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## How Black Mothers “Successfully” Raise Children in the “Hostile” Canadian Climate

*This article explores mothering from the perspective of a middle-aged, Black Caribbean mother living in Canada and her oldest daughter's experiences. Engaging a first voice account from the daughter, the article provides a view into the mothering style and techniques that the daughter experienced as a result of being mothered by a woman born and partially raised in the Caribbean, uprooted from her home in the immigration process, and who subsequently makes another home in Canada. The perspectives proffered by the two women's voices highlight the struggles of Black mothering under the gaze of White Canadian parenting expectations.*

### Introduction

Mothering is a challenging endeavour, regardless of the circumstances, resources, and support that surrounds the undertaking. Women, almost always, must mother under duress. Even the stereotypical “good” mother is considered suspect at various times across her lifespan. The socio-political conditionality that helps to create a suspicion of mothers certainly influences the way women mother their children. These contexts are indeed complex, woven with intricacy, and detail historical malcontent of women and mothers. In particular, the scrutinization of certain “types” of women and mothers dominates. Mothers are routinely criminalized and demonized for being too permissive or too authoritarian; for not raising children with “good” values who will become the “right” kind of “good” citizen; for being too self-centered—in short for not being martyrs. Furthermore, it appears as if mother blaming is surgically implanted in all structures of our society, such that any social issue that emerges with children seems to be linked with “bad” mothering. The aforementioned, and a host of other

acts of demonization, are also applied to Black women and, by extension, Black mothers. This paper discusses some of the challenges that Black mothers face in mothering their children and the strategies that they employ in their motherly roles. I use “counter-storytelling” (Solórzano and Yosso 32) methodology to explore the rationales for Black women’s mothering strategies, including the impact that such strategies have on the relationship between Black mothers and their daughters. I highlight the invisibility of race and discuss how some young Black children do not make the connection between race and mothering practices. Specifically, I explore my motivation for mothering in ways only a Black woman can and must, which I argue is like being on the frontlines of a lifelong warfare. The paper begins with a literature review of Black mothering, which is followed by a discussion of a “counter-stories” methodology, where I outline its usefulness and application to discussions about Black mothering; in addition, I discuss three specific Black mothering strategies. The paper concludes with the narrative of my older daughter Renee and my analysis of the overarching theme of Black mothers as role models for their daughters.

### Literature Review

This section discusses some of the strategies that Black mothers deploy to help shape their children into adulthood. Richard Lalonde, Janelle Jones, and Mirella Stroink examined how racial identity influence Black Canadian mothers’ socialization strategies and noted that “Black parents may face additional child rearing challenges compared to parents from other racial cultural groups because of the disadvantaged position they often occupy within their communities” (129). More specifically, the salience of White supremacy, the normalization of whiteness, and stance of neutrality in our society (Adjei; Aylward; Dei, Karumanchery and Karumanchery-Luik; Delgado) are “the major factors that differentiate the mothering of Blacks and Whites” (Bush 381). Boykin and Toms have argued that the “socialization of Black children is a unique process with its own set of concerns and considerations, rather than an ‘incomplete version’ of Euro-centric socialization (qtd. in Lalonde et al. 130). In addition, the intersection of race and gender (Crenshaw; Collins “Shifting the Centre”; hooks; Mullings “Mothering White Children”) “works to de-center, devalue, and disempower Black mothers and womanhood” (Bush 389).

In spite of the challenges, Black mothers are often categorized as “bad mothers,” in direct opposition to the “good mother,” who is self-sacrificing, nurturing, white, and middle-class (Ikemoto; Collins “Shifting the Centre”; Glenn; Strom, Strom, and Beckert). Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins (*Black Feminist Thought*), Ellen Lewin, Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso argue

