

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 3 June 2026

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A Literariness.org Project

Life in the Ghetto: Navigating Discrimination, Stereotypes and Black Resistance in Angie Thomas's *On the Come Up*

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Abstract: The Black community in the contemporary United States grapples with a set of challenges distinct from those faced by its enslaved ancestors. Although Emancipation symbolically broke the chains of slavery, systems of racial segregation and inequality persisted, binding Black Americans through invisible constraints operating within social, political, and legal spheres. In everyday life, Black individuals continue to encounter multiple forms of racial injustice. Resistance to such systemic racism—despite constitutional guarantees and anti-discrimination laws—manifests in diverse and complex ways across different domains of life.

Angie Thomas, in her novel *On the Come Up*, foregrounds the layered injustices experienced by Black communities in present-day America and explores the various modes of resistance that emerge in response. This paper analyses the novel to unravel the levels of discrimination towards Black people and to identify patterns of resistance within Black communities, with particular attention to Black youth. Young Black Americans not only confront systemic racism that reduces them to damaging stereotypes—such as hoodlums, drug dealers, and gangsters—but are also compelled to navigate the marginal spaces into which they are pushed without internalising or performing these imposed identities. The paper argues that the novel resists the commodification of Black rage and critiques the expectation that Black resistance must conform to roles prescribed by racist structures. Further, it examines how Thomas interrogates the limits of Fanonian violence as an effective mode of resistance within the post-Civil Rights context of the United States.

Keywords: *Black Resistance, Stereotyping, Systemic Racism, Black Youth, Contemporary America*

Introduction

“We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.”
—Michelle Alexander

Racial discrimination persists as an enduring condition in the lives of Black people in contemporary America. Despite the eradication of the legal apparatus of racism decades ago, racial caste evolves into different forms in different generations and continues to govern the lives of coloured minorities. Black people, in the present-day U.S., confront challenges conditioned by discrimination based on race, which are not explicit but are deeply entrenched in the structures of society. Their lives are bound by invisible chains of racism, despite the constitutional guarantee of justice and equality. Evolving forms of racism ensure the continuity of discrimination in America. For instance, Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow*, asserts that the criminal justice system in modern-day U.S., which increasingly targets Black people, is a reconfigured form of systemic racism.

In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color “criminals” and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you're labelled a felon, the old forms of discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps, and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service are suddenly legal. (2)

African Americans are often represented in mainstream discourses as members of particular groups associated with illegal activities and crime. Public perception imagines members of the Black community as inherently barbaric and brazen offenders, posing serious threats to civilised society. The everyday life of Black people is marked by constant vigilance to avoid being perceived as a threat by authorities and the dominant social order. Black people are forced to prove their innocence for no apparent reason in a country that, ironically enough, considers itself the most egalitarian, advanced, and just of all nations in the world.

Episodes of Black resistance to systemic injustice have significantly marked the recent history of America. Each incidence of injustice against the Black community serves as a reminder of the long history of violent racism and inequalities that ignite their calls for justice and change. Black resistance to the recast forms of racism in contemporary America is multifaceted, ranging from street protests to legal contestations to cultural and literary production. Literature by Black people not only creates a legitimate space for themselves in the world but also dismantles images created by dominant discourses. Contemporary African American writers such as Colson Whitehead, Jesmyn Ward, Ta-

Nehisi Coates, Angie Thomas, etc., following the lead of their predecessors, bear witness to the unpleasant realities of Black lives, for “often it is only in the realm of fiction that this reality can be acknowledged, that the unspeakable can be named” (187 hooks). Literature by Black writers serves as testimony to the constraining circumstances imposed upon their lives due to their racial identity. These works often fulfil a dual function: they educate an indifferent world about Black lived realities by granting them global visibility, while simultaneously empowering the community from within. African American literature also operates as a site of reflexive critique, in which the writers do not obscure the shortcomings within their own communities. In the present paper, a novel by the prominent African American author, Angie Thomas, is analysed to study the nature of resistance against racism in contemporary America. It also examines how the Black youth of the 21st century confronts the stereotypical moulds set for them by the dominating society. Analysis of the author’s idea of resistance in the present era, where resistance itself is delegitimised as a threatening entity to civil society, is also conducted.

