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3. "WE DO IT FOR THE PEOPLE"

Spoken Word Poets and Hip Hop Artists as Agents of Social Change

Bronx-born, nurtured from the urban locales of young Black and Latino citizens, and fed up with the frustration of injustice, Hip Hop was born in the mid- 1970s (see Chang 2005, Forman & Neal 2011, Rose 1994). As a method of cultural production and as an art form, Hip Hop has received the support and criticism of everyone from academics to audience members. While there has been some work produced about the undeniable roots of the Caribbean and African music that evidenced through the rhythms and politics of Hip Hop's beginnings, there have been few nods to the interrelationship of spoken word poetry, political activism, and the production of Hip Hop. This chapter will solidify those connections by exploring the overlap between spoken word poetry performance and the Hip Hop community as they play out the role of social change agents. In her pioneering work on social action, Toby Jenkins (2009) specifies three potential roles available for those interested in creating social change: an ally, advocate, or agent.

In this chapter, I will apply Jenkins' definitions of these roles to examples of Hip Hop and spoken word artists, and extend her work by adding another position created and taken up by performance poets and Hip Hopheads alike in the fight for social justice: an artist. There are a multitude of artists that move in between the roles specified by Jenkins' work and I pull examples from mainstream familiar faces to lesser known activists who provide concrete demonstrations of this social justice theory. Much of my own artistic and scholarly work is rooted in theoretical frameworks that prioritize a feminist and poststructural analysis because they demand self-reflexive strategies and courses of action to back the academic theory (see, Bost 2001, Morgan 1999, Wheedon 1996). As an artist I find this approach absolutely central to the production of socially responsible performance art because of the demand this type of analysis places on artwork to remain at the minimum in conversation with my home community (Butler 1993, Karenga 2010, Powell 2003).

My intention here is to bring to bear a social justice theory that lends itself to practice by scholars and may broaden and deepen the possibilities for social change as they are often understood in the academy and by administrators that work with students.

It's not just that Hip Hop artists and spoken word poets provide examples of academic social theory that critique a mainstream point of view—they offer much more than a slick illustration. The magnetism for these cultural practices lies in

the work of production and I am drawn here because of the action oriented focus of the culture; to practice is to explicitly critique what occurs in a social-political world that we participate in. The construction and analysis of activist performance work that also represents Hip Hop and spoken word work within the academy is even more critical because of the cultural contexts that are re-affirmed, validated, and evolving inherently in these art forms. Hip Hop and spoken word poetry create opportunities to challenge an educational tradition and system that frequently denies the complex account of history that Hip Hop and spoken word poetry performance bear witness to. We do more than tell stories about history, about life, about dreams and Jenkins provides a clear way to reconsider and re-energize ourselves in the face of overwhelming social injustices. Understanding the various roles of a social change agent might expand the ways we engage our students in action and better equip them by raising their level of awareness about issues they can become involved in. In this chapter, I will consider the following questions: in what ways do local politics, aesthetics, and understandings of activism collude and collide within Hip Hop cultural production? How does cultural collateral and cultural currency impact and manifest in these two forms of cultural production? Finally, what forms of social transformation are youth developing as a response to these calls to social action from performance artists?

...never wanted to write poetry only wanted to manage my pain stuff my hurt into the curves of letters consonants that beat like fists to make us all feel better we've been strategically positioned for failure so they're surprised when we succeed be careful not to confuse humility with defeat don't make judgments based on what you see still waters still run deep so it's best to sit still if you got shaky feet it's best to keep quiet if you're not sure what to speak as for me your silence might protect you. but it will not set you free...

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD...

Hip hop history is rooted in social activism. There are no shortage of the links between oppressive living conditions, police brutality, issues in urban education and a desire to revolutionize the dominant power structure in order to transform the social positions available to communities of color in the United States (see Bynoe, 2004; Chang, 2005; Kitwana, 2002; Rose, 1994). Even as the struggle for equality and human rights has expanded for young Black and Latino men and women, so have the ways and means of performing, consuming, and producing Hip Hop culture—it has become popular. The audience and even the producers of Hip Hop have grown increasingly diverse, necessarily altering the art form and the outcomes of each performance. Hip Hop is global, it is consumed and re-produced by wildly diverse social groups from white youth in America to Aboriginal youth in Australia to Muslim artists in East Africa and it is used as a marketing tool to sell everything from retirement plans to fast food. Hip Hop is also used as a teaching

