization of Indigenous lands. They reinforced the racist myth that sites of settlement like North America were devoid of people and civilizations, which, when coupled with the perspective that man holds dominion over land, justified aggressive settler encroachment. The Doctrine is foundational to US property law and continues to be cited in legal cases (see, for example, *City of Sherrill vs. Oneida Indian Nation, 2005*; Miller and Ruru, 2009).

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