that the complexities and interrelatedness of race, class, gender, and sexual identification are important to address in our dialogues and practices. Black families and mothers have different experiences based on identity markers such as “socioeconomic status, geographic location...cultural, social, and political environments”; these will “affect how Black parents see themselves and interpret the Black experience for themselves and their children,” and therefore impact parenting styles and strategies (Lalonde et al. 129, 137). If we follow Crenshaw’s logic about attending to women’s multiple identity makers such as race and sexual orientation, we see how lesbian mothers, for example, must prove that they are as “natural” and self-sacrificing as heterosexual women. In these cases, “the complexities of mother require lesbian mothers to reinstate the dichotomy of natural/unnatural and mother/nonmother that their definition of lesbianism sought to subvert” (Lewin 335). Clearly, Black lesbian mothers have additional challenges, aside from the perceived moral transgression of loving other women. Isabelle Gunning writes of her experience as a Black lesbian mother and states “...motherhood outed us” (160) so that the double transgression of being lesbian and Black impacted Gunning and her partner’s experience with their daughter’s school board administrators. For Gunning, the harassment she and her partner experienced “had nothing to do with being lesbians and everything to do with being Black (160). So the scripted identity marker of Blackness, as Paul Adjei and Frantz Fanon argue, is the salient ingredient in experiences of Black motherhood. If we shift our focus from sexual orientation to class, we can see how the marker of Blackness is visited upon poor Black mothers, rendering them devalued commodities who are conveniently pathologized as unfit, lazy, dependent on the state, promiscuous, blamed for being poor, and charged with having deviant lifestyles that corrupt their children (Augustin; Mendenhall, Bowman and Zhang; Roberts). Black mothers therefore deploy various parenting strategies to help their children resist White social domination. In a sense, Black mothers’ parenting strategies are themselves counter-stories.

### Methodological and Theoretical Frameworks

The challenge of racial disparity is examined in this paper in the context of racialized mothering strategies, including the meaning and challenge of Black mothering brought to bear against *accepted* and *expected* norms. Richard Delgado and John Stefancic argue that by using story-telling and narrative, racialized persons are engaged as the creators, disseminators, and reproducers of experiential knowledge that addresses how and challenges why persistent racial disparity is accepted by society as a norm. Solórzano and Yosso note that “counter-stories” are “grounded in real life experiences and

actual empirical data and are contextualized in social situations that are also grounded in real life” (36). Solórzano and Yosso also note that, “...stories can be used as theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tools to challenge racism, sexism, and classism and work toward social justice” (23). Storytelling and narrative are used as hybrid strategies, simultaneously addressing transformative resistance and knowledge dissemination. Storytelling can be “counter-stories” which alter the discourses around the legitimacy of research, social realities, and people’s experiences but, more importantly, they expose the inherent racism in dominant stories, centralize race, and challenge the dominant discourse created by the colonizers about racialized bodies (Delgado “Storytelling”; Delgado and Stefancic; Bernal and Villalpando; Love; Yosso). “Counter-stories” create spaces for marginalized people to document and counteract the falsehood and social injustice perpetuated against and about them, while also allowing for the expression of injury to mind, body, and spirit in a way that finds limited expression in other mediums (Bernal and Villalpando; Delgado and Stefancic; Love; Yosso). “Counter-stories” are a powerful means of challenging and re-storying the dominant discourse, which is often negative, stereotyping, incomplete, and/or a one-sided majoritarian or master story about racialized and marginalized people propagated by the invisibility of White normalization.

“Counter-stories” are oppositional to the dominant or majoritarian stories; they challenge the majoritarian stories that are layered with assumptions and filtered through unequal racial lens when issues of race, gender, and class are discussed (Crenshaw; Collins *Black Feminist Thought*, “The Meaning of Motherhood”; hooks). Majoritarian stories are embedded in our social structures and they determine our relations and reactions to certain categories of individuals. Majoritarian stories strip racialized people of the opportunity to correct the erroneous and negative stories, especially given their lack of access to the social and political structures by which these discourses grow and stay alive like viruses, being transferred among White dominant groups. The danger of majoritarian stories is their presumed universality and the invisibility of race and racism, as well as other forms of domination, such that they are seen as the normative point of reference (Delgado *Critical Race Theory*; Delgado and Stefancic; Solórzano and Yosso). Majoritarian stories are powerful inhibitors that distort and silence the experiences of racialized people (Delgado “Storytelling”; Delgado and Stefancic; Solórzano and Yosso). From a mothering perspective, majoritarian stories privilege White heterosexual, middle-class, healthy women’s stories. It is important to challenge the majoritarian stories with our own version of our lives. The next section discusses three strategies that Black mothers implement to bring their children safely into adulthood.