Discrimination, Stereotype, and Black Resistance

On the Come Up (2019), award-winning author Angie Thomas's second novel, follows her much-acclaimed debut, *The Hate U Give*. Thomas deploys fiction to articulate her voice of dissent against the racial discrimination that defines the lives of Black people in contemporary America. Her novels showcase the different levels of discrimination and Black people’s resistance to it through the lives of her characters. Set in the impoverished Black neighbourhood of Garden Heights, the novel illustrates the trials and tribulations of Black people living in such localities. *On the Come Up* follows Brianna “Bri” Jackson—a sixteen-year-old aspiring rapper—on her journey to the realisation of her dreams. Bri has to fight multiple battles on a daily basis. On the larger front, she fights against the prejudices of the dominant society towards Black people. In her neighbourhood, she has to stand up against the gang-affiliated groups and their deadly feuds, which not only mar the reputation of Blacks but also make a peaceful life impossible. Additionally, on a personal level, she struggles with the constrained financial situation of her family.

I

On the Come Up critically examines multiple dimensions of Black life in the “ghetto”. Thomas sheds light on the harrowing situations that Black people, living in racially segregated, economically weak neighbourhoods, endure in different walks of life. The events in the novel resonate with the findings of numerous scholarly analyses that highlight the subtle and disguised ways in which racism operates in America in the contemporary era of colour-blind ideology. Research from the Urban Institute traces the evolution of America’s separate and unequal neighbourhoods. It shows how they

resulted from “plans, policies, and practices of racial exclusion and disinvestment...” The research further highlights the persistence of racially unequal neighbourhoods in contemporary America and their impact on the lives of its residents. As the report notes, “Living in segregated neighborhoods has blocked people of color from the educational opportunities, jobs, and wealth building necessary to access well-resourced neighborhoods... many people of color remain locked in disinvested neighborhoods, while predominantly white neighborhoods grow and prosper more readily.”

Garden Heights is subject to systemic discrimination and neglect by the authorities. Bri and her peers struggle to navigate life in the Garden, hoping to leave it for a better life in the future. The novel opens in a post-riots Garden Heights. The riots—a major event in Thomas’s earlier novel—occurred during protests following the acquittal of a white police officer who shot an unarmed Black teenager, killing him on the spot. The Garden incurred severe losses after the riot, which remain unpaid by the authorities.

I stare at what’s left of the Garden. We’re on Clover Street, which used to be one of the busiest streets in Garden Heights, but ever since the riots, there’s a bunch of charred rubble and boarded-up buildings... “Doubt they’ll ever fix this mess,” Jay says. “It’s like they want us to remember what happens when we step out of the line.” (Thomas 68)

Many institutions in the neighbourhood suffered losses, which were irreparable without aid from the authorities. The neglect results in institutions laying off employees, making life even more difficult. Bri stares at an empty fridge and worries about food, shelter, and warmth in the days following her mother’s layoff from her position as a church secretary. Jay, Bri’s mother, a former drug addict, finds it very difficult to find another job immediately. In Jay’s predicament, the author points to another layer of discrimination. It highlights the difference between how society looks at the mistakes of White people and those of Black people. While rich White people are pardoned immediately and can return to their normal lives easily, the Blacks, especially the poor, find it immensely difficult to be forgiven and can never fully return to their normal lives.

“You know how many rich white folks come to the courthouse on drug possession?”

“A whole lot,” says Jay.

“Too many,” Aunt ‘Chelle says. “Every single one gets a little slap on the wrist and goes right back into the society, like it’s all good. Black folks or poor folks get on drugs?”

“We’re ruined for life,” Jay says. (101)

Life in the neighbourhood becomes increasingly difficult after the riots. The area is kept under constant surveillance by the police, an unwelcome intrusion which reinforces the disparity between the

people of the neighbourhood and those outside it. “The cops constantly drive by, but that’s the new normal in the Garden. It’s supposed to be on some ‘Hi, I’m your friendly neighbourhood cop who won’t shoot you’ type shit, but it comes off as some ‘We’re keeping an eye on your black asses’ type shit.” (Thomas 23) The constant presence of the police terrifies Bri; her trauma at the anticipation of being held up by the cops reflects the real-life situation of young Black people in the U.S. Several studies reveal the far-reaching consequences of surveillance in the lives of Black youth. According to research archived by the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH), exposure to hyper-surveillance may put these young people at risk of developing mental health disorders and lead to deep-seated psychological trauma. (Webb et al.)

