

Understanding Hybridity in Derek Walcott's *In a Green Night*

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Many contemporary classic discussions on post-colonial literary theory and practice such as *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin; *The Location of Culture* (1994) by Homi K Bhabha and others have offered dynamic perspectives pertaining to the post-colonial question of identity and representation. This paper proposes that cultural production in Post-Colonial situations inevitably concerns itself with the hybridized nature of Post-Colonial culture as strength rather than weakness. In this paper, an attempt has also been made to highlight this theoretical shift in Post-Colonial literature through a critical 'understanding' of 'hybridity' in Derek Walcott's *In a Green Night* (1962).

Where words itself fail to convey a final definite meaning in a Post-Colonial world, what would happen to notions of 'identity' and 'representation' that need to undergo the critical process of definition. To a scholar like Bill Ashcroft, one's cultural identity does not exist outside representation. So problem arises when it is an authentic fact that the process of definition of identity and representation of identity turns out finally to be a process of construction through language. In this pattern meaning of words become fluid in nature and are context bound but it is a known fact that context is boundless where notions of 'homes', 'homelands', 'nations', 'cultural identities' and 'representations' are at work and currency at the moment. This perspective has been constantly debated over, on the ground of contemporary literary concepts or theoretical point of views, to name some Benedict Anderson's take on the idea of 'nation' as an 'Imagined Community'; Salman Rushdie's path-breaking perspective of 'Imaginary Homelands'; Harish Trivedi's say about 'Nation in Imagination' and so on. Under such considerations, it has become a tremendously challenging task to locate the authentic orientation of a poet like Derek Walcott who belongs to the Post-Colonial West Indian 'multi-ethnic' culture. One needs to be firstly acquainted with an intricately complex concept like 'Hybridity' to see its relevance in Derek Walcott's poems.

In the celebrated essay 'Signs Taken For Wonders,' Homi K. Bhabha introduced his 'landmark' concept of 'hybridity' and examines several moments in Post-Colonial literature that depicts the 'sudden, fortuitous discovery of the English book' (LC 102). Bhabha suggests that the 'English book' (the bible, namely) is an emblem of colonial rule, desire, and discipline. The European book, in other words, is a 'sign taken for wonders' and a fetishized sign that glorifies the epistemological centrality and permanence of European dominance. Paradoxically it is an emblem of 'colonial ambivalence' that suggests the weakness of colonial discourse and its susceptibility to 'mimetic' subversion. Bhabha argues that the English book, instead of describing the fixity or irreducibility of European rule, in fact betrays these foundations of authority and moreover empowers the colonized subject with a mode of resistance against imperial oppression. In her pivotal essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Gayatri Spivak explores how subaltern communities (particularly women) are perhaps unavoidably constrained to 'speak' through the tropes and conventions of the hegemonic voices that have produced their very subalternity (Spivak 1995). In one way, Bhabha's notion of the mimicry of the 'English book' serve as a foil for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' for, whereas

Spivak seems to foreground the impossibility of linguistic subversion, Bhabha gives more credit to the colonized subject's linguistic agency.

What is of particular value is Homi Bhabha's understanding of 'hybridity'. The effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions. Through hybridization, new identities are constructed which are both resistant and compliant, which use tropes and selectively adopt values of the colonizer to construct a third identity, an identity described by Bhabha as 'third-space' or 'in-between'. In *The Location of Culture* (LC 1994), Bhabha tries to find a proper location for the confrontation of two cultures in the post-colonial period and points out that this in-between space for the impact of two cultures is called hybridity. In its general outlines, Bhabha's hybridity paradigm has enormous appeal: that the Post-Colonial location is one where the binary opposition of oppressor and oppressed, male and female, master and victim, has become irrelevant, that the new playing field is one of performative contestation rather than ethnic or national separation and rivalry. In the Introduction to *The Location of Culture* (LC), Bhabha talks of 'the borderline work of culture' as one that 'demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present,' one that 'creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation" (LC 7). 'Such art,' he suggests, 'renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent "in-between" space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present' (LC 7).

