

Globalization and the Picture Book

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Abstract

Children's books have long been considered vehicles that both embody and transmit the culture of a society. Usually the cultural aspects represented in a picture book are those of a country's dominant cultural group, which is perceived as synonymous with the national culture. The writer of this article suggests that a national literature for children no longer exists, if it ever did. Further, following cultural theorist Stuart Hall's lead, the writer suggests that globalization of the children's book industry has prompted the emergence of both global and local literatures in place of a national literature. Information on some publishers' practices, together with salient examples of picture books from several countries, demonstrate the emergence of a new global culture in picture books that are intended to move seamlessly across national borders. This global culture cannot be found anywhere on the globe, although it does include many of the characteristics of mainstream American culture, which not coincidentally represents a large market for book publishers. Simultaneously to the appearance of these global books is the appearance of children's picture books that embody the cultures of non-mainstream groups within a given country, the presence of which challenges rather than reinforces the national identity of that country's literature for children.

In 1996, Jeffrey Garrett noted in his introduction to *The Best Children's Books in the World* that the term “international literature” was “a figment, as meaningless an abstraction as the notion of ‘the international child’,” as what it really denoted was a mosaic of the literature from countries around the world. “There IS no such thing as an international children’s book,” Garrett continues. “Every child’s book that is real and not the product of some multinational marketing department arises, like every real child, at the conjunction of a unique time with a unique place” (Garrett 1996: 7).

More and more often Garrett’s qualifier—“not the product of some multinational marketing department”—is taking precedence over the child’s book that is real, at the conjunction of a unique time with a unique place. What Garrett deemed a figment is quickly turning into a reality, as a body of literature is being created that is indeed international. The new international book may originate in a specific country, but its only home is virtual with a homogenized setting and a conception of the world that is characteristically American, in part influenced by the proliferation of American popular culture around the world. The globalized picture book is a story set everywhere and nowhere.

Children’s books have always been looked upon as vehicles that both embody and transmit the culture of a society. As the French scholar of comparative literature Paul Hazard noted in the 1930s, “We can disregard the literature for childhood only if we consider unimportant the way in which a national soul is formed and sustained” (1983: 111). A recent call for papers from *The Looking Glass*, an e-journal about children’s literature, focused on national literatures, defined as “differing representations of national cultures, values, and images through children’s and young adult literature” (“The Caucus Race,” 2008). Among others, the following questions were posed: “Do national literatures reflect their cultures or shape them? How is patriotism variously represented in a nation’s literary canon—does patriotism require the diminishment of Other nations or peoples? How do national literatures function as external ambassadors, offering a nation’s face to the world, or as internal ideologues, interpellating children and teens as model citizens?” (“Caucus Race”,

2008). Such questions complicate the underlying assumption by Hazard that the body of children's literature from a country represents a uniform national worldview that is passed on to the reader. While assuming the existence of national literatures, the questions posed by *The Looking Glass* suggest that national literatures may not be representative of the population as a whole and that emerging literary voices have the power to reshape national literatures.

The best-known classics of children's literature—books like *Pinocchio*, *Heidi*, *The Secret Garden*—have long been external ambassadors for their countries and taken to be, in Hazard's terms, sustenance for their respective national souls. Such classics, which have been translated widely and are known by readers around the world, have always either explicitly or implicitly conveyed the culture, history, and sensibilities of a discrete, albeit exclusivist, cultural or national population at a given time in history. In fact, they are metonymic; to the rest of the world, they have stood for their countries as a whole, but in their own countries, they represent only one facet of a complex social system. As with everything else in our postcolonial, poststructural world, the notion of a national literature is no longer stable. Johanna Spyri's *Heidi*, for example, transports readers to the Swiss Alps and advances the belief that a simple life and clean country air can cure a city girl's illness. For the reader whose sole knowledge of Switzerland comes from this book, Switzerland's image is that of a pastoral Arcadia, uncomplicated by the knowledge that the country also includes cities that lead the world in commerce and banking.

