

Reading Difference: What Comparative Literature Tells us of Plurality

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Abstract: With the American School's emphasis on interdisciplinarity at the expense of the text as an 'event' of encounter and the analytical predominance of categories such as anglophony, francophony, and 'Indian' writing in English continuing to exist owing to the privileging of universal categories of identity, literary analysis has been rendered external to the central concerns of the discipline. In this paper, we propose ways to position literary analysis as central to the comparative methodology through an analysis of practices of narrativization in select contemporary novels that destabilise categories of identification including Sarr's *The Most Secret Memory of Men*, Dany Laferrière's *I am a Japanese Writer*, Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, and PF Mathews' *Chavunilam*. In this paper, we explore the possibility of a literary analytical methodology that is suited to the concerns of Comparative Literature in the 21st Century, as a means to surmount the binaries between text/context, aesthetics/identity, east/west through an ethics of 'alterity', 'dialogue' and 'relationality' as fundamental to human existence and not mutually exclusive of each other. Through expanding and negotiating with the "literary", we suggest that the revival of the literary aesthetic is not separate from contextual concerns, but vitally capable of accommodating plurality through meaningful engagements with our 'others', and providing unique and indispensable perspectives.

Keywords: Comparative methodology, aesthetics, plurality, relationality, contemporary literature

The writer's word manifests the unknown and the strange. Didn't a writer say
long ago "cease to think...now, dream".

– PF Mathews

Introduction

In the ACLA State of the Discipline Report of 2004, Haun Saussy alludes to the "exquisite cadavers" of Comparative Literary methodology. As it stands now, "Our conclusions have become other people's assumptions" (3) even as it brings little by way of "tangible reward" to the discipline (4). Saussy's remark provokes us to introspect on the methodological debt of possibility owed to our discipline and therefore, our responsibility to revitalise our position with regard to the practice of 'doing' comparative literature.

In the light of the growing demand for interdisciplinary and purely sociological approaches to "studying" literature, there is an increasing disparagement of methodologies that involve "only reading artistic literature." What is the implication of such a turn away from literary analysis and its significance? Both Edward Said and Sthathis Gourgouris have critiqued this obsession by referring to it as a "cult of professional expertise" (Said 30). For Gourgouris, the "advent of interdisciplinarity" is an "indication of alleged undisciplinarity" (70). It also speaks to the abilities and inabilities of "selling humanities" (Fish) as "useful" with readily pragmatic "utilitarian" benefits and also of view-

ing literature and literary art in its own complex terms rather as a one-to-one reflection of a “study-able” social phenomenon. Prof. Sayeed in his essay, “A Note on Understanding” distinguishes between the *telos* in the Sciences and Humanities as attempts to seek ‘knowledge’ versus ‘understanding’. While truth, facts and figures are *known*, meaning is *understood* where meaning cannot be reduced to mere linguistic understanding because it is an experiential event (3–4).

The practices of “close reading” and “distant reading” have been understood as fundamental oppositions. They are placed as mutually exclusive positions; the “close reading” of the “practical” critics has been understood as belonging to the arsenal of the conservative comparatists and Moretti’s “distant reading” was the proposed alternative of the age of planetary cosmopolitan comparative literature. Both these strategies have since been identified as purposeful and yet inadequate. Perhaps, it is because we are called to return to the ‘pluralism’ that is at the heart of our discipline and that eschews binary categorisations and blanket universals. The site for this return, we argue, is in literature itself.

This paper argues that it is time for us to place literary analysis at the centre of comparative methodology in our efforts to understand the core values that bolster our discipline; those of ‘plurality’, ‘alterity’ and ‘relationality’ through a willing engagement with the ‘other’ without the hefty cost of reductionism.

The ‘Literary’ as a Method of Re-invention

In a sweeping eschatological declaration on the “last gasp of a dying discipline”, Gayatri Spivak suggests that the discipline of Comparative Literature could easily be subsumed by other disciplines such as Cultural Studies and Area Studies. Ipshita Chanda rebuts this claim in her essay “Can the Non-Western Comparatist Speak?” when she suggests that Spivak’s problem is one of method and of garnering a method to navigate the dynamics of the Cold War and 9/11 in Western academia thereby leading to a crisis that does not clarify who has been dead and by whom (59).

