

Remapping *the Jazz Singer* from the 1920s to the 1980s

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Abstract: The *Jazz Singer* (1927), a film based on Samson Raphaelson's short story, "The Day of Atonement," published in 1922, and inspired by the life of one of the most successful twentieth century Jewish actors, Al Jolson, played an important role in the film industry, as it anticipated the end of the silent film era, and it also managed to offer a closer look at the atmosphere of the Jewish American life, illustrating the main issues that the Jewish American families had to deal with at the beginning of the twentieth century. Later on, three more films were made, and they adapted the original story to the realities of the periods when they were shot, the 1950s, and the 1980s, respectively. The aim of this paper is to highlight the way in which the film industry addressed intergenerational dynamics in Jewish American families during the 1920s and the 1980s, respectively, by comparing and analyzing the original *Jazz Singer* (1927) and its 1980 remake, with respect to the arising conflict between tradition and ambition, to identity issues, and to the relations established between family members, in conversation with critical sources by Vincent Brook, Joel Rosenberg, and Stephen Whitfield.

Drawing inspiration from the life of one of the most successful twentieth century Jewish American actors, Al Jolson,¹ the successful writer and playwright Samson Raphaelson wrote a short story titled "The Day of Atonement,"² which was later adapted into four films (in 1927, 1952, 1959 and 1980).³ The tale follows the story of a young boy, Jakie Rabinovitz, who goes against tradition and his father's wish that he should become a cantor, and sets on a journey of becoming a jazz singer. While following this path, he meets a dancer (Amy Prentiss) with whom he falls in love, but this results in him being disowned by his father. Later on, when he is to debut on Broadway, he is asked to replace his dying father for the

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Yom Kippur service and, as a result, he returns home and gives up the opportunity of launching his theatrical career. Later on, the first *Jazz Singer* film was made (1927),⁴ casting Al Jolson, the very man who inspired Raphaelson into writing the tale of the young Jewish American singer, as the main character—Jakie Rabinovitz.

My paper focuses on the first (1927) and the last (1980) *Jazz Singer* films,⁵ which will be compared and analyzed in order to highlight the way in which the film industry addressed intergenerational dynamics in Jewish-American families during the 1920s and the 1980s, particularly with respect to the arising conflict between tradition and ambition and the relations established between various family members, questions which were tackled in both films. The critical sources I have used throughout the essay in order to support my ideas include Vincent Brook's *The Four Jazz Singers: Mapping the Jewish Assimilation Narrative*, which tackles the question of Jewish identity, Joel Rosenberg's *What You Ain't Heard Yet: The Languages of The Jazz Singer*, which follows a musical approach to the 1927 *Jazz Singer* film, and Stephen Whitfield's *Voices of Jacob, Hands of Esau: Jews in American Life and Thought*, in which the author focuses on the 1980 *Jazz Singer* and attempts to foreground the evolution and transformations the film, as well as the lives of the Jewish immigrants, went through. In this sense, I will explore and extrapolate their views about the two films in order to show how the relationships between the first and the second generation of Jewish immigrants have evolved during the twentieth century and how their constant struggle paved their road to success.

The Conflict between Tradition and Ambition

To begin with, the most striking theme in the films from 1927 and 1980 was identified by Vincent Brook as the conflict between tradition and ambition/modernity, pictured by the

argument between an aspiring Jewish pop singer and “his sternly religious father” (401) who expects his son to follow the same path as him. However, since the son decides to choose a different path from the one his father has laid ahead for him, the cantor disowns his son. The opening scene of the 1927 film presents the place where the main conflict begins, the New York Ghetto, which is closely followed by a depiction of the vibrant Jewish district in the city, “The New York Ghetto—throbbing to that rhythm of music which is older than civilization” (Crosland). The subsequent scenes bring the viewer closer to the existing tensions between Cantor Rabinowitz, the “chanter of hymns in the synagogue, [who] stubbornly held to the ancient traditions of his race” (Crosland), and his “Americanized, show business-minded son, Jack Robin” (Brook 402), who has already adapted to the new culture. Unlike his son, the father proves to be a very strict, bold, and conservative person, who refuses to accept the possibility of his son following another career path, which results in the alteration of the balance between the two.