The system, with racism entrenched in its operations, makes it hard for Black people to succeed in life. Employers apply different standards when reviewing applications from Black and White applicants. Black people with high-profile resumes find it harder to get a job than White people with low-profile resumes. (Chicago Booth Review) Despite doing everything right, Bri’s brother, Trey—a brilliant student and qualified young man—is unable to find a decent job to support his family. When he works at a pizza shop out of desperation, he is scorned by the thugs in his community, who took the illicit route to stability. The double standards of the system, which push the young Black people to inevitable destruction, are exposed through the different characters in the story. Throughout the narrative, the author points out how the discriminatory treatment by the dominant culture hinders the Black people’s attainment of success and instead forces them into the lure of easy bucks through illicit business. The text foregrounds the bitter irony of the Jackson family’s situation—Aunt Pooh, Bri’s Aunt, a drug dealer and gang member, is the only financially stable figure in the family. At the same time, those who work legitimately often rely on the food she provides. “It is kinda messed up. Here my brother is, doing everything right, and nothing’s coming from it. Meanwhile, Aunt Pooh’s doing everything we’ve been told not do, and she’s giving us food when we need it...The drug dealers in my neighborhood aren’t struggling. Everybody else is.” (Thomas 218) Thomas clearly sketches how the prevailing social order drives the young Black people towards such unlawful activities, while also adopting a self-reflexive critical stance towards illegal business, gang violence, and criminal activities among Black people. The text lays bare the ordeals of living in a neighbourhood infested with violent gangsters, the potential threats and the long-lasting consequences. Bri’s father, an underground rap legend, Lawrence “Lawless” Jackson, better known as Law, is murdered by gangsters before he can make it big in music. The incident, which occurred when she was four, becomes a defining factor of her life. She is denied the prospect of stability and fulfilment owing to the internecine violence of the gangs. Depicting the life of a tragedy-stricken family struggling in a poor Black neighbourhood, the narrative foregrounds the links between the insidious operation of systemic racism and the lived condition of the downtrodden.

II

Racialised stereotypes embedded in the American collective imagination serve to legitimise discrimination against African Americans, and this extends well beyond the atrocities endured by Black people in everyday life. Thomas depicts the magnitude of racial discrimination in contemporary U.S. society and exposes how stereotypes facilitate it. The narrative problematises the image of Black people constructed in the dominant psyche. “Thomas challenges these stereotypes in her novels and shows that Blackness is more than T.V. clichés.” (Lee) Bri’s experiences on different occasions delineate how “stereotypes have the potential to uphold systemic oppression across societal contexts” (Melson-Silimon et al., 2023). As a Black girl who asks uncomfortable questions to her white teachers, Bri often ends up in the principal’s office for being “aggressive.” Thomas highlights how legitimate questions about discrimination and inequality are considered offensive in a society that claims to be the apostle of democracy. Bri’s behaviour is often flagged as aggressive, which is attributed to her racial identity. The bias that Black students face when they question the system is emphasised. The school officials take for granted that Bri is aggressive, in accordance with the preconceived image in the public domain.

“Aggressive” is used to describe me a lot. It’s supposed to mean threatening, but I’ve never threatened anybody. I just say stuff that my teachers don’t like. All of them except Mrs. Murray, who happens to be my only black teacher. There was the time in history class during Black History Month. I asked Mr. Kincaid why we don’t ever talk about black people before slavery. His pale cheeks reddened.

“Because we’re following a lesson plan, Brianna,” he said.

“Yeah, but don’t you come up with the lesson plans?” I asked.

“I will not tolerate outbursts in class.”