With the American School’s emphasis on interdisciplinarity at the expense of the text as an ‘object’ of study, literary analysis has been rendered external to the central concerns of the discipline. While the text is undoubtedly and indisputably a cultural product, no cultural product is a mirror image of its culture just as all of us, every individual, is not a mere monolith of our shared social experiences. Questions of “authenticity” specifically those raised from “central” locations of culture and criticism often seek to participate in elaborate rituals of “authentication”, reproducing singular images of the *authentic*; a ‘canon’ of the authentic. “Speaking for the collective always means betraying individuals” (380) as Sarr rightly puts in his novel, *The Most Secret Memory of Men*.

Re-considering the text as an ‘event’ involves grappling with the unique ways in which literature processes, negotiates, arrives at, or departs from the circumstances of its production. This is particularly significant within a time where the literature being produced is, in fact, increasingly sophisticated and navigating multifaceted and uniquely challenging circumstances. The text is not an island unto itself but submerged within the multiplicity of dialogues. The challenge here is to prevent ourselves from confusing the text with one voice or one dialogue alone. Categories of identifying and micro-identifying literatures with specific regional, linguistic or thematic discourses may well be one of the many sources of that confusion. For instance, *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, a British Pakistani writer, stretches the form of the novel and the form of ‘narratives of belonging’ to accommodate for the chronic refugee crisis and the state of permanent transience. The novel drifts through simultaneities and incorporates elements of magical realism such that it begins to arrive at novel ways of existence within a world of transient belongings. The sophistication of form in Hamid’s writing and the *avant-garde* elements that invent a way of hopefulness in anticipations of catastrophe—do we place this narrative solely within the framework of the refugee, diaspora, or the immigrant? In a work where the place of origin is deliberately unnamed and the places of arrival are short-lived, placing it into any of these categories would be an act of algorithmic reduction. Rather,

it is prudent to interrogate through the text what categories are being disassembled and what spaces are being invented.

A similar case can be found in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*. This modern re-telling of Sophocles' *Antigone* explores the implications of the 21st century war on terror upon the lives of young Muslims, specifically those who are immigrants or citizens in the West. Shamsie reinvents *Antigone* on several levels: Sophocles' tragedy is novelised into the tragedy of far from exalted people but those who are not alien to fatal flaws including those of *hamartia*. The threefold narrative structure presented through the perspectives of Isma, Aneeka, and Parvaiz render the complications of hefty internalisations, the workings of secrecy and the price of openly declaring one's allegiance. This reinvention which still carries with it the transformed echoes of the original tragedy, does not allow us to engage with either text in isolation. It is a dialogue wherein each participant, including the reader, is transformed.

Instead of reducing the experiences of the individuals grappling with the same event, Shamsie utilises the novel as a form to show the heteroglossia of human experiences through characters who occupy different positions. If Isma's protectiveness over her family comes with the exhaustion of thankless endurance under several communities who all simultaneously denounce her, Aneeka declares herself her brother's keeper at the cost of her hopes, dreams, and life itself. Parvaiz himself is depicted as having been in search of the very belonging that had evaded his sister's; a search for the paternal homeland within which he too was betrayed. Even though all of them traverse through the same 'event,' the experience of this 'shared' event is not the same for all of them owing to their different positions in the society. The novel's analysis cannot be reduced to a homogenised reading of the diasporic experience. Rather, the 'plurality' inherent to the form and intensified by Shamsie through narrativization is the key to centering the co-existences that form the heart of the novel. Taking each character as a mere and isolated "product" of society takes away the contingencies of the individual characters, and therefore, of the literary event. It is reading that proposes micro-narratives and counter-narratives as against the grand narratives under which both literature and discipline could easily be subsumed. In order to excavate these micro-narratives from the literary texts, it is important that the literary method comes first and foremost in a comparatist's interaction with the text. Furthermore, a *transtextual* reading, rooted in the intensity of the dialogue that unfolds between *Antigone* and *Home Fire*, may yield meaning to the contextual particularities of both the texts, a "reversing" of the lens of stability that comparative literature affects (Hayes 13).