Just as the concept of national literatures is being challenged, so too the boundaries between genres in books are constantly shifting. Lengthy illustrated classics like *Heidi*, first published in 1880, have generally given way to novels with minimal, if any, illustration; today most visual images are to be found in picture books or transitional books. The same period of time has also seen great shifts in national boundaries, and more recently the electronic media have made national borders especially porous. In this article, I offer information on some publishers' practices, together with a few examples of picture books from several countries, to posit the

emergence of a new global culture in picture books that are intended to move seamlessly across national borders. This global culture is, in fact, virtual, as it cannot be found anywhere on the globe. Simultaneously emerging are children's picture books projecting cultural images that challenge rather than reinforce the national literatures of the countries under whose flags they are created.

In "The Global and the Local," Stuart Hall connects the nature of cultural identity with historical moments, noting that in our own time the form of cultural identity taken by nation-states has been "strongly centered, highly exclusive and exclusivist" (1997: 20). While national identity was once rooted in a single country, it has become "increasingly deterritorialized" as forced migration has caused large groups of people to move from their places of origin to other parts of the world (King 1997: 6). Hall identifies the new forms of globalization as global and local, "two faces of the same movement from one epoch of globalization, the one which has been dominated by the nation-state, the national economies, the national cultural identities, to something new" (1997: 27). The 'something new' is mass global culture, a homogenized form of cultural representation made possible by Western technologies and drawing from Western societies. "It is not attempting to produce little mini-versions of Englishness everywhere, or little versions of Americanness. It is wanting to recognize and absorb those differences within the larger, overarching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world" (Hall 1997: 28).

A comparison of two writer/illustrators of children's books, both Swedish and separated by over half a century, illustrate Hall's claim. From the 1920s through the 1960s, Maj Lindman wrote and illustrated two series of books about triplets: the Snipp, Snapp, Snurr books, about three boys, and the Flicka, Ricka, Dicka books, about three girls (who were originally named Rufsi, Tufsi, and Tott). English translations were published in the United States beginning in the 1930s and were a staple in public libraries. Every book begins with a variation of the line: "Snipp, Snapp, and Snurr, three little boys who live in Sweden, were on their way home from school one winter afternoon" or in the case of the other series, "Flicka, Ricka, and

Dicka were three little girls who lived in Sweden.” What stands out today is the extent to which the Swedish setting is foregrounded. I read these as a child in the 1950s, and knowing that I was reading about children in Sweden was neither more nor less appealing than if they had been set in another part of the United States, as I was not a well-traveled child. More important was that I knew these children lived in Sweden and did the same ordinary kinds of things I did—ride sleds, play in the snow—and had the same kinds of feelings I had. In *Flicka, Ricka, Dicka and their New Friend* (Lindman 1942: n.p.), the girls meet an older neighbor who turns out to have been a geography teacher. “Geography, you know, is all about places and people,” he tells them, and shares stories about the United States, which he praises as a “fine country” (n.p.) He urges them to visit there someday. The realistic illustrations featured the same kinds of images I was already used to from my Dick-and-Jane readers in school—mother in an apron and red-cheeked children coming in for lunch. I was a child of Scandinavian ancestry with roots in Minnesota, and despite their Swedish setting these books felt familiar to me, right down to the snowy winters that were similar to the ones I knew. To a child who had never experienced snow, these unfamiliar scenes might be equally fun to read about but more difficult to imagine and identify with.

Today some of the books in this series might seem hopelessly old-fashioned to a young reader, as they are inculcated with values and behaviors straightforwardly presented in keeping with the 1930s in America and, one assumes, Sweden, but viewed as mawkish in this era. For instance, Snipp, Snapp, and Snurr see a yellow sled in the store window and they want it (Lindman, 1936). Do they go home and ask their parents to buy it for them? Well, not quite. They figure out that they must earn money to buy it for themselves, so they ask their mother to help them earn it. They spend two weeks doing household chores—scrubbing the steps, doing the laundry by hand, peeling potatoes, going to the grocery store, dusting the bookcases and removing each book individually. At the end of the two weeks, they go with Mother to the store to get the sled. While she is inside buying it, they see a little boy crying in

front of the window. “What’s the matter,” they ask. “I want that sled so very much,” he replies, “I’ve never had a sled.” When the triplets learn that his family doesn’t have enough money, they decide to give him their new sled and go back to work for another two weeks. No grumbling ensues, but quite the opposite. “Do you remember how happy that little boy looked on the bright yellow sled?” they ask one another as they work at their chores. “And Snipp, Snapp, and Snurr were happy, too.”