## Mothering Strategies

There is a vast literature that addresses and explores Black women’s deliberate construction of parenting strategies that are mainly born out of fear for their children and based on experiences that foreshadow the children’s certain encounters with racist and sexist institutional policies and programs (Collins *Black Feminist Thought*; Lalonde et al.; LeCuyer et al.; Mendenhall, Bowman and Zhang; Ridolfo, Chepp and Milkie; Rouse, Brooks-Gunn and McLanahan; Bernard and Bernard; Williams-Wheeler). In spite of the pressures on Black mothers, they continue to ensure the safety of their children and help them develop survival skills to deal with and neutralize discriminatory encounters. This experiential knowledge—particular to Black mothering—does not fit easily into the normative understanding of parenting based on White mothers’ experiences. In the next section, I discuss three of the specific parenting strategies that Black mothers deploy to help shape their children: providing a structured home environment, implementing a “tough love” approach, and teaching self- and racial-pride.

### *Providing a Structured Home Environment*

Black mothers have employed specific parenting strategies—a strict and structured home regimen with an emphasis on education, academic excellence, and being socially responsible. Similarly Black mothers help their children gain entrance into spaces “reserved for whites” so, in a sense, they teach their children how to be responsible while closely monitoring their actions. At the same time, though, they also allow a range of freedoms outside the home depending on the age of the children and parallel to the availability of supervised programs, perceived safety, and racial and culturally diverse programs. Annette Lareau found that many middle-class Black parents were focused on ensuring their children were involved in multiple extra-curricular activities as they “view these activities as transmitting life skills to children” (748). In their article “Raising Middle-class Black Children: Parenting Priorities, Actions and Strategies,” Carol Vincent, Nicola Rollock, Stephen Ball, and David Gillborn found that “many parents sought out high status cultural activities for their children, such as music lessons and public speaking, and pressed children to excel in their activities. Perceived gaps in children’s learning were filled with individual tutors and extra classes” (438). Even so, Sinikka Elliot and Elyshia Aseltine, in their study of 40 mothers (Hispanics, Black and White), found that socioeconomically disadvantaged Black mothers use “protective carework” (721) to curtail their sons from becoming involved in criminal activities. Concerns about teenaged daughters being raped or sexually assaulted, furthermore, resulted in controlling girls’

clothing choices. Conveniently, having a structured home environment acts as a welcome precursor to using “tough love” parenting as well.

### *Implementing a “Tough Love” Approach*

The “tough love” approach to parenting is a frequently utilized parenting strategy for Black mothers. In their study, Cecilia Rouse, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Sara McLanahan found that “more blacks than whites were in the tough love group” (148). In fact, Black mothers are known for using verbal cues to convey particular expectations to their children. Elizabeth LeCuyer et al. note that Black mothers’ “verbal strategies included repetition and clear instructions, sometimes using a particular tone of voice to get the child’s attention and/or to convey the importance of the prohibition or instruction” (148). One of my tough love parenting strategies was throwing children’s belongings (e.g. footwear, toys, books) outside or in the garbage if they were left in undesignated places in the home. On one occasion, a volunteer from the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) saw a foster child’s boots outside the front door and enquired about it. I explained my strategy to her and she reported my actions to the child’s worker, suggesting that I was “cold” and “detached” from the child. To this individual, other parents and professionals, including teachers and CAS workers, my “tough love” parenting strategies were interpreted as abusive, controlling, or too strict (Mullings “Mothering White Children”; “Temporary Mothering”). E. A. LeCuyer and colleagues agree that “many professionals are not aware of the range of disciplinary strategies used by African American parents, or their values or reasoning behind their use” (145); ignorance about these parenting strategies motivates many individuals to judge Black mothers by their own White standards. This is not to deny overlaps and the need for “standard” practices, but to emphasize the primacy of experiential lived knowledge in Black parenting that is informed by a different history and epistemological paradigm than the perceived normative one. The next section discusses the parenting strategy of teaching children about pride in themselves and their race.