tool, within public institutions for education as well as mass media outlets, for every school subject from history to the ABC's (Porfilio & Viola, 2012). Insert the art of spoken word poetry here: interwoven and often overlapping, spoken word poetry performance directly connects with the history of Hip Hop. Both art forms have roots in the lives and cultural practices of urban youth of color, both have been commodified by media conglomerates for large exchanges of currency and capital, and both offer a tremendous connection to social movements in the United States. There are purists who argue about the origins of performance poetry and Hip Hop and which came first—this is an interesting debate, but not the focus of this chapter. Instead, the rich history and the deep connections between the practice of Hip Hop and the performance of spoken word poetry continue to pulse with an undercurrent of political motivation and this is the vein of conversation I want to enter. What are the possibilities for artists with a vested interest in social responsibility who practice spoken word poetry performance and Hip Hop? How can we begin to articulate our positions—as artists, as educators, even as fans, here at the crossroads between art and social responsibility? How do we witness and perform activism in contemporary and relevant ways?

To consider these particular forms of cultural production, it's important to situate them within the broader context around performance. Performance is a method of teaching and learning that remains consistently effective because of the embodied urgency that it requires. Performance occurs everywhere, all of the time and not always under the circumstances we have come to expect—with the trappings of a stage, a spotlight, and an audience that purchased tickets. Performance as a form of pedagogy; however, it recognizes and insists upon the relationship that occurs between an artist and an audience member, and relies heavily upon the ability of each to relate to the "Other." In other words, effective performance pedagogy induces sameness while also acknowledging difference—it requires collaboration and extraction all at once (Schechner, 2013, p. 3).

During an effective performance pedagogy moment, there is an exchange between the artist and the audience member. This transaction trades sets of meaning, information, and is also skillfully managed. Performance pedagogy invites an examination of opposing systems of knowledge, values and subject matters and provides the opportunity to construct new meanings through creating performance events (Schechner, p. 24). One of the major reasons that the arts have always played a central role in each major social movement of the United States is due to the fact that performance requires an acknowledgement of the body of the performer. This very immediate, embodied performance experience calls attention to the physical body of the audience member as well—markers such as gender and race immediately position these bodies in relationship to one another in a social hierarchy based on the privilege and power awarded to each one. In the Hip Hop and spoken word poetry communities, these bodies are placed at once in opposition and yet in cahoots because they often participate in conflicting discourses. The featured poet at a set might be a Latino that could pass for white while two of his audience members include an

African American woman attending the show with her white boyfriend. Each of the social discourses these three people inhabit are at once acknowledged through performance. There are benefits from privilege (ie: heterosexual relationships and white male privilege) and simultaneously those privileges are disrupted because the power dynamic is challenged through the poet's performance (attending and fiscally supporting a spoken word artist whose art and performance defies the very privilege the audience member enjoys). The body itself, along with the language used in performances of Hip Hop and spoken word poetry, functions as a particularly effective site to analyze social justice orientations because conflicting discourses occupy the same space, opening up possibilities for explicit political action. Below I outline specific examples of artists who shift within and between roles of social change and by their example, create such opportunities for their audiences to do the same.

THE A-LIST A-TEAM: ROLES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Allies

Toby Jenkins (2009) outlines three key positions made readily available for any citizen interested in activating social change. The first of these positions is a political ally. Jenkins defines an ally as "a person whose orientation is *outside* of the oppressed group...who recognizes her privileges and works in alliance with members of oppressed groups to stand against oppression" (p. 28). A social change ally is often visibly different than those who hold membership within the oppressed group. A historical example might be a white Freedom Rider who participated in the Civil Rights movement in the 60's—the initial Freedom Riders were a small group of white men who joined with a small group of Black men and protested the Jim Crow laws enforcing segregation by riding interracial on a bus through the South (Arsenault, 2006, p. 57). This law-breaking protest resulted in violence, arrests, and scandal, while concomitantly raising awareness across the U.S that there were indeed White allies standing in solidarity with the African American community in the struggle to end racist laws and unjust social practices. Becoming an ally for social justice is an important role to be filled and is often useful for marginalized communities. However, it is absolutely crucial to understand that the role of the ally is associated with outsiders who will maintain their social class, privilege, and power regardless of the end result upon the oppressed community.