A more contemporary Swedish series, this one set in the mid-1990s and written by Olof and Lena Landström, also illustrates everyday events in the life of a child. These books chronicle the life of a young boy, Will, who is close in age to the triplets—about 7 or 8 years old—as he goes to the post office, gets a new hat, or visits the barber shop. In the case of these books, however, nothing in the text or on the jacket flap of the U.S. edition tells us that Will lives in Sweden, where as a matter of fact his name was Nisse rather than Will. Anglicizing his name further obscures the Swedish origins of these books. Would young readers have enjoyed these books less if they thought they took place in another country? Conversely, will they like them more because they think the stories take place in a town somewhere in America, even one that doesn’t quite look like theirs? In *Will Goes to the Post Office*, Will’s mother sends him to the post office to collect a package addressed to him. He gains a couple of friends as he leaves his apartment building, and together they walk the few blocks along city sidewalks and across streets to get there. There’s nary a thought that three young children, one a toddler, would not be safe walking in the city on their own, and yet few American mothers would send their children on such an errand. The illustrations, too, offer details that do not quite fit into the American landscape. When Will arrives at the post office, it is identified by a signage that carries a golden post horn along with the word *Post* rather than the red, white and blue insignia of the U.S. Postal Service.

As in *Flicka, Ricka, Dicka and their New Friend* by Maj Lindman, geography plays a role in *Will Goes to the Post Office*. The big package from Uncle Ben turns out to be a globe. In both series, the authors stress the value of learning about the rest

of the world. It seems fair to read this interest in faraway places as an underlying cultural value of Swedish life, one which seems to have continued through the decades. Both Lindman's and the Landströms' books have something to tell readers about life in Sweden, and yet the more contemporary series by the Landströms has been de-territorialized and is able to slip through the porous national borders as easily as Americans used to be able to cross into Canada and back.

The contrast between Maj Lindman's two series and the Landströms' books about Will, published in the U.S. almost 50 years apart, illustrates a trend in international publishing. While publishing picture books about children's lives in other countries was looked upon positively in the 1940s, American publishers have recently been downplaying a sense of place and its cultural underpinnings and expression. Even when acquiring British books to publish in the United States, American editors have been quick to substitute American language for any obvious Britishisms. Their reasons are twofold: fear that the American reader will not understand, and fear that the reviewer will scent the book's 'Britishness' and consider it a strike against the book. While the Harry Potter phenomenon has proven that neither concern is valid, picture books continue to be Americanized. In fact, the rule of thumb, according to an American editor, is "The younger the child, the heavier the hand" (Whitehead 1991: 688). More recently there is evidence that publishers of books in European countries are getting out the pencil before a book even makes it into print, saving the American editor the extra work.

Picture books are expensive to produce. In the United States, the market for children's books is large, and American publishers can print books in large enough quantities to justify payments to the author and illustrator, as well as the one-time editorial and production costs of turning manuscript and artwork into a book. In most other countries with established publishing programs, that is not true. Governments must either subsidize publication, or the publisher must find partners from other countries to act as co-producers. Co-productions are very common in the international publishing world today and have been since at least the 1980s. This is how they work:

the originating publisher sells rights to as many publishers as he or she can on the basis of finished artwork and text. The publishers who buy rights translate the story and submit their texts to the originating publisher. The publisher then prints all of the language editions in sequence, changing the black plate (which carries the text) for each edition. Except for the text, the books all look identical from country to country. So this is the first way in which globalization is affecting the children's picture-book: the necessity for co-production to keep prices down and make publishing a picture book economically viable.

And exactly how does this influence the expression of culture, national or otherwise, to be found in these books? Well, imagine that you are creating one book that you would like to sell to as many publishers as possible. You don't want to include anything in the illustrations that might prevent a potential publisher from joining in on your co-production. In a recent article in *Bookbird*, the journal of international children's literature, a British illustrator discusses what co-productions have meant for him. "All manner of dos and don'ts for illustrators have sprung up in picture book editors' offices," he explains (Salisbury 2006: 7). Some of the don'ts: Don't include any "local" visual references—this would include the red double-decker buses so long associated with London or the position of the steering wheel in British vehicles. Better to create a setting that can be construed as "everywhere" so that readers in several countries can identify with the place. "Everywhere" is a land of nondescript buildings, generic parks, and unidentifiable skylines located somewhere between North America and Northern Europe.