When talking about and to his son, the father’s words are forceful and striking, “What has *he* to say? (...) he *must* be one!” (Crosland), showing how young Jackie had to obey his father and leave his personal wishes behind. The child, therefore, has no say when it comes to his future career path; all he can do is to patiently and dutifully obey his father. What is important to note in the father’s speech are two terms, “have to” and “must.” At a first glance, both words seem to indicate a simple necessity, a duty of the son towards his loving father. However, upon closer analysis, what they truly reveal is the powerlessness of the son and the imperative obligation that he closely obey his father’s words.

In addition to his harsh words, the cantor goes as far as using physical violence against his son when the thirteen-year-old boy is discovered in a saloon, performing jazz tunes. What the father hopes to achieve through his aggressive language and behavior is his son’s obeisance and redirecting his steps on the path of tradition and conformity. However,

contrary to his belief, this gesture leads to the scattering of the family, as the boy runs away, and is later on disowned by his father during the Yom Kippur service, just before he starts singing Kol Nidre, “My son was to stand at my side and sing tonight—but now I have no son” (Crosland). The family is thus shattered and the song comes to play an even more important role, as it “raises the stakes of the story's events by suggesting that this common family squabble is no less than a full-blown spiritual rupture, equivalent to the state of excommunication traditionally prescribed (though rarely enacted) against the Jew who denies God or adopts an alien faith” (Rosenberg 19).

The chant additionally seems to mark both the end point of the first part of the film and of Jakie’s childhood, showing, as Rosenberg states, how each of the characters followed their own separate ways, according to their views, wishes, age, and gender (20). The father, therefore, resumes singing in the synagogue, as the rest of his family had done for generations, the mother continues to be torn between the love for her son and that for her husband, while Jakie, the errant son, follows his dream of becoming a jazz singer, far away from home.

The 1980 remake, on the other hand, adopts an entirely different kind of opening, with Neil Diamond posing for the film poster in the same manner as the Statue of Liberty, which seems to illustrate another theme, that of freedom, along with the struggle for racial integration. As Diamond’s song continues to play in the background, the new images depict a modern city that is even more crowded than the Jewish district in the original film, characterized by ethnic and racial diversity “which aims to cast the by-now dated Jewish immigrant experience in the broader context of the American Melting Pot” (Brook 411). The film, thus, becomes a mirror which reflects the “Salad Bowl rhetoric, growing from the multicultural immigrant waves in the late 1960s and 1970s” (Brook 411) as it can easily be noticed through the presence of the Asian Americans and African Americans in the large area

of New York City. What these scenes show is the United States after the Second World War and the civil rights movement, events which contributed to a shift in the Jews' images, since, as Vincent Brook mentioned, the "civil rights and ethnic pride movements (...) raised minoritarian consciousness and provoked demands for increased and more favourable representation among marginalized groups" (410). In other words, what the viewer is presented with at this point in the 1980 film is a more recent America, transfigured by the war, the Holocaust and the various movements which brought the country closer to equality and the salad bowl rhetoric.⁶ However, this only happens on a surface level, since, as the film continues, the realities portrayed are different: by the end of the song "America," the viewer is able to witness the still present separation between the different races and ethnicities inhabiting the land. Consequently, the Jewish Americans keep their kind close together, they meet in the synagogue and pray, and the African Americans frequent their own night clubs. Here, one can notice how reluctant Yussel Rabinovitch, the main character who is played by Neil Diamond, is to invading the African Americans' space, since, at first, he refuses to enter the night club labeled as "for blacks only."

Unlike the 1927 film, the 1980 remake skips a phase in the protagonist's life, introducing him as an already grown-up, married man, singing in the synagogue, by his father's side. Despite his being an adult, graciously following into his father's footsteps, Yussel seems to lack the maturity and understanding that is expected of a fully grown man. Even though he appears obedient towards his father, since he is present where he is expected to be—in the synagogue, at a closer look, one can sense a small tension surfacing between father and son, as the young man's singing tempo changes towards the end of the religious service. This all illustrates his eagerness to escape the sacred space, his dissatisfaction with his place, and his childish way of resolving the hidden conflict between him and his father.