From the perspective of performance within the Hip Hop community and practitioners of spoken word poetry, what role does a social justice ally play? What are the stakes and the rewards for allies that perform within the Hip Hop and spoken word community and why is this important to consider at the crossroads of social responsibility?

Most often, social justice allies within Hip Hop and spoken word poetry communities perform as audience members. There is an appreciation and support

for the art form by an audience who does not necessarily participate in the same communities or lived experiences as the artist. There is also an expressed desire by the audience to re-produce the message and the meaning within these cultural performances. In several pertinent academic writings focusing on Hip Hop production and masculinity, themes of love, fear, desire and ownership surface repeatedly. bell hooks, while she doesn't focus solely on Hip Hop, skillfully analyzes the results of what occurs whenever the terms "fear" and "love" are confused in her treaty on the performance of Black masculinity by Black men in the United States (2004). She argues that "Black males in the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy are feared but not loved" and that the confusion between these two terms oppresses the ability of Black men to perform as their authentic selves and also skews the ways in which Black masculinity is interpreted by and responded to by dominant culture (p. ix). What does this say about the relationship of the performing artist and the ally audience member of a Hip Hop or spoken word poetry performance? First, that the relationship is complex. Performances of Hip Hop and spoken word poetry provide socially responsible artists an opportunity to resist and combat dominant narratives about many social issues, in the example drawn from hooks' text, their identity. Language becomes the MC's tool of political resistance, and an embodied performance creates the space of invitation for an allied audience member to collectively redefine and remember their own identities and the ways in which they relate to and understand the identity of the artist (Endsley & Jaksch, 2012). This can be a powerful moment of possibility for allies and artists. Most often, however, what we find in the mainstream performances of Hip Hop is that certain performances of very limited and specific identities, particularly for Black men, are privileged over others and thus are marketed more widely and made more accessible. These identities are consumed and then re-produced at a more frequent rate than those that might challenge and legitimize more transformative alternate possibilities. Therefore, there is a clear struggle for power and autonomy that takes place within each performance of Hip Hop and spoken word poetry.

One of the most high profile examples of a rags-to-riches rap story is Jay-Z. He has lived the dream of social mobility and survived long enough to tell about it—which is an amazing feat in and of itself (Endsley, 2012). Jay-Z is in a position of superstardom and financial security and it is from this social position that he performs his version of his own story, one that simultaneously marks him as powerful socially and yet politically oppressed. Jay-Z proclaims that his material wealth places him at the "top of the totem pole," otherwise untouchable, yet at the same time admits "I'm shocked too/I'm supposed to be locked up too/you escaped what I've escaped/you'd be in Paris getting fucked up too" (Watch the Throne, 2011). Jay-Z embodies and performs his contradictory social memberships, sometimes calling on his listeners to join him as politically active, as seen in his consistent participation in President Obama's political campaign trail prior to both the 2008 and 2012 elections; and sometimes flagrantly disregarding and belittling those same social responsibilities as seen in his arrogant lack of conviction when it comes to objectifying women, or

his disinterest in taking an overt political stand with other artists who boycott Florida over Trayvon Martin’s tragic murder because his finances might suffer.

The audience member ally might take her or his cue from Jay-Z’s performance choosing to selectively participate in a move toward social justice—they may justify their own social contradictions using Jay-Z’s performances as a model. They may perform as a social justice ally when it is convenient to them, when the risks are low and the stakes are not high. This is the precarious position of the social justice ally that Jenkins describes—there is always the privilege of outside membership. Because Jay-Z is no longer impoverished, he is able to participate in an elite social class. Yet, he embodies and represents the lived experience of a Black male in the United States. His wealth and status provide Jay-Z access to a seat at a new table of power and status where the priorities of capitalist gain position him in direct conflict with his identity as an African American man. Because of his newly earned class status, Jay-Z can effectively choose when to engage politically on behalf of any particular social issue because in some cases, his money protects him. This is a complicated matter. On the one hand, it makes logical sense that Jay-Z’s performance is also a blatant contradiction that alternates between overt political issues and the struggles that he experienced as a young man coming of age. On the other hand, Jay-Z cannot “buy” his way out of being Black. It is unfortunately not uncommon that high ranking officials or even academics like Professor Gates are victims of violence and accosted as suspects for crime solely because of their skin color and gender. No matter how high he has climbed out of the hood, Jay-Z’s potential for social mobility is still limited and scribed by dominant narratives of white male patriarchy even while his wealth marks him as privileged.