“I’m just saying, don’t act like black people didn’t exist before –”

He told me to go to the office. Wrote me up as being “aggressive.” (Thomas 66-67)

Thomas calls attention to the fact that the perpetrators of racism are not always individuals, but the system itself. The prevalent Stereotypical images of Blacks in society make racial discrimination seem justifiable. Systemic injustices towards people of colour are rarely questioned by the broader public. Bri’s bitter experience at school exemplifies the unfair treatment to which Black people may be subjected, even in spaces assumed to be safe. Long and Tate, the school guards, tend to get rough with the Black and Latinx students. The fact that Long himself is Black does not stop him from being discriminatory towards kids of colour. “Nobody wants to say it, but if you’re black or brown, you’re

more likely to end up on their radar, even though Long himself is black.” (11-12) When Bri is pushed and pinned to the ground by school guards and accused of being uncooperative during a security check, the novel reveals how racialised violence operates through institutional authority. This episode reflects Angela Davis’s argument in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* that “Racism is so dangerous because it does not necessarily depend on individual actors, but rather is deeply embedded in the apparatus...”, thereby emphasising the need for an analysis that moves beyond individual acts of racism. The guards deal with Bri as though she is a criminal suspect, and she is presumed to be a drug dealer by the majority of students and parents in the days following the incident. The novel articulates the implications of stereotypes in the lives of Black people through this specific episode and more broadly throughout the narrative. Bri’s experiences in daily life, as depicted in the novel, corroborate the arguments by Cynthia J. Najdowski in her article, which discusses different psychological impacts stereotypes can have on Black people. She documents how Black children are aware of negative racial stereotypes early in life. Bri describes how a commonplace activity like shopping becomes terrifying for Black kids, causing psychological trauma in them. “It’s like how when I go in a store in Midtown-the-neighbourhood, and the clerks watch me extra close or follow me around. I know I’m not stealing, but I get scared that they think I’m stealing.” (Thomas 139) Black people’s behaviour in public is often shaped by a constant awareness of how they may be perceived, leading them to act cautiously to avoid being seen as a threat. They must navigate unspoken yet understood social codes. Through these details, the novel exposes how systemic suspicion restricts their everyday freedom and renders ordinary life difficult.

Furious at being labelled a hoodlum by Long, Bri unleashes her rage through music. Her song transcends personal experiences and addresses the inequalities towards the Black community as a whole. Bri represents the politically conscious Black youth of contemporary U.S., and her song constitutes young Black people’s retort to the world that always construes them as criminalised subjects.

... We don’t bust, yet they blame us for murder

You think I’m a thug? Well, I claim it.

This Glock, yeah, I cock it and aim it.

That’s what you expect, bitch, ain’t it?

The picture you painted, I frame it.

I approach, you watch close, I’m a threat...

Rap, being one of the largest music genres in America, provides a space for resistance for the marginalised groups. Historically, Black Americans from urban areas utilised hip hop to make themselves visible. However, over time, capitalism has devised ways to commodify Black rage. The article, “Hip Hop, the Law, the Commodified Gangsta”, provides a brief context about how rap has transformed in accordance with the market demand. (Folami) “...critics contend that today’s “gangsta” lyrics are merely a corporate-creation, designed to sell an image that is popular with consumers.” (Folami 145) The novel interrogates how racial capitalism promotes and rewards the performance of the violent Black image. Bri’s song, which is called *On the Come Up*, unintentionally reinforces the very stereotypes she rapped against. Despite being an instant hit over the internet, the expression of Bri’s raw, untamed anger receives mixed reviews. Her rebellious words are interpreted literally; the defiant irony is overlooked, depicting her as an angry black girl. In the ensuing events, the author uncovers a complicity within some segments of Black artistic production to commodify Black rage. While the dominant white society views Bri’s fame with apprehension, some businessmen admire her for “playing the role”. Bri is approached by her late father’s rich manager, Supreme, who has ties with established music production companies. He encourages her to play the role of the threatening Black teenager. “The key for you is to play the role, whatever that role is...I don’t walk outta there a *broke nigga*, I bet you that. ’Cause I play the role that they think I am. That’s how we make this game work for us. Use whatever they think of us to our advantage.” (Thomas 214-215) Her free-style rap is replaced with scripted ones, which attests to the stereotypical image of Black people. She is asked to rap about the dangerous Black people, which would excite the white kids in the suburbs who are the biggest consumers of hip-hop. “You know what the kids in the suburbs love? Listening to shit that scares their parents. You scare the hell outta their folks, they’ll flock to you like birds.” (215) When Supreme reveals to Bri that he was the one who asked her father to play the role and rap about the street, Thomas points to the fatal consequences of playing the stereotypical image, which may eventually blur into lived realities. The author conceptualises resistance through Bri’s eventual refusal to comply with the schemes of capitalist demands.