### *Teaching Self- and Racial-Pride*

Meeshey Williams-Wheeler argues that, “African American mothers are cognizant of and concerned about the societal challenges their children may encounter and tend to employ positive supportive parenting practices that may serve to buffer against prejudice and discrimination” (16) and, as a result of such practices, children of African American mothers are more competent in their ability to deal with social barriers and other discriminatory experiences such as racism, sexism, and ageism. Furthermore, as Bush argues, Black mothers also try to shape their children by instilling “qualities that are more of a balanced or synthesis and are somewhere in the middle of traditional Europeanized

dichotomization of masculinity or femininity,” which include valuing strength in mind and heart, compassion, belief in God, and “being true to self” (384). These strategies, particularly for middle-class Black children, “carefully and comprehensively mould and develop them into a particular kind of social and educational subject” (Vincent et al. 430). Mothers make concerted efforts to introduce their children to activities and literature that highlight pride in the children themselves and Black people in general. In addition, parents enrol their children in cultural and racial group activities such as weekly Black Heritage programs and celebratory activities such as kwanzaa. In some cases, when the choices exist within the school curriculum, Black parents insist that their children’s assignments are focused on the Black experience. Through parenting, Black mothers teach cultural pride to children to help prepare them for experiences of racial biases and discrimination. This practice is what Vincent et al. describe as “concerted cultivation” (435). Vincent et al. suggest that cultural

activities [are] not *specifically* chosen to reinforce children’s understanding of and pride in being Black, they [are] arranged to offer the children the chance to develop skills and abilities, cultural and social resources, in order to strengthen their position as they navigate a racially unequal society. (439)

In other words, as Black women we must be unrelenting in our parenting, especially given that Black bodies are held suspect and, as Adjei surmised in his recent article “When Blackness Shows up Uninvited” in *White spaces*, they are routinely destroyed (29-30). These teachings emphasize stories of a different kind—these can be effectively seen as “counter-stories.” The narrative in the next section represents the counter-story about Black mothering from the perspective of a Black daughter. I used her narrative, as previously noted, to highlight the nuances of mothering children when for them, race and racism is an underdeveloped concept.

### Renee’s Counter-Story

Renee’s counter-story takes up the question of Black mothering in a particular way. Why this story and why my daughter’s narrative instead of my own? I have told my stories many times and so I thought it was time for my daughter’s voice to be heard. I sent an email to both my daughters as follows:

*I have an idea. No rolling of eyes or hard breathing out: here it is: I have a good opportunity to get an article published and I would like your input. I would like each of you to write me a short letter telling me what you liked*



*and didn't like about the way I mother you. Don't worry about hurting my feelings. I want to critically look at how my race and culture helped to construct my mothering principles and practices. Feel free to include my restrictions on clothes, nail polish, makeup, sleepovers, academic things, activities we did, lessons you took, things you were forced to do, ways I support you and everything in between. Thank you. Love you both.*

Eboni-Rai explained that the deadline for the letter was in conflict with her schedule but promised to contribute in other ways. Renee accepted the offer and submitted her narrative. I promised to edit only spelling and grammatical errors and not make this piece “too radical.” She offers a balanced approach that presents mothering as a challenge and an opportunity to help shape a human being from birth. Simultaneously, she depicts the delicate balance that is required in Black mothering practices and, extraordinarily, pulls back her historical curtains to show how Black mothering affected and shaped her as a young child and subsequently as a woman. Renee’s narrative, while explicit in some ways and appearing carefully crafted to protect me, did not mention any of her experiences with racism, one of the major considerations in why Black women, myself included, employ certain mothering strategies. Renee writes:

*“I think that being a mother is very much like loving.... There really isn't a beginning or an end. Some people may think that mothering begins the moment you have your first child, but I think that mothering begins the moment that we are born.... Every joy and every hardship a woman endures in her life will shape the way she mothers her own child... And I believe that my own mother is no exception.... My mother gave birth to me when she was 19 years old. As a young child, I remember looking at my mom and thinking that she was the smartest, the prettiest, the coolest and best woman on the planet... Not only did I want to be just like her, but I wanted her to tell me that I was just like her... I wanted to please and impress her... My mother was not a “polite” mother or “nice” mother.... She was radical, different, bold, defiant and sometimes scary. I remember sitting at the dinner table for hours until I finished eating the food on my plate; being scared because I refused to tell her what 7x3 was or gazing into the eyes of the most powerful source in my life and seeing complete disappointment because she expected better of me. I never for one second ever thought that my mother was heartless, in fact I knew that her disappointment, her frustration and her anger was rooted in her desire for me to be my best... I only wished that she knew in those moments that the intensity, the sharpness of the words and the anger only made me more afraid to try.... But how could she know?... This is how my mother was mothered, how my mother's mother was mothered.... How could she know?...”*