While I argue that the wealth Jay-Z is so proud of certainly imputes him with a larger responsibility, and that the size of his fan base suggests that he is at a place in his career to make an effective and lasting stand for social justice that might include Black women, I also acknowledge his choices as an artist. There is no simple and tidy ‘resolution’ for what is signified in Hip Hop both on and off the stage. The experience that regularly gets repeated by Jay-Z and regurgitated by his global support and social media outlets of radio, television, and the internet continues to exclude the increasing population of oppressed communities from the broader cultural and political conversation. Muting their already ignored voices by highlighting the privileged aspects of his identity communicates to his audience allies that Jay-Z is comfortable with perpetrating hegemonic and oppressive social agendas. Most consumers of Jay-Z’s music will not listen to all of the tracks on an album—only those songs that make the top 40 playlists on the radio stations across the country will stay in heavy rotation. And yet, is it entirely Jay-Z’s responsibility to take a resistant political stand? Is it enough for him to perform critically sometimes and expect that his allies will take some accountability of their own?

Henry Giroux (2006) suggests that performance pedagogy is one “in which occurs a critical questioning of the omissions and tensions that exist between the master narratives and hegemonic discourses that make up the official curriculum

and the self-representations of subordinate groups as they might appear”(p. 60). Jay-Z’s performances certainly match Giroux’s description, despite being complicit in propagating moments of misogyny, violence, and capitalist rhetoric. I respect the lucid point feminist theorist Cherrie Moraga (1981) articulates when she says “... for each of us has in some way been both oppressed and the oppressor. We are afraid to look at how we have failed each other. We are afraid to see how we have taken the values of our oppressor into our hearts and turned them against our selves and one another...” (p. 32). This statement, written over 30 years ago in a pioneering collaborative work by feminists of color, echoes clear and true in this analysis of social justice roles. Allies are key players in the quest for social justice—from large movements to our home campuses and communities—active supporters from folks who hold privilege and power can increase the length of stride and can be integral to achieving aims for an oppressed group. Making bonds with allies can also ensure that social struggles become collaborative in nature and can also spread like ripples over water, raising awareness and creating momentum.

These are all positive aspects to the ally-relationship. Yet, in the same way that Jenkins was motivated to critically examine and extend the definitions of social change roles as a cultural practitioner in a collegiate setting, I’m raising the stakes for those of us that participate and perform in the world as artists. How are we included and implicated as socially responsible artists of color? Schechner (2013) reminds that “the relationship between studying performance and doing performance is integral” and so the question remains: what are we to do when identifying as an ally is not enough (p. 2)? Where do we go from here?

...as for me I'm one of Chief Thundercloud, Harriet Tubman's daughters I feel right at home with my underground poetry supporters if God be for us that makes us unstoppable if it looks impossible if it sounds illogical that keeps things exciting, we don't blink at obstacles we don't shrink at threats we don't rescind our statements we don't expect you to understand if your vision ain't there yet No matter where you come from life ain't simple But simplicity is instrumental heart beats the bass, keeps the tempo And there is so much I want to say to you but my words can't articulate Clearly If you choose to pay attention you will have to pay dearly...

Advocates

The second role outlined by Jenkins is that of an advocate for social change. She states “advocates give voice to issues; they may or may not identify with the group, and may or may not take action beyond articulating what needs to be changed” (p. 28). In other words, advocates are the vocal ones, those who work to ensure that legislation and policy get changed. Advocates are often easily identified in the world of government as those who raise awareness using their voices. This is a position that is more overtly performative and public in nature than that of an ally. It

is not much of a stretch to consider the Hip Hop artist or spoken word poet to be an advocate for a community issue in the fight for social justice.