From an understanding of the various critical theoretical point of views as discussed above, one can infer that there can be no single, or correct, exclusive concept of hybridity for, wherever it emerges it suggests the "impossibility of essentialism"(to use Robert Young's phrase). Hence it would be challenging to examine the operation of this dynamic concept in a work like Derek Walcott's 'In a Green Night' (1962) poems and see as to 'how' this text manifested his primary aim—to create a literature 'true' to West Indian life.

On receiving the Nobel Prize in literature for the year 1992, Derek Walcott addresses his idea of poetry as:

Poetry, which is perfection's sweat but which must seem as fresh as the raindrops on a statue's brow, combines the natural and the marmoreal; it conjugates both tenses simultaneously: the past and the present, if the past is the sculpture and the present the beads of dew or rain on the forehead of the past. There is the buried language and there is the individual vocabulary, and the process of poetry is one of excavation and of self-discovery. (from the Nobel Lecture, 1992)

The publication of Derek Walcott's *In a Green Night* (IGN 1962) marks a turning point in the history of West Indian poetry, at once for liberating it from a simple, mindless romanticism, a weak historicism, over-rhetorical protest and sterile abstraction. According to Robert D. Hamner, this work is a remarkable attempt by a West Indian to come to terms with a tangled cultural heritage which offered both the vision of unbearable brutality and the promise of rich variety. Although this text includes poems from the earlier collections, it represents a major step forward in Walcott's verse. Many of the thematic concerns recur, but the cryptically subjective passages and the straining for effect that frequently mar the poetry of the first three volumes are replaced by a style that aims at greater clarity and a more sustained engagement with the external natural and social milieu of the Caribbean, particularly St. Lucia.

In a self-referential reflection on the process of writing in the penultimate poem in the collection 'Islands', he describes his goal as follows:

I seek as climate seeks its style, to write

*Verse crisp as sand, clear as sunlight
Cold as the curled wave, ordinary
As a tumbler of Island water. (IGN 7)*

Criticism of the outsider continues in the poem 'Islands' where he points out that the tourist's narrow view is limited to the 'beds and beaches'(IGN 77) and that a true appreciation of:

*Islands can only exist
If we have loved in them. (IGN 77)*

While some of the poems continue to dramatize the sense of lost innocence that dominates the earlier verse, others show Walcott's commitment in writing poetry that aims to paint the St. Lucian natural world in all its variety. Walcott had committed himself to this endeavor in the knowledge that no one had yet written of this landscape and that it was possible and now he sought to evolve a style that would realize the 'several postures of this virginal island' (IGN 16) on the printed page. Typically, through a proliferation of similes and metaphors throughout the volume, this crisp, clear ordinariness is conveyed but there is a directness here that is rare in the earlier volumes. The quest for an appropriate tradition is still implicit. Even though there are several references to European literary figures like Virgil, Horaces, Catullus, Villon, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Sir Thomas Browne, Donne, Marvell, Blake, Wordsworth, Baudelaire and Eliot on the one hand, this volume also includes at an opposite extreme, Walcott's first poems employing Creole registers: 'Tales of the Islands, VI', 'Pocomania' and 'Parang'. Interestingly, the anxiety of influence is no longer the pivotal point of the poems in the same way and the crisp, Standard English advocated in 'Islands' predominates.

In the first poem of the volume *In a Green Night* (1962), 'Prelude' which had previously appeared in *25 Poems*, the poet resolves that his life:

*Must not be made public
Until I have learned to suffer
In accurate rambics. (IGN 11)*

This poem is rightly placed in this volume as it articulates the commitment to a more restrained poetic practice that characterizes most of the verse in the volume. Further, Walcott's ubiquitous theme of identity together with the consciousness of the people in the Caribbean islands get explored here in a sense of division and alienation which are exemplified by the steamers that ply the islands, feelings reinforced by the voyeuristic tourists who help to create that atmosphere of confinement and limited scope behind their "ardent binoculars." (IGN 2) The tourists keep alive the whole question of identity as they travel among the islands.