*“I’ve learned so much from my mother. My mother is my best friend and the one person who knows every single thing about me. My mother is the person who loves me unconditionally, but will never sit back, lay down or shut up, even if I asked her to.... My mother’s love is fierce, infinite, timeless, unbreakable.... My mother’s love pisses me off sometimes, challenges me, makes me feel worthy and shields me from the ugliness of the world.... At the age of 34 I see and know things that I could not have seen or known with my child like eyes. Now I know that when I was afraid, she was afraid too. I know that my mother did the best job she could, with the tools that she inherited and learned along the way and did an awesome job raising me. I have experienced epic failures and intense joy in my life.... I am an extraordinary woman and I have her to thank for that.”*

*“My mother and I, we grew up together.... As a child, I watched my mother grow from child to woman, to wise woman.... I watched as my mother developed new skills to express pain, frustration, disappointment.... I watched my mother learn new ways to love—new ways to mother.... We went from having an underdeveloped relationship where fear, force and control was the dominant energy to having one where patience, compassion and trust (for ourselves and each other) is what set the tone for every conversation. This did not happen overnight, but together we did the work.”*

*“And I don’t mean to paint a view that my relationship with my mom was negative, bad or terrible. I’ve highlighted some of the things that did not work... But there are many things about the way she mothered me in my early years that was nothing short of divine. I learned to read at the age of three and by five I was reading medical encyclopaedias and learning about the human body for fun. I can remember singing with my mom in the kitchen as we made pancakes, watching Sunday morning black and white movies together.... We took trips all over the city, enjoyed cultural festivals.... We talked, we laughed and we played together.... My mom gave me the world and even when she was working three jobs and sometimes did not have food for herself she fed me.*

*“Sure, when I look back at the way I was raised, like all children, I can see many things that did not work. I also see many things that did work. I am clear that though I do not have children yet, everything that I am doing today is laying the foundation for how I will mother my children tomorrow. I take full responsibility for my life, for the life of my future children and for the relationship that I have with my mother. My mother did her job and she did it well – she raised me. And everything that I receive from her now is like the icing on the cake. I am forever grateful for my Mom. I love her soft bits and her sharp bits. I love all of her and I know without a shadow of a doubt that she loves all of me.... And nothing else matters.”*

### **What Story Does Renee’s Narrative Tell?**

Renee’s narrative tells her story and provides a “counter-story” to the majoritarian

stories popularized in print and video media. Her narrative corroborates the literature that suggests that Black women are more involved with the parenting of their children and are strategic in guiding them (Bush; Lalonde et al.; Strom et al.; Williams-Wheeler). Specifically, she discusses her ability to read at an early age and her multiplication table practice, indications that education is indeed important to Black mothers—a point I highlighted as part of the strategies of Black parenting. Renee also points to my expectations that she had to be successful, and when she had not succeeded as defined in the home, she felt punished with looks of disappointment. Once again, this observation further highlights the ways in which fear of Black children’s failure, resulting from systemic racism, grounds the parenting strategies of Black mothers.

In her narrative, Renee realizes the effects of “protective carework” (Elliot and Aseltine 721) when she highlights “that when I was afraid, she [mom] was afraid too.” I remember an incident that set my teeth on edge and caused me sleepless nights filled with fear—the kind of fear that is particular to the experience of Black mothers. Renee, a confident and academically strong child, announced that she was “not smart” anymore after her teacher isolated the four Black children in her class at one table and placed a mixture of East Asian and White students at different tables designated the “smart tables.” By the time I became aware of this cruelty, the damage was done and irreversible for years, despite strategies employed precisely to address such damage. I recall that it was during this time that I increased the pressure on young Renee out of fear that she would fail, and knowing that failing could never be an option for a Black child. In adulthood, Renee suggests that “my mother’s love ... makes me feel worthy and shields me from the ugliness of the world.” Did she understand the deliberateness of my parenting strategy as a young child or teenager? My parenting strategies were designed to help insulate my daughters from racism and the other forms of discrimination they would face as a result of wearing the identity marker of “Blackness” and living in the skin of a young Black girl in Canada. But, as a Black mother, shielding my children from the often unpleasantness in the world is and remains only one part of the mothering role. Black women also serve as role models for their children—an important role that cannot be left up to strangers in the form of superstars and entertainers.