It is thus no surprise that the thirty-nine-year-old son deceives his father and sneaks out in order to sing with his friends in a “black-only club.” covering up for the missing member of “The Four Brothers” voice quartet, under a new name. Following his short escapade, his relationship with his father is further strained, because once the father learns about this, he is deeply disappointed by his son’s behavior, as the latter seems to take everything lightly. As a result, the father attempts to lecture to his son in the hope of making him aware of all the hardships and struggles he had to face years before, prior to his arrival in America, which is why he alludes to the difficulties the Jews went through during the Holocaust.

Considering that the historical context has changed in relation to the 1927 film, one can safely state that Yussel is a product of the *melting pot*, a hybrid, a result of two different cultures: he was assimilated by his new country and took up more ambitious goals and liberties, while his father is still struggling to keep his Jewish heritage intact. As a result, the focus of the film changes as far as the conflict between the father and son is concerned. What the viewer is now able to witness is a somewhat reversed idea: the father is no longer trying to impose old values and traditions on his son in the same manner his predecessor did back in 1927, but he is rather struggling to reenact his Jewish heritage by keeping to some of the traditions, at the same time allowing his son certain liberties. In other words, what the old cantor does is pave the way to multiculturalism, which sometimes collides with his son’s assimilationist ideas.

In the discussion with his son, the father also brings up tradition, “For five generations a cantor Rabinovitch has been singing in the synagogue” (Fleischer), similarly to the father in the first *Jazz Singer*, which results in a small verbal fight between the cantor and his son. However, this small conflict ends quickly, as the son apologizes and leaves the discussion, refusing to listen and to try to understand his father’s explanation and expectations. And yet,

despite his superficial apology, he still continues to comply with his father's wishes, even though, as Stephen Whitfield argues, he "affects no deeper understanding of the religious calling" (169), fixing his attention on the material goods and forsaking God.

This time, it is not only tradition and modernity that clash, but also assimilation and integration, as the son comes to represent the second generation of immigrants who blended perfectly in American society, while the father is caught between two different cultures: he lives in a Jewish neighborhood where all his actions appear as mechanical and uncertain, somewhat conservative and influenced by the experience of the Holocaust, but at the same time, he accepts some of the American cultural values too. For example, when Yussel is presented with an opportunity to follow a music career, his father allows him to do so, even though, in the beginning, he objected to it because his son "will never come back" (Fleischer) (without offering a clear justification). This scene can also be interpreted in terms of foreshadowing, as it casts the matter of disowning into the future, when the father discovers that his son has divorced his wife, remarried a non Jew, and "sired a son by her (in traditional Judaism, only children born to a Jewish mother are considered Jewish)" (Brook 413). The cantor's actions portray a different situation than in the original film, as the conflict is shifted from the struggle between tradition and ambition to that of tradition and modernity. Moreover, what the film brings forth is another question, that of the Jewish heritage being forgotten or cast away. In other words, the tension that arises becomes more complex in the sense that another conflict is brought into discussion: multiculturalism versus assimilation.

Another element that sets the two films apart consists in the struggle between familial duty and ambition. In the 1927 film, Jack has to choose between "the call of the blood," which implies the abandonment of his astounding theatrical career, and the cry of the theatre, which means forsaking his father in order to continue with his career, while the 1980 remake fails to show the pressure on Yussel's shoulders, as he abandoned his father the moment he

was disowned, only to return when his non-Jewish wife requests a reconciliation between her husband and the cantor. This means that, despite bringing the film closer to fiction than to real life due to its happy ending, the 1927 *Jazz Singer* still manages to offer a dose of realism to the public, unlike its 1980 remake, because it portrays all of Jakie's internal struggles and the reasons behind his decisions very well, while the 1980 remake follows another path, displaying a Jew who has already been assimilated into modern American culture.

Following the same idea, towards the end of the 1927 film, the viewer is able to witness Jack's internal struggle as he is presented with two choices: either to follow the path his father and faith set forth (i.e. tradition) and therefore sing in the synagogue and replace his dying father during the most sacred holiday of the Jewish religion, or follow his dream (ambition) and perform on stage, during the grand premiere of a show, which would propel his career higher. At a first glance, nothing seems to shake his confidence, or at least, not until his eyes land on his mother's portrait. It is then that he realizes that deciding on such an important and serious matter is not an easy task, "I'd love to sing for my people—but I belong here. But there is something, after all, in my heart—maybe it's the call of the ages—the cry of my race" (Crosland). At the same time, even if the scene was shot without sound, the emotions transmitted by the character through his facial expressions and non-verbal language are strong, emphasizing the difficulty of the task he is faced with. The entire scene is thus emotional, connecting the viewer with the character and granting them a rite of passage to the character's feelings, the ability to witness the struggle between tradition and ambition which clash within Jack's chest, tearing at his heart (Crosland) and swaying his will.