In 'As John to Parnos', Walcott states 'This island is heaven- away from the dustblown blood of cities'(IGN 12) and heads on a creative poetic journey to fulfill his vow to chronicle the island world. In another poem, 'A Sea-Chantey' a 'litany of islands' (IGN 66), the poet offers both a reverent appeasement of the waters and, in its litany of place names, a declaration of love for the Caribbean world, bitter though its history is seen:

*The litany of islands,
The rosary of archipelagoes,
Anguilla, Anguilla,
Virgin of Guadeloupe,
And stone-white Grenada
Of sunlight and pigeons,
The amen of calm waters... (IGN 64)*

-suggesting a similarly celebratory and reverential response. But other poems in this volume as well bring forth a considerably more complex mood. In the title poem, the Caribbean is a 'Green yet ageing orange tree' proclaiming 'perfected fables' but, as like the apple tree in Eden, containing a 'cyclic chemistry / That dooms and glories her at once' (IGN 73). Moreover the poetic persona in 'Return to D'Ennery Rain', is an 'imprisoned' onlooker coming back to a crippled village and struggling with a complex of emotions, among them the impossibility of finding a 'home' (IGN 33). Even though an existential tone is evident here as in his earlier volumes, it is contextualized by an admission, in the last line that the persona is absorbed in a process of self-pity but at the same time, evoking a clear and precise picture of the village ambience:

*The hospital is quiet in the rain.
A naked boy drives pigs into the bush.
The coast shudders with every surge. The beach
Admits a beaten heron. Filth and foam. (IGN 33)*

In many ways Walcott's commitment to chronicling the St. Lucian is also related to the need for a cultural vision grounded in the politics of decolonization. As evident in these lines from the poem 'Roots':

*Merely a naturalist's notebook ?
Then till our Homer with truer perception erect it,
Stripped of all memory of rhetoric,
As the pealed bark shows white;*

...

When they conquer you, you have to read their books... (IGN 60)

Walcott explicitly condemns the second hand status conferred on cultures that are habitually defined through comparison with European 'originals.' The poems in this volume frequently offer release from such Euro-centric constructs of alterity through an emphasis on a home-grown vision-which will replace the tourist gaze. This concern is sharply present in 'Prelude' for, it too writes back against the situation of being cast away from the constructed supposed centres of cultural authority as is evident in the following lines from the poem:

*Meanwhile the steamers which divide horizons prove
Us lost;
Found only
In tourist booklets, behind ardent binoculars;
Found in the blue reflection of eyes
That have known cities and think us here happy. (IGN 11)*

There is anxiety involved in trying to locate a specific point of rupture in the history of West Indies, a moment of fall and the notion of lost innocence due to colonial operation and intervention and the problem of locating not Eden but the Fall proves as difficult as finding a moment of originary beginnings. It is this matter that Walcott probes deep into in 'The Banyan Tree, Old Year's Night.' To the poet, Colonialism may be to blame for his sense of exile but the sources of his melancholy remain 'Blank as the rain on the deserted mind' (IGN 72). In the poem 'Orient and Immortal Wheat', a thirteen years old Walcott responds to living in what he feels is a 'monstrous' natural world to 'the fever called original sin' (IGN 48), a delirious world - bringing together a complex set of emotions apparently connected with puberty, loss of faith and the futile attempt to transfer European landscape vision into the local world. This poem presents a child's point of view about his world around:

*Nature seemed monstrous to his thirteen years.
Prone to malaria, sweating inherent sin,
Absorbed in Limacol and evening prayers,
The prodigy, dusk rouging his peaked face,
Studied the swallows stitch the opposing eaves
In repetitions of the fall from grace. (IGN 48)*

Disease, decay and disillusionment are to the fore, but even here there is the promise of release through a creolized Wordsworthian epiphany:

*He wept again, though why, he was unsure,
At dazzling visions of reflected tin.
So heaven is revealed to fevered eyes,
So is sin born, and innocence made wise,
By intimations of hot galvanize. (IGN 48)*