III

Angie Thomas depicts Black American resistance to oppression at multiple levels in *On the Come Up*. Interrogating the day-to-day struggles of the African American community in contemporary America, she presents a form of resistance suited to the post-Civil Rights United States. Through specific events in the narrative, she advocates a disciplined and reconfigured mode of resistance suited to a period in which armed revolution is widely delegitimised. Thomas echoes Angela Davis’s formulation in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* that freedom must be continuously defended. She asserts that consistent action against oppression is the key to liberation, and passive suffering is

dismissed as a non-option. Bri's bitter experience of injustice by the school guards just after her friend Sonny had suggested to "just ignore them" (Thomas 59) explicitly points to this.

While refraining from condemning revolutionary or armed resistance, Thomas tests the viability of models of resistance such as those grounded in Frantz Fanon's theorisation of violence. Fanon positions violence as a response and as a historically conditioned eruption of accumulated oppression that consolidates into revolutionary struggle. The text exposes the diminished efficiency of such eruptive violence within the political landscape of contemporary America, where such defiance is rapidly criminalised. Thomas instead situates resistance in calculated and collective actions shaped by prevailing political constraints. The Black students' protest, following the reinstatement of Long and Tate, turns violent when some students unexpectedly attack them. In the subsequent disagreement that arises among the students, Thomas depicts her conceptualisation of resistance. She asserts that there is a certain code of conduct to mark their anguish about the injustice, through Malik's words: "There's way to go about it." (237) Bri's friend, Malik, is an embodiment of the model of resistance advocated by the author. He echoes her concern that such impulsive violence risks further marginalisation rather than liberation when he condemns the incident at school, "I guarantee those two are back because so many parents bought that 'drug dealer' narrative about Bri...They've got reason to believe we're all threats now. I bet there will be armed cops at the doors" (237)

Ethical self-preservation is foregrounded as the most essential element of resisting oppression in *On the Come Up*. According to the author, resistance demands action, but not at the cost of destroying the self. Thomas states her guiding philosophy in her previous work, *The Hate U Give*, "Sometimes you can do everything right and things will still go wrong. The key is to never stop doing right." (154) Holding on to one's values despite grave adversities and regardless of temporary disappointments is lauded as a remarkable achievement. Thomas renounces the tendency to let others dictate one's actions, which entails compromise of values. Jay advises Bri to remain steadfast and not stray from her scruples under the pressure of rage against injustice. "You're gonna face a whole lot of Longs and Tates in your life, baby. More than I'd like. But you never let their actions determine what you do. The moment you do, you've given them the power." (*On the Come Up* 70-71) The narrative presents two types of characters: people like Jay and Trey, who keep on doing the right thing despite setbacks and people like Aunt Pooh, who takes the easy route to escape. All these people fight racial discrimination, but Thomas illustrates how those who forsake values lose themselves and eventually fail to attain their goal. Thomas advocates against both "playing" and "being" in the roles attributed to Black people by the dominant society. Thomas challenges both the "performance" and the internalisation of roles imposed on Black people by the dominant society.