Maybe best recognized from his feature on HBO's *Russell Simons presents Def Poetry Jam*, spoken word artist, published poet, and actor on the silver screen, Carlos Andres Gomez is a multi-dimensional performance artist who easily manifests the characteristics of an advocate for social justice. Carlos has performed across the globe and has succeeded as a slam poet, all the while using his performances to verbally raise the consciousness of every listening ear. In his recently published book, *Man Up: Cracking the Code of Modern Manhood*, Gomez describes his drive to “confront the varied selves I have been and am” in order to achieve and share his dreams of equality, breaking gendered and racialized barriers, all using this tool called poetry (2012, p.2). Gomez identifies as a Latino and thus works within and across the borders of his identity as an author and a performer. His poetry does not necessarily offer direct solutions or commands to challenging injustice; yet, he offers an alternative narrative, his agenda stands in clear opposition to the prescribed performances of identity and expectation reiterated by society. In the earlier reference to hooks, she raised themes of fear and longing, and Gomez offers an insider's perspective that connects his experience with that of a broad audience, similar to an ally, while explicitly stating that it will take more to achieve social justice than building alliances; Gomez advocates.

In one of his well-known poems, “All We Have,” Gomez translates history from his own perspective, offering a new vision of the function of dance in communities of color, suggesting an empowering reinterpretation of a tired discourse on slavery and Black and Brown bodies: “when they don't allow Us to read/and teach Us to forget Our languages,/mispronouncing Our names...we were never your slaves... Black/Brown/Indigenous/Mestizo/Latino...we never lost our rhythm/surviving” (p. 18). Within the lines of this poem, Gomez positions the ability to dance as equally critical to the ability to read and write: he neatly binds it to the ability to survive. “All We Have” calls up contemporary understandings of the history of slavery in the US, often conveniently brushed aside, and centralizes the ability to dance as a practice that is more relevant and imperative than the simple physical exercise or the base hyper-sexualized frenzies that it is often reduced to. Instead, Gomez re-visions our concepts of power and spirituality, challenging textbook tales of slavery which often teach that the ancestors of Black and Brown people in the United State were fools and hopeless fools at that. These lines call up images of freedom, spirituality, embodiment, and power relationships that encourage his audience to reconsider their own cultural values in relation to education: the piece pays tribute to those that were not permitted to participate actively in traditionally privileged institutionalized education, prevented from becoming literate. Yet, Gomez suggests that by teaching us to dance “our Ancestors taught us well” (p. 17). As his title indicates “All We Have” is actually quite a lot—Gomez includes all of his audience by using the “we” pronoun, and references the ways in which resistance and the performance of a body of color is rich with political power.

Gomez's political power is in his voice and his articulation of the struggle to validate knowledge that is produced from outside of the boundaries of traditional education: this is ironic because he spends a great deal of his year touring colleges and universities. As a full-time artist and actor, Gomez is planted squarely in the eye of the public and uses his position to assert a political agenda that clearly aligns him as an advocate that mobilizes his listeners and influences them to become active politically and socially. While Gomez works within the mainstream, supporting himself financially as a full-time artist, booking gigs, playing roles in films, and writing commissioned poetry, he simultaneously uses his position within the matrix of domination to acknowledge his own privileged subject positions. Gomez also tangles with the theme of ownership as raised in the earlier reference to hooks' work on Black masculinity, participating in the dominant discourse of performing as a man of color within the strict confines of the performances opened up to him by "a gendered, masculine, patriarchal identity" (hooks, p. x).

By using the areas he is privileged as well as his role as a spoken word artist to perform narratives that challenge these limiting and violent identities, Gomez is inviting his audience members to do the same. Thus, Gomez employs his access to ownership and concurrently models ways to disrupt the restrictive and exacting social expectations. Gomez works both within and against and encourages listeners to join him in making necessary changes to ensure access and opportunity that continue to disintegrate racism, sexism, and classism. The role of the advocate in social change is one that requires more commitment than that of an ally, particularly when it is inhabited by a performing artist. The reason this position is more rigorous is two-fold: first, body of the artist (especially an artist of color) is already a consistent site of political struggle. When the artist is committed to producing socially responsible art that political struggle becomes non-stop and deeply personal; also, much of the advocate-artist's work and cultural production will be aligned with their goals and motivated by the social issues they advocate. Secondly, an artist-advocate knowingly and consistently performs on behalf of not only a community of people to whom they may or may not share allegiance and membership, but to a cause—this cause exposes the artist-advocate to a larger systemic network of opposition and oppression on a regular basis because the cause is rooted in a deep engagement to social justice. What happens when the cause demands more from the artist who is already an ally and advocate?