Another variation of this same rule is at work. If American publishers or editors object to a particular element in a book, the artist or writer is instructed to change it so that the book can be sold in the United States. This is a more nuanced expression of erasing the sense of place—rooting out implicit cultural values that clash with American ones.

Birte Müller is a German artist living in Hamburg. She wrote and illustrated a picture book about a boy who complains about the healthy food his mother feeds him,

so the mother agrees to let him shop and cook for one day (Müller, 2004). After eating a breakfast and lunch of candy, doughnuts, and junk food, Finn predictably has a stomachache. When he feels better, he goes out to play with his friend and comes back hungry. As Müller first wrote it, Finn wants his mother to cook for him, but she reminds him that it was his day to cook and in the end serves him a piece of toast. Her intention is not to punish him, nor does he feel punished; they had struck a bargain, and she was holding him to it. American editors, perhaps influenced by the prevailing climate of oversolicitous parents, thought this response evidenced poor mothering. Not only did the American publisher require Müller to redraw the page, replacing the toast with a plate of spaghetti, but they also refocused the English translation into a lesson about healthy eating. Now Finn scans the refrigerator and spies some leftover spaghetti and sauce, which he asks his mother to reheat in the microwave. “Now that is a proper, healthy meal,” his mother announces. Because this was a co-production, the change in artwork required by the American publisher took effect for all of the editions in the countries where the book was published.

Birte Müller had another experience with the same American publisher over the book *Giant Jack* (2002). Jack is a rat being raised by a mouse mother in what we perceive as a typical cross-cultural adoption story: the child may look different from its siblings or parents, but it is part of the family now and equally loved. On one spread, the mouse mother is lying in a position facing the reader, and through her slip-like dress, her teats (four of them) are visible. For that reason, the American editor vetoed the picture. “I had to paint it again, because in America, I think, it’s an absolute no-no, even if it’s an animal” (Müller, 2007).

The more relaxed attitude toward nudity in other countries prevents some U.S. publishers from taking certain books from foreign publishers. Two recent examples from Germany illustrate this point clearly. In both of these cases, readers stood to learn a lot about contemporary life in Germany, including the fact that Germans generally live in much smaller spaces than Americans. The first is called, *Unser Haus!* [Our House] (Von Stemm, 2005) which refers to a whole apartment building,

six units in all. The cleverly designed book is printed on board and spiral-bound on both the left and right sides. It opens in the middle, with each side separated into three units representing each of the six apartments. The room layouts are the same, but the décor and the occupants vary. We see a variety of ethnic groups and family structures engaged in daily activities in each room. This includes a man in the shower in one apartment, and a woman on the toilet in another. The German literary agent for this book has stated that because of these images, she has been unable to interest an American publisher in this book, despite its clever design (Koppe, 2007).

The second example is Rotraut Susanne Berner's wonderful look-and-see book about winter (2003). This book is one of four volumes that show detailed pictures of daily life during each of the seasons and are clearly situated in Germany—the kind of book that is fun to pore over again and again. The book has a *Where's Waldo?* feel, as readers strive to follow the large cast of characters from page to page. An American publisher expressed interest in publishing the series on the condition that Berner make some changes: replace two nude art objects in the scene depicting the art gallery and delete the smoker. The first object is an impressionist-style painting of a reclining nude, and the second is a sculpture of a young male. Each is a small element on a busy page. Berner, author/illustrator, declined, pointing out that the *pimmelchen*, or “little Willie,” as it was translated, is only one-half a millimeter long, and the nude of the woman is quite obviously a painting (Paterson 2007). To top it off, a character in a café is seen holding a cigarette (although one must have the eyes of a child or a magnifying glass to discern the cigarette). Berner was not willing to censor herself but did suggest that the publisher put black rectangles over the offending items. That publisher decided not to publish the books after all. This case made the pages in the international press. Berner's response, who has been honored with the German Children's Literature Prize, is quoted in *The Independent*: “I thought, if there is going to be censorship, then at least it should be recognisable as such” (Paterson 2007). The point here is that the very details that so offend American publishers contribute to the realism portrayed in the book, and to eliminate them

would be to take the first step down the road toward global culture. In October 2008, the American publisher Chronicle Books quietly published all four of these books as a single volume, *In the Town All Year 'Round*, without any changes, and the book has garnered positive reviews without a single mention of nudity or cigarettes.