Furthermore, tradition and ambition acquire human form, as they are represented through the image of the mother and the Jewish chairman, on the one hand, and the dancer and the managers, on the other hand, people who come to interfere with Jakie's decision, making it even more difficult for him to settle his thoughts. Consequently, these two groups

come into opposition, with the latter (the group consisting of the dancer and the managers), achieving the same grave voice as Jack's father, imposing their will on the singer, trying to win him over through the menacing tone of their speech. Hence, both sides are well represented, strong in conveying their wishes, which makes it even more difficult for the artist to decide on what path to follow.

The scene ends with the mother acknowledging that her son's place is in the theater, "He's not *my* boy anymore, he belongs to the whole world now" (Crosland), which results in an apparent reconciliation between tradition and ambition, through tradition's total renunciation of its claims upon the singer. However, this is of little importance to the jazz singer as he is still struggling in the waters of uncertainty. In the end, though, he realizes that even if his career is important to him, his duty towards his dying father, and *in extenso*, towards the Jewish people as a whole, cannot be ignored either. As a consequence, his struggle surfaces into a well-shaped drama, emphasized by the religious celebration, the Day of Atonement, which gains a whole new significance, since the son's return into the synagogue becomes equivalent with his redemption. Nonetheless, once Jack returns home and begins singing in the synagogue, "we should hear Kol Nidre as jazz—its riffs circling endlessly around the same first clause in a kind of atonement reverie" (Rosenberg 36-37), which signifies his spiritual return and penance, and, at the same time, a possible blending of tradition and modernity, as it is unclear whether or not he improvised on the chant's lyrics. The story therefore ends on a happy note, as the son succeeds in bonding with his father once more, after an emotional moment spent in his company,

The original story and play had ended with the return to Hester Street, as Jack Robin answers the call of 'something in the blood'. The 1927 film let the tension go slack with an epilogue consisting of Jolson doing 'Mammy' at the

Winter Garden. The hero therefore wins everything—his mother’s heart by returning to the lime-light, and America’s heart by so dynamic and emotional a performance in *shul* and on stage. (Whitfield 168)

Unlike the original film, the 1980 remake follows an entirely different path, removing the dramatic conflict and even the tragic element, because Jess’s father is no longer dying, but only suffering from high blood pressure. The atmosphere created by the final scenes is more relaxed and there is nothing to suggest an internal tension arising within Jess Robin as he dances with his lover to romantic jazz tunes, and he is calm and composed when talking to another Jew. Surprisingly though, the only one who attempts to awaken tradition within the protagonist, and manages to do so, is his lover, a *shiksa*, who appears to care more about the Jewish religion and customs than the Jew himself, which is ironic. In fact, she is the only one who manages to convince the stubborn singer to participate in *Yom Kippur*, and as Whitfield notes, “Had the protagonist been asked to sacrifice his career, he surely would have refused” (169). The internal struggle between the call of the stage and the call of the blood is therefore dismissed, a main difference between the two films.

Another important point to make is that the son proves himself to be rather fickle, considering that in the beginning he did not seem very keen on ambitiously pursuing his singing career, since he almost gave up on it, not to mention that after he was disowned he even left everything behind, including his pregnant lover. What this shows is Jess’s weak sense of responsibility and of forgiveness, in addition to his readiness to entirely renounce his Jewish heritage after his dream has been accomplished, which validates his father’s fears of losing his son to the American *melting pot*.

Furthermore, in contrast with the original film, the remake portrays a vulnerable and weak father, who is still affected by the Holocaust and, as a result, encounters difficulties in

communicating cross-generationally (Mihăilescu 136). Consequently, the cantor's objections to Jess's career choice become incoherent and deeply affected by "the haunting, though still largely under-addressed, toll of Holocaust events" (Mihăilescu 136), which deprives his arguments of a solid basis. For example, when Jess tells him about the opportunity he has received in Los Angeles and about his decision to leave New York, the cantor dismisses the idea categorically. However, when he must sustain his refusal, he falls prey to his thoughts for a few seconds, after which he ends up wishing his son well. What this demonstrates is that even though he is afraid of spiritually losing his son,⁷ the father's love, trust, and understanding for Jess prevails.