Through the central characters' responses to pressing situations that push them to their limits, diverse means of resisting systemic oppression while preserving ethical integrity are explored. In Bri's family's perseverance through the tragedy that befalls them, Thomas demonstrates the silent strength of wilful resistance. Jay, who had sought refuge in drugs to suppress the trauma of witnessing her husband's murder, fights all odds with sheer willpower after de-addiction. Her resistance comprises a persistent attempt to remain clean of drugs after years of addiction. Her life is a daily struggle against numerous oppressive forces working in tandem. Jay has to deal with the discrimination and neglect of the dominant society, which almost starves her family, while simultaneously fighting the prejudice of her own community. Even after being clean of drugs for eight years, she still has to prove herself every day. Nevertheless, she holds on without considering a quick illicit option to keep herself and her children safe and sound. With a steadfast commitment to her moral principles, she navigates the toughest times. In her determination to help rehabilitate other former drug addicts while being burdened by personal problems, Thomas highlights the model of communal solidarity envisaged by her. Jay is portrayed as a resolute, principled Black mother and through her character, Thomas indicates the need for moral refinement within Black families. Thomas asserts the importance of a sound family environment in assisting Black kids to traverse the adversities of racial discrimination in the larger society without compromising their ethical values.

In Trey's wisdom, the novel highlights the potential for excellence in young Black people. He is determined to protect his family amid formidable challenges without resorting to illicit means. Being a mature and sensible young man, he condemns gang culture and distances himself from such affiliations. Emphasising the importance that he attaches to education and his decision to major in psychology, the author stresses how education can positively impact an entire community. "There are a couple of reasons my brother majored in psychology. One, he says he wants to keep somebody from ending up like our mom did. Trey swears that if Jay had gotten counselling after seeing Dad die, she wouldn't have run to drugs to deal with the trauma." (*On the Come Up* 94)

In Malik's character, Thomas demonstrates another dimension of resistance. As a young man aware of the socio-political realities of the Black community, he is presented as a responsible, budding activist. Deeply conscious of the systemic injustice facing the Black community, Malik represents a responsible form of resistance. Though angered by the incidents around him, he retains his principled restraint. Rather than falling into traditional confrontational roles, he opts for organised, democratic strategies and also leverages modern media platforms to expose acts of racial injustice around him. Through Malik, Thomas articulates a viable method of resistance that strategically operates within contemporary systemic constraints.

Bri marks her dissent through music which becomes a potential tool in her hand to release her rage in an unconventional but powerful way. The text's insistence upon wielding art as a weapon against oppression is underscored by situating Bri's music within the hip-hop tradition, which carries the legacy of African American cultural resistance. Thomas transforms Bri's rap into a powerful medium of political testimony. Drawing on hip-hop's long history as a counter-discursive space for Black resistance, the work frames Bri's rap as an act of cultural and political defiance. However, in delineating Bri's resistance, Thomas advances beyond a mere analysis of how art becomes a site of resistance. She emphasises the moral responsibility an artist must bear when producing art, regarding the potential impact on the audience. When Bri meets Jojo, a young boy who idealises her, she is shocked to learn that her song misleads young kids in the neighbourhood. Her ultimate refusal to comply with the demands of the profit-driven music industry is influenced greatly by this realisation. During Bri's final performance, Thomas underscores the ethical weight of artistic representations.

I refuse to be their laugh, I refuse to be their pet, I refuse to be the reason some kid now claims a set...

You see, they figure I'm a nigga that's gon' rap 'bout pulling triggers, just to make their pockets bigger while the world yells I'm a sinner...

But I'm gon' speak on what I see and never claim it to be me. (On the Come Up 440)

Conclusion

On the Come Up insightfully portrays the pervasive nature of racial discrimination in the present-day United States by depicting the day-to-day struggles of Black Americans. Narrating tales of Black people's lives in a racially segregated and economically weak neighbourhood, the novel reveals insidious forms in which racism continues to infest their lives. Angie Thomas illustrates how they face discrimination in almost every aspect of life, regardless of multiple reforms aimed at supporting people of colour. Negative racial stereotypes play a significant role in perpetuating and legitimising racial discrimination. The extent of the impact such representations have on Black people's lives is showcased in the work. Thomas's work emphasises the need for internal reforms that would better equip the Black community to challenge systemic racism, rather than merely depicting racial discrimination and reactive resistance. Asserting the need for adaptive methods of resistance suitable for the contemporary political scenario, Thomas emphasises the importance of ethical self-preservation. Through this work, which insists on the ethical accountability of the artist, Thomas effectively inscribes her own voice of dissent against systemic racial injustice of contemporary times.

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