In short, the United States, which is the biggest single market for children's books as well as the single biggest producer, has become the tail wagging the dog when it comes to the nature and kind of cultural content that will be present in children's books. The rule of thumb seems to be: the less specificity, the better. As noted earlier, this "essentially . . . American conception of the world" is how Stuart Hall describes the new global mass culture. The result is that many picture books now reflect Hall's global mass culture, what I am calling a virtual global culture of picture books.

Concurrent with the coming of the globalized picture book is the emergence of the locally grounded picture book, set in a specific time and country but not consistent with the traditional image of the national culture. Stuart Hall's ideas of the global and the local prove especially useful in addressing this phenomenon. As Hall explains, the global and the local work in tandem in the move from the epoch of a world-system dominated by nation-states, with their independent national economies and national cultural identities, to an epoch dominated by global mass culture. "One of the things which happen when the nation-state begins to weaken, becoming less convincing and less powerful, is that the response seems to go in two ways simultaneously. It goes above the nation-state and it goes below it. It goes global and local in the same moment" (27). As the national cultural identities are assimilated into the global mass culture, space opens up for the emergence of local identities that have been heretofore overlooked. In practice, this emergence has manifested itself in the form of social and political movements that seek recognition for those of its citizens who don't match the image put forward as the national identity. Hall notes that these subjects "can only come into representation by, as it were, recovering their

own hidden histories. They have to try to retell the story from the bottom up, instead of from the top down” (35).

If the examples offered at the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) Congress held in 2010 are any indication, independent movements are afoot in countries around the world for ethnic and linguistic minorities to recapture their own histories and voices. These efforts come in large part from groups that have been politically oppressed or whose culture has been all but erased during a history of colonialism. Guatemalan writer and educator Victor Montejo, for instance, noted that Mayan culture in Guatemala, repressed since the Spanish conquest, is being revived by people of Mayan ancestry who recognize the importance of keeping their native language and culture alive. As part of this effort, Montejo interviewed Mayan elders to record and retell old stories and legends that were in danger of being forgotten. In addition, Montejo has created a simplified version of the *Popol Vuh* for children; a collection of Mayan creation stories, the *Popol Vuh* is both a sacred and significant text in Mayan culture.

In India, Tara Books is a small independent publisher that has arisen to fill in some of the gaps in what is available to Indian children. India didn’t really have its own tradition of picture books when Gita Wolf, who describes herself as “a former academic rash enough to start a publishing house,” began her venture (“Our Team,” 2010). Prior to that, picture books found in India were imported primarily from the U.K., and although the English language presented no problem, the story lines, art forms, and characters in the picture books had little relation to the lives of Indian children. Wolf was aware of the many indigenous art forms practiced in tribal communities in India and set out to find ways that the work of these artists, which contained their own visual grammar, could evolve into picture books. Rather than expecting their talents to conform to the established format and approach of the standard picture book, she created collaborative workshops where narrative art could emerge out of the artists’ worldviews. For example, *The London Jungle Book* represents artist Bhajju Shyam’s view of London through his Gond perspective

(Gond being a tribal community in central India). As explained in the foreword, wall art is a Gond tradition, and Shyam had been invited to London to create murals on the walls of a restaurant in an Indian neighborhood of London. Through symbolic images, Shyam depicts the distinctions between his culture and what he observed in London. The cover image overlaps two contrasting images that symbolize time: London's Big Ben that measures time for Londoners, and the rooster that tells Gonds that morning has come.