Another differing element is that Jess's father is not the only cantor singing during *Yom Kippur*, which makes everything all the more strange, since, apparently, Jess would not necessarily be needed anymore. Moreover, by attending the religious service, Jess does not sacrifice anything, since the show takes place after the holiday, and the rehearsal is already over, facts which do not justify his refusal to participate in the religious service, nor his grudge against his father. Moreover, when he finally joins the service, he does it unwillingly and there is no context for his "desire to keep the Judaic world as hermetically sealed as possible" (Whitfield 169), not to mention that what brings peace in the Jewish family is actually the baby and, as Whitfield argues, "it is family ties that bind, not shared values—with the old cantor rather than his son making the compromise" (169). The baby, thus, becomes the bridge that brings together tradition and modernity, as well as integration and assimilation, seemingly replacing the mother's role in the original film. Additionally, Vincent Brook notes, "The film ends, much as in the first two *Jazz Singers*, with Jess Robin's nationwide televised concert superseding his singing of the *Kol Nidre* for his sick father, who (...) recovers in time to cheer on his son from the audience" (413). This ending leads to only one conclusion: the conflict between tradition and modernity has been concluded, with

tradition seemingly withdrawing from the scene and allowing modernity to take its place. Moreover, the ending song, *America*, which portrays the journey and life of an immigrant, becomes the conclusion of the film, illustrating how a consensus has been reached between the father's wish for the Jewish heritage not to be forgotten, and the son's assimilationist ideas and tendencies.

Family Relationships

In the original film, the father is strict and narrow-minded, always pressuring his son into following into his footsteps, refusing to understand his point of view, desires, and even the fact that the place where they live has changed, while the 1980 cantor becomes a shadow of his predecessor, deeply affected by the events that took place during the Holocaust, living with a trauma that renders him more humane and caring. In other words, while the first cantor is clearly a very conservative man, the latter is open to change, willing to embrace new values, customs and traditions. Additionally, the 1980 father is supportive and maybe even a little proud of his son's achievement in the music industry, judging by his reactions upon visiting him in California, while his predecessor refuses to forgive his son unless he sings in the synagogue.

The son also changes from 1927 to 1980, as Jackie is very ambitious, independent, and strives for change, while Yussel is less ambitious and always entangled with his family members, seeking his father's or wife's opinions when it comes to his jazz career, for instance. Jess is also more introverted than his predecessor, selfish, and sometimes unreasonable, making random decisions (e.g. he left his pregnant lover without a reason), while Jack's decisions are always based on facts (e.g. he tries to make up with his father several times, but since the latter kept pushing him away, he gives up on trying), and he

strives not to disappoint his mother, whom he loves tremendously. Jack also aspires to a world where tradition and modernity can be reconciled, to a family that supports and loves him, and to success, while Jess only represents a selfish modernity and the desire for success.

The most noticeable feature in the 1927 film, however, is the introduction of the archetypal Jewish mother, Sara Rabinowitz, about whom the audience find out that “God made her a woman and Love made her a Mother” (Crosland), who becomes a bridge between tradition and modernity due to her caring and supportive nature, which consequently transforms her into an epitome of suffering, since she is always caught in the fight between her husband and her son, a role that seems to have been shifted to the father, in the 1980 remake. What is interesting about the latest remake, however, is the introduction of Rivka, Yussel’s wife, who takes on the role of the strict father from the original film, and therefore becomes a vivid representation of tradition and conservatism, which renders the tradition-ambition/modernity conflict more prominent inside the couple.