### **Black Mothers as Supporters and Role Models**

As Renee’s final words affirm, Black mothers use themselves as role models for their children. While, perhaps arguably, all mothers strive to be role models, this utility is especially important in the context of Black mothering in a “hostile” climate. Wanda Thomas Bernard and her daughter Candace

Bernard discussed the strengths and challenges of their mother-daughter relationship in the article “Passing the Torch.” From this dialogue, Wanda’s role modeling and Candace’s love and respect for her mother is readily apparent. Similarly, Renee discusses her feeling about me (her mother) as a young girl; she thought that I “was the smartest, the prettiest, the coolest and best woman on the planet... Not only did I want to be just like her, but I wanted her to tell me that I was just like her ... I wanted to please and impress her.” Renee’s desire to emulate further affirms the narrative of Black mothers using themselves as role models. To that end, a positive story emerges out of the acerbic meta-narrative. The “counter-stories” of our daughters as young Black women are significantly different from the master story that suggests that Black women are “bad mothers.” Eurocentric notions of motherhood suggest that aside from suckling White babies historically (read Mammy), and caring for them as domestic workers in recent times, Black mothers are valueless. However, I have demonstrated that Black daughters see their mothers as role models and this could only be accomplished with trust and respect born out of the specific race-based mothering strategies and practices. At one point, Renee described the mother-daughter relationship as being “underdeveloped ... where fear, force and control was the dominant energy.” Rather than using the measurements of White Western values systems to vilify their mothers, Black daughters like Renee create “counter-stories” which, for them, provide a rationale for the mothering strategies they were raised with. That is to say, the daughters’ “counter-stories” suggest a deep understanding for the context of their mothers’ struggle in which:

Black mothers have historically been charged with the responsibility of providing education, social, and political awareness, in addition to unconditional love, nurturance, socialization, and values to their children, and the children in their communities. They have been expected to fulfill these roles, while fighting the contradictory role prescriptions and externally imposed definitions of their roles. (Bernard and Bernard 47)

If we follow Bernard and Bernard’s reasoning, Black mothers have little power to change the social script handed to them and their children and so the mothers must navigate their way through the maze regardless of the barriers they encounter. I too, as a Black mother, feel the “fixed” roles (Fanon 121) that I and my Black children have been assigned; and, like Fanon, I want to fight that script but realize that it is etched on our bodies and written in blood. Hence, I try to serve as a role model and an example of a Black person who has been “allowed” to escape the *ordained* role.

## Conclusion: Parenting and Mothering Children to Survive

Part of my role as a Black mother is to prepare my children to successfully navigate the world around them by teaching them to be responsible, independent, self-sufficient, strong, resourceful, goal-oriented, and to make good choices. Consequently, Renee's reflection that "my mother's love is fierce, infinite, timeless, unbreakable.... My mother's love pisses me off sometimes, challenges me..." is not surprising. The fierce fighting *every day* on behalf of my children, the invisibility of the scars, and the silence that shrouds the fight on the frontlines of what feels like a battlefield (of a different kind), distorts the reality of what social warfare really is for Black mothers and their children. However, in spite of the challenges, my daughter and I have maintained a close and loving relationship, one where she receives encouragement, support, and unconditional love. Notwithstanding the display of bravado, courage, fierceness, and personal success, not a day goes by when my heart is completely at ease and my fears are hushed. I still fear for my children's safety; for them not achieving success according to White standards and being blamed and punished when they refuse to acquiesce; for them being targeted and not treated fairly; for them being raped and sexually assaulted because Black women's and girls' bodies are to be violated and discarded. Most of all, mi fraid fi mi pickney dem (I fear for my children) losing hope and confidence in themselves. These fears are *real* because I have known them intimately through my lived experience as a Black woman and mother. I want the cycle to stop with me. Consequently, I emphasize "protective carework" (Elliot and Aseltine 721) as one of my Black mother's parenting strategy. It is one way Black mothers can negotiate the racialized, cold climate of the "Great White North."

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