In 'Two Poems on the Passing of an Empire,' Walcott shows England to be both colonized and colonizing. Because Walcott is a hybrid and strives to reconcile his own national identity, this poem voices the complications resulting from imperialism. The colonized nation never regains purity, and the colonizing nation will always be guilty of spoiling that innocence. The inhabitants are, at once, who they were and who they are to become – members of an indigenous community and citizens of an approaching nation. An element of confusion and rejection arises out of this relationship. Walcott reacts to the duality of a colony's inhabitants in this poem. Amazingly *In a Green Night* (1962), one can see Walcott gaining a poetic vision that correlates to a larger vision for his culture. To use Edward Said's word, Walcott achieves a 'contrapuntal' vision that converts him from his location of being a poet (man) living with a sense of exile to the one exiling his state of exile. This is evident in some of the intense poems this volume contains within, as for instance, in 'Ruins of a Great House', Walcott invariably resists the adversarial divisiveness promulgated by binary classifications and argues instead for a cross-cultural fusion or a stance which allows identity to slip between the nets of static essentialist categorization. 'Ruins of a Great House' also confronts issues central to Caribbean culture, taking the fate of a former estate house as a metonym for the passing of Empire. The house represents the security of the supposedly stable Old World social order which crumbles down in the New World social order of Caribbean land. The poem emphasizes the theme of the transience nature of human life and in doing so, debunks the oppositional aesthetics rooted in notions of cultural and racial binaries along with the essentialist political definition of 'Power'. The opening line of this poem states:

*Stones only, the disjecta membra of this Great House,
Whose moth-like girls are mixed with candledust,
Remain to file the lizard's dragonish claws... (IGN 19)*

The passage also comments on the particular fragility of the former plantocracy's way of life and the poem goes on to suggest that the colonial presence has been but a passing phase in a perennial Caribbean natural cycle:

Deciduous beauty prospered and is gone. (IGN 19)

In this poem, Derek Walcott's persona stands looking at the fractured remains of a plantation great house recalling the past grandeur of the age in which the plantations, their aristocracy and their architecture flourished. He finds himself able to admire this past glory, the achievement and what he could regard as the greatness of the fallen empire despite his

knowledge that it was built on slavery, genocide and debauchery. Walcott combines the bitter knowledge that:

*Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake
The Albion too was once
A colony like ours (IGN 19)*

-and both slave and master inherit histories of excruciating pain, cruelty and abuse. What comes over above all in the poem is Walcott's acknowledgement that he is gazing at the decay that has overcome an institution that was once powerful. "Ruins of a Great House" further reinforces the tensions of merged identities. The persona moves from an exhibition of anger, resentment, hate and bitterness to a compassionate understanding of his British masters, who themselves were once slaves to the Romans. This greater perspective of things enables the speaker to accept the existential nature of his divided-self and that of West Indian man.

Walcott's dilemma poses a problem for West Indian identity and historical reconciliation between the African and European past. 'Parang' illustrates dramatically how best reconciliation works through the meshing of language and customs to create a unique blend of poetry. The poem addresses the vitality of West Indian rituals and musical rhythms which are similar in pattern to the calypso. This is evident in the lines:

*This banjo world have one string
And all man does dance to that tune:
That love is a place in the bush
With music grieving from far,... (IGN 35)*

In using Caribbean patois along with English in his text, Walcott not only demonstrates the very theme of his work within the words he chooses to use, he also makes it so challenging that his success seems that much more spectacular. Walcott doesn't just drop a word here or there for effect; he uses entire lines of patois next to entire lines of English, balancing the rhythm of the different languages off one another within the loose confines of the poem's meter.

*O, when I t'ink how from young
I wasted time at de fetes,
I could bawl in a red-eyed rage
For desire turned to regret,
Not knowing the truth that I sang
A parang and la comette... (IGN 33)*

This poem demonstrates the West Indian's love of life, but also focuses on the theme of failed love between the islanders and their island homes. This sense of failure permeates the very fabric of interisland relationships and poisons that links between the islands, their colonial masters and now the Americans.

'Tales of The Islands' evokes memories of all that mold the West Indian psyche--religion, language, landscape and poverty. Christian and pagan myths are combined in the ritual slaughter of a sheep by the river. The dancing, the drinking of blood and white rum are reminders of *the dark past whence we come (IGN 28)*. The invocation of the past is linked to the themes of memory, exile, identity, birth, death and decay. There are, however, significant difficulties involved in assimilating Walcott's paradoxical and multifaceted poetic strategies into a discursive whole.