In the United States, Children's Book Press was founded in 1975 by Harriet Rohmer, a mother who saw the diversity in her children's classrooms and noted the absence of books that reflected that diversity. Since then, the non-profit press has been publishing picture books, usually bilingual, from the Latino, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and multiracial communities. To illustrate the difference between a book that reflects a local point of view rather than a national one, we need only compare Santiago and Lowry's *Home to Medicine Mountain* (1998) with Cheney and Glasser's *America: A Patriotic Primer* (2002). Santiago and Lowry's book tells the story of two Maidu Indian brothers from Northern California who are sent to an Indian boarding school at the southern end of the state, over 500 miles away. One illustration shows them in a classroom; on the board are written important events and concepts in the history of America: "1492 Discovery of America/ Manifest Destiny/ Louisiana Purchase/ 1849 Goldrush of California." The irony is clear, as the Maidu Indians lived in what is now California long before the New World was "discovered" in 1492, and the concept of Manifest Destiny led to the destruction of their lifeways and the influx of prospectors during the Gold Rush. Contrast this with Lynne Cheney's *America: A Patriotic Primer* (2002), which also glorifies the accomplishments of Europeans in the settling of America but with no intentional irony. She relegates all American Indians to one page: "N is for Native Americans, who came here first." Cheney tells her story from the top down, rather

than from the bottom up, and the book represents a regression toward the mid-twentieth-century attitudes with which she grew up.

In other countries, too, voices are emerging from the wider population that has long co-existed with the majority. For generations of readers, one of Canada's signature books has been *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). In many ways, Anne and her adopted community in Avonlea have represented to outsiders the idea of quintessential Canadianness: people descended from European immigrants, primarily British, living on sparsely populated land, with strong Christian beliefs and a reverence for nature. Yet at the time Montgomery was writing *Anne of Green Gables*, Canada was also home to its First Nations people as well as those whose ancestors came from Asia and other non-European countries. Only recently has their presence been noted in picture books as Canadian content laws foster home-grown talent. Paul Yee, a third-generation Chinese Canadian born in Saskatchewan, expands the Canadian national image with his picture book *Roses Sing on New Snow* (1991). Illustrated by Harvey Chan, this short piece of historical fiction depicts one of the Chinatowns that evolved in British Columbia to cater to the Chinese men who arrived to work in the goldfields and, later, to build the western segment of the Canadian Pacific Railroad. Against the backdrop of the Canadian Rockies, the daughter of a Chinese restaurant owner concocts savory meals that nourish the workers, who have left their families back in China, in both spirit and body. In *Tales from Gold Mountain: Stories of the Chinese in the New World* (1989), Yee shapes Chinese beliefs and events from nineteenth-century frontier life into original stories that contribute additional layers to the textbook version of Canadian history. More recent immigrant stories add further dimensions to the Canadian national image; in *Lights for Gita* (Gilmore, 2000) for instance, young Gita, newly arrived from India, invites a classmate over to her apartment to celebrate the Hindu holiday of Divali. Canada is, of course, just one of the many countries that are populated with immigrants whose presence has been overlooked in children's books.

We are entering a new era of identity where differences are to be found at the local level rather than the national level. Cornel West calls this phenomenon the new cultural politics of difference and notes that its “distinctive features . . . are to trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific and particular; and to historicize, contextualize and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing” (West 2000: 119). West’s statement brings us back to Stuart Hall’s idea of the global and the local, “two faces of the same movement from one epoch of globalization,” where cultural identity moves at once above and below the nation-state.

Trends in the book industry neatly exemplify Hall’s theory. On the one hand, formerly independent publishing firms are swallowed up by multinational media corporations, resulting in the commoditization of books, which in turn pushes the international picture book further into the world of virtual global culture. Simultaneously, small locally owned presses are emerging with a mission to fill the gaps with stories told from the bottom up. While independent presses need to support themselves, they are not beholden to the bottom line in the same way that behemoth corporations are. Instead, they are free to offer stories peopled with individuals at particular junctures of time and place without the expectation of selling into the world market. Thus the Goliath of the publishing world, the global picture book, is being challenged by an array of Davids who are publishing picture books that portray specific cultures. They haven’t the resources of the conglomerates, and often they struggle to gain visibility for their locally produced books among the mass of imported ones. It is too much to expect that, like David, they will prevail. Their goal, however, is not to gain international distribution—in that they would be imitating the global giants—but simply to affirm the cultural existence of and give voice to the groups of people being erased by the move toward global culture in picture books. These culturally specific books provide a countermeasure to the global book, leaving the concept of a national literature somewhere back in the twentieth century.

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