Last but not least, both directors tackle the question of identity, the confusion between African Americans and Jewish Americans, who are considered to be equally able to play one another’s role, not to mention their shared heritage and their similar experience with discrimination and persecution (Rosenberg 43). What is thus emphasized is the problem of the Jews’ integration in American society, which gives “a formal completeness to the purported absorption of the Jew into the American ‘melting pot’” (Rosenberg 13-14), as both Jack and Jess are interested in following their dreams, being successful and acquiring a better life (constantly on a quest of fulfilling the *American dream*). As such, *The Jazz Singer* (1927) has “become a cardinal point on the map of cultural studies” (Rosenberg 12), for it was mostly seen as a drama of Jewish assimilation, while the 1980 version of the film casts the question of Jewish integration into a new light, since it brings into discussion ethnic diversity. Additionally, even if both films illustrate the idea according to which the Jews are caught

between two worlds, struggling to fulfill the American dream and blend into the *melting pot*, there is still a hint that they might overcome these issues, as they were able to seize the opportunities which granted them access to a better life, as the two films analyzed above come to prove.

To conclude, what the two *Jazz Singer* films did was to offer a closer look “at the distinctive atmosphere of American Jewish life” (Whitfield 161) by underlining a desire for recognition and ambition that shaped their lives and by bringing forward the stubbornness they manifested in acquiring their goals. In other words, *the Jazz Singer* films managed to portray the main issues that Jewish American families had to tackle during the twentieth century by shaping the relations that developed between different generations, the misunderstandings and miscommunication that intervened between parents and children, the clashes between tradition and modernity, and the two major issues, integration and identity.

¹ Al Jolson was himself a Jewish immigrant and the son of a cantor, as well as part of a family keen on keeping tradition going. Similarly to Raphaelson’s protagonist, Jolson became fascinated with the show business industry and consequently tried to make a name for himself in this field (Whitfield 160).

² The story illustrates the conflict between different generations of Jewish immigrants to the United States and the struggle the younger generation of Jewish immigrants went through while attempting to reconcile tradition and ambition. After the story’s publication, Al Jolson “heard in it so many echoes of his own career that he wanted to star in the dramatization of the tale” (Whitfield 160) and consequently, Raphaelson adapted it for the stage.

³ The story was very successful since it was made into a film in 1927; it was then included in radio adaptations in 1936 and 1942, and it became the basis of three more movie remakes. Moreover, both the story and the first film adaptation were greeted with enthusiasm due to their portrayal of the Jewish American struggles, the vibrant conflict between different generations of Jewish immigrants, as well as their life in the ghetto. Interestingly, despite its success, neither Raphaelson, the author of the short story, nor Alan Crosland, the director of the 1927 movie is remembered today. As a matter of fact, Raphaelson actually hated the movie because he thought that it misinterpreted and falsified the original story (Whitfield 162).

⁴ Like the play, the movie remains connected to Al Jolson’s life, as it follows the same basic plot points. The protagonist of the movie, an ambitious boy, seems to follow the same path as Jolson did a while after his arrival on the American continent. Aside from a few minor details such as the places where Jackie and Al lived (which were different—Jackie lived in New York, while Al lived in Washington), the main points that connect the two, actor and character, are the difficulties they faced while living in the ghetto, the sinuous path they walked in order to achieve their dreams, the tough struggle between tradition and ambition they internalized, and their interactions with their family members, as well as with the others (Garfinkle 108).

⁵ Even though the two movies were made in different decades, the subject matter remains the same: the never-ending conflict between the first and the second generation of Jewish immigrants, the struggle the younger generation faces in terms of conforming to tradition or following their dreams (ambitions), as well as the question of identity and the connections they establish with the others. Overall, as it will later be explained, both protagonists in the two movies, Jackie (1927) and Jess (1980), continue to maintain their links with Al Jolson’s life, each taking up various aspects of his life and illustrating them on screen. For example, the 1927 movie captures Jolson’s journey of becoming a renowned figure in the movie industry, while the 1980 remake keeps

the question of the main character being disowned due to falling in love with an outsider (a non Jew), which also connects with Jolson's life (he was married to someone a lot younger than him who was not Jewish). Also, the outcome of the journeys taken by both characters in the movies remains the same: they achieve their dream of becoming renowned jazz singers (Garfinkle 107-108).

⁶ The salad bowl rhetoric, as opposed to the melting pot theory, expresses the integration of the minority cultures into the majority cultures, each of them keeping their individuality intact and not fusing with the mainstream in order to create a homogeneous culture (Mihăilă 5).

⁷ In other words, the cantor is afraid that once his son will leave home, he will renounce his Jewish heritage, casting old values and tradition aside in favor of American ones.

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