Derek Walcott's intentional use of patois and Standard English unmistakably, also highlight the voices in interaction within the poet who is in quest for a voice that is capable of

speaking to the multiple cultural houses he belongs to. In ‘Tales of the Islands’, taken from the collection *In the Green Night* (1962), the poetic voice moves between Creole and standard English, finding a complex resonance in the way the poet blends lyrical and narrative modes:

*The fete took place one morning in the heights
For the approval of some anthropologist.
The priests objected to such savage rites
In a catholic county; it was quite ironic.
[Chapter V]
Poopa, da’ was a fete! I mean it had
Free rum free whisky and some fellers beating.*

... ..
*Generation has its angst but, we has none,
And wouldn’t let the comma in edgewise.
[Chapter VI] (IGN 22)*

Probably one cannot understand Walcott’s poems without some reference to Walcott’s use of language which forcefully expresses the themes discussed in his works that deals with the lasting scars—personal, cultural, and political—of British colonialism in his native land and the opposing African and European influences that characterize his West Indian heritage. Walcott shifts his poetic language between formal English and patois to highlight the linguistic dexterity of the Caribbean people. As contemporary Caribbean poet Edward Kamau Braithwaite explains in his *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1984), a ‘hurricane does not roar in pentameter,’ (10) and as such Caribbean poets would prefer calypso rhythms and oral drumbeats, which invoke a response from the local audience—an appropriate “representation”, in Braithwaite’s terms, of a nation ‘in revolution’. Against such tendencies, Walcott’s poetry clearly reflects his rootedness in European tradition and literature; his acceptance of that heritage is, however, never whole-hearted. His poems explore the inner conflict between native culture and an imperial tradition imbibed from books, dramatizing both a personal and historical quest for identity.

As regards to the themes, one of the central concerns of Walcott is the legacy of Caribbean history, or its non-history and cultural fragmentation. The Caribbean artist has no ancestral myths, no glorious past to look back to—and yet, paradoxically, no subject has occupied the Caribbean artist so much as his own history. Like Joyce, Walcott considers history a kind of nightmare, but it takes a central role in his poems, not as a documentation of dead facts but as a living presence. The Caribbean has been portrayed as an illegitimate child of history because of its paucity of written records; to western historiography, it is a lacuna, a dark void. As a Caribbean artist, Walcott tries to fill in the gap with his literary and pictorial efforts. The landscape in Walcott’s poetry is an alternative to those traditional monuments which stand witness to the history of a civilization. Since the Caribbean has few monuments and a tangled history, the celebration of landscape works to reconstruct a dialectical relationship between nature and culture. However, Walcott is optimistic and makes a creative use of his Nation’s absent history by casting himself as an Adam of the New World, giving names to his surroundings. He is face to face with a nature whose objects demand fresh meanings, which his poetry provides with arresting new metaphors. These metaphors are not stagnant but dynamic, lending continuity to his work.

An anthologized poem like 'A Far Cry from Africa' in this volume represents the artistic growth in Walcott. This poem is the vantage point from where Walcott initiates his Odysseus journey towards becoming a Caribbean Homer.

*A wing is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa. Kikuyu quick as flies
batten upon the bloodstream of the veldt (IGN 18)*

Set against the backdrop of the Mau Mau freedom struggle in Kenya, 'A Far Cry from Africa' is a classic. The poet discusses the dilemma of being torn between Africa and Europe. This poem appears to be a perfect dramatization of Walcott's own particular racial angst due to his hybrid existence. Exposing the intersection of cultures within him, this poem highlights the turbulent journey of a man trying to relate to his immediate schizophrenic Post-Colonial world reality and his state of hybridity. In "A Far Cry from Africa," Walcott uses the advantages of hybridity to express unhomeliness and discusses the conflict between his loyalties to Africa and to Britain. The title of the poem emphasizes Walcott's cultural instability as it implies a type of alienation from Africa, despite its concentration on African themes. Walcott juxtaposes the Africans and the British, focusing on each group's transgressions which make him feel foreign in both cultures. Further the poet's hybrid heritage prevents him from identifying directly with one culture and creates a feeling of isolation. The poem provides a textual version of the poet's mental dissertation on the vices and virtues which differentiate each culture. In a generalized fashion, this poem can be read as an investigation of the Caribbean psyche's divided cultural and ethnic allegiances.