*...wanna teach the youngsters better manners good grammar family planning
avoid negativity like internet spamming living life reckless lash out at those who
can help you because you feel helpless it won't solve the problem only buries
the seed of dissatisfaction deep so that even if you control it in the daytime
nightmares get you when you sleep i know it's hard to speak with respect in
a world that shows you little but give a little humble head bow as you ask for
what you need pride is brittle and most often pride won't land you on your feet
developing maturity comes at a high cost most are eager for the glory but are*

ignorant of the loss, to be truly great, sacrifices are made everyday still, folks throw it away, say thanks for keeping me entertained they can't see past the energy to the pain so if you do what you to validate it's going to be a tough lesson, baby a hard road, honey the talent might carry you to a place your moral fiber can't keep you then down comes the church, down comes the steeple and who suffers most of all whenever a great person falls? The PEOPLE...

—C. Leigh Endsley, “Wanna Write Poetry,” 2012.

Agent

The final orientation around social justice described by Jenkins is that of an agent. She defines a social change agent this way:

“one that acts, or has the power or authority to act...orient themselves toward action and go beyond developing empathetic relations or vocal oppositions—they work to create change within the dimensions of society in which they may or may not have power” (p. 28).

This role is by far the most risky and demanding of the three positions—and it is also the most crucial and rewarding. To be an agent of social change, we are required to extend ourselves, no matter our community memberships *especially* into those locations where we don't necessarily have power. Becoming an action figure, an artist-agent for social change demands commitment, a cause, and a cape; a cape, not to be a hero, but to be mobile, to uplift, to extend, to employ, to engage, to live with the threat by actively participating in the social locations where we “may or may not have power.” An agent goes beyond words and past supportive stances around a social cause and puts in a very different type of performance. Jenkins' definition calls up images of leaders, of those who serve at a personal cost and sacrifice to themselves. To live the life of an artist-agent is to wholly commit and to uplift an entire community in the process. Most often, artist-agents exhibit a work ethic that sets them apart—they last long because they are grounded in lived experience that often fuels their efforts and they are positioned to work as members and as performers. Artist-agents can be powerful. They take action, they are energized and they are good listeners. Jenkins observes that “real, substantive change has always come from *within* [these] communities” ensuring that the vision and motivation for social change is relevant to the lives of those it is intended for (p. 29). Artist-agents are cognizant of historical context and the impact of their performances as moments of incredibly powerful potential. Each performance then is a tribute to the past—not for nostalgia's sake, but as motivation to make further progress.

The conclusion is that each of these roles plays a significant part in adjusting the climate and atmosphere that we operate in on a daily basis. It is because Hip Hop artists and spoken word poets are often so closely associated and connected with the youth from many geographical locations that they have such potential to

enact social change. All over the world, artists and scholars are making moves that are encouraging and inspiring. Internationally, there are workshops that use the arts as empowerment through an NGO such as Long Live the Girls in Addis Abbaba, Ethiopia, or venues like the United African Alliance Community Center that hosts the Arusha Poetry Club in Tanzania. In the United States, high school English teacher Michael Rosenthal shines a light for his students beyond his classroom by being awarded a grant to provide writing and performance opportunities after school to assist his students as they explore performance poetry. No matter where you are located or what your "day job" might be, there are a myriad of ways to become an agent of social change through Hip Hop and spoken word poetry. These positions are not stagnant or static. We can be flexible, fitting into and slipping out of each one of them, performing them as needed. Doing so permits our audiences to imagine themselves performing in the same way—and we all know you become what you think. Even so, I have to acknowledge the daily hustle, the very real consequences to a life committed to producing socially responsible art and this struggle between a life of performance as an artist and the pressure to define success in a conventional way. There is no shame in testing the waters, in being cautious as you undertake and audition new roles for yourself. My goal is to encourage you and also to ring the alarm of urgency; we have to fill these roles. I end then with a commission, with a call to commitment and to a cause. Cultural producers, I challenge you to meet these moments of tension and contradiction. We are truly at a crossroads where possibility meets with praxis and theory with lived realities and at this place in the road, there are such possibilities.

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