*I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live? (IGN 18)*

Here is the cry of alienated hybridity: the impossibility of choosing a part from one's own being; a futile meaningless attempt in the name of attaining an identity of the self. June Bobb in *Beating a Restless Drum (1998)*, pointed out these lines as evidence of characterizing Walcott as a poet and a person, that is as artist and man torn apart by divisions of self and world. In other words, these lines imply that Walcott has succumbed to the despair inherent in alienated hybridity, due to his professional and personal ambivalence and is a living example of the divided loyalties and hatreds that keep his society suspended between two worlds. Bobb claims, however, that the agonized question in 'A Far Cry from Africa' is a prelude to a richer, fuller answer elsewhere. To critics who suggest that Walcott's question implies a paralysis on the part of the poet, Bobb counters that while focusing on the poet's tortured consciousness and personal pain, critics lose sight of the wider implications of Walcott's lines and the poet's conscious recreation of the universal struggle between possessors and possessed. This struggle does not result in paralysis, however, for the poet attempts to impose an order in his world, an order denied by the forces of colonization. For Walcott, the questions raised in 'A Far Cry from Africa' are rhetorical; while he agonizes over the possibility of submitting to the forces of destruction, he is at the same time at work reinventing a Caribbean identity that would purge these negative forces and restore order to the Caribbean world.

Although the poem ends in an ambiguous ambivalent fashion where the persona representative of Walcott himself, fails to make a choice between the English tongue he loves and the Africa he lives in, with a state of hybridity—such an ending anticipates at the same time, the notion of a complete withdrawal and resistance from colonial constructs of dualism that has made an artificial divide between cultures as ‘high-low’; ‘white-black’; ‘civilized-uncivilized’; and so on, therefore to anticipate more positive constructions of ‘Hybridity’.

One can hence conclude that in, *In a Green Night* (1962), Walcott creates poetry that is truly ‘a border work of culture’ (to use Bhabha’s words) by being in the ‘liminal’ space wherein the cultural differences inherent in his state of hybridity-- interact and articulate. In a true sense, this volume captures the metamorphic journey of Walcott and traces the trajectory in which the poet firstly, confronts with questions pertaining to the authentic role of a poet in the immediate post-colonial Caribbean world ; secondly, the confrontation with a schizophrenic reality of hybridity inherent in him ; thirdly, the question of conflicting loyalties; fourthly, the post colonial notion of laying claim to his mixed heritage and other relevant issues of making a right choice. Throughout this work, Walcott has pondered reflexively about himself and his art and the collection as a whole allows us to trace his artistic evolution, as he explores the multiple possibilities of rhyme and meter, stanza forms, and language. The collection can be seen as a travelogue from mimicry through intertextuality to creativity—that is somewhat true of all Post-Colonial literature.

From a study of Derek Walcott’s *In a Green Night* (1962) poems, one could observe that Walcott rejects preconceptions of Post-Colonial writing as either “victim’s literature” or “resistance literature” and argued vehemently for an “intercultural model” of Post-Colonial literature. Creativity as Walcott emphasizes in *The Muse of History* (1976), cannot come out of revenge. Against a “separatist” black literature that violently asserts its isolation, its difference, he counterposes the vision of a Caribbean writer as inevitably “mixed”- a poet who is neither a Eurocentric nor an Afrocentric but an ever more multicentric poet of the contemporary world. Indeed in Walcott’s *In a Green Night* (1962), we see the poet attaining a ‘poetic vision’ that allows him to not only give voice to the suffering of African Caribbean peoples under European colonialism and slavery, but facilitates him to fuse the other literary prototypes of North and South, Old World and New in an astonishing ‘hybridity’ that amplifies the cross-cultural fabric of Post-Colonial poetry and contravenes the widespread assumption that Post-Colonial literature develops by sloughing off Eurocentrism for indigeneity.

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