Prof. Amiya Dev in his "Towards Comparative Indian Literature" argues that 'Comparison is right for us because, one, we are multilingual, and two, we are Third World' (qtd. in Das 102). He advocates not for singular readings but rather for the framework and practice of "interliterariness" that foregrounds 'relationality' between literatures without reducing them to static and individual poles. It is notable that Prof. Dev developed this concept and its practice through his engagement with the undefinable category of Indian literature(s) which in threatening and promising to subsume every element of literature produced in this subcontinent still subsumes none of it. In his prolonged engagements with concepts of unity and diversity and the necessity of thematology, he says, "*Stoff* is interliterary in spirit; for being the abstract of an experience within one culture it is open to the literatures fed by that culture, and also to the literatures from other cultures if they are approachable in intercultural terms" (Dev 236). Taking an approach to these unforeseen avenues of literature informed by concepts such as "interliterariness" is in our view more productive than outdated and fossilised categorisations which at once isolates and homogenises the text and the reading experience.

The realities of forced migration, globalisation, and transnationalism are undoubtedly significant to our discipline in the 21st century. Saussy's report as far back as 2004 does affirm this calling for new avenues of analytical methods crucial to disciplinary adaptation. We would like to add that the response to these realities should not merely be a reinforcing of binaries between text/context and aesthetics/identity, which only serve to reify and fossilise one element of a binary as progressive and

the other as reactionary. On whichever side the coin falls, we forfeit our ability to comprehend 'plurality' and we deprive ourselves of our very real ability and potential to deftly navigate and even surmount such binaries. We live in the age of information where much of the world is readily narrativized in the best of ways and in the worst of ways. In such a context, it is futile for the literary analyst to singularly focus on where texts end and where contexts begin, whether art is for its own sake or the means to representation, whether the aesthetic or the resistive element should be prioritised in our reading particularly so when comparative literature compels us to ask—why not both? Why not all of it? It also invokes the ideas of 'difference', 'plurality' and 'relationality' as fundamental to human existence and not mutually exclusive of each other.

Identity Studies and its Ramifications

Just as the text is indisputably a cultural product, the 'self' is also created out of our intersecting social realities and our intersecting identities. While there is a growing emphasis on identity as a category of analysis of literary texts, one must be cautious against not allowing it to become the sole category of analysis in the sense that the race, caste, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation of the author overshadows their creative text rather than allowing those intersections to freely illuminate the same. It is crucial that we understand identity as fluctuating and intersecting rather than as essentialised categories of experience. To that end, we must arrive at a pluralistic conception of identities hitherto understood as in essentialist terms. To be clear, we are not suggesting that analyses from the perspective of identity and social experience are obsolete or unnecessary. In fact, it is imperative that we interrogate received categories of literature, literary merit, and the parameters of the aesthetic in the light of multifaceted and plural identities with their oppressions and privileges. However, preconceived and monolithic conceptions of what makes up an identity and therefore, what the marginalised author is allowed to write and under what parameters they are enabled to be read have to be questioned. In as much as reading and writing are both approaches towards alterity, dialogising categories of identity may only elevate our ability to evade reductionism in this process.

Dany Laferrière in an interview denounces the "profiling" of authors according to the place of their origin and rejects all sorts of labels assigned to him such as 'francophony', 'Caribbean', 'exile', 'Quebecois', and 'immigrant'. He says, "Being labelled on something that is the focal point of freedom, to be labelled from creation is an absolutely incredible thing... That I am a migrant writer in anthologies kills me" (46) ... "How I hate that ugly word of *immigrant* – which is not even a French word. We say *immigrant*. Migrant literature? It's what? It looks like a horde of grasshoppers ready to devour you in their path. How not to be confused: what does it take to produce real literature, no ego or more ego? I feel like I have a star on my forehead every time people call me an immigrant writer" (Selao 241).

He critiques the categorisation of his novels as 'exile literature' and admits that success for him as a 'real writer' would be achieved when he is placed not only above negritude but also Creole or Francophone writing, exile literature or migrant writing, the last category being a coinage of "[re]searchers, academics, immigration agents and other head-shrinkers" (qtd. in Selao 240). This becomes an object of critique and ridicule in his novel, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, which was published in 2008, and translated into English as *I am a Japanese Writer* by David Homel in 2010. Laferrière says, "Being labeled on something that is the focal point of the freedom, to be labelled from creation is an absolutely incredible thing... That I am a migrant writer in anthologies kills me" (qtd. in Selao 240). The idea of the novel was conceived much earlier and in 2000, he had already declared his dream to write a book titled *Je suis un écrivain japonais* ("I am a Japanese Writer"). The novel goes to the extent of espousing that "For literature to really exist, the books would have to be anonymous. No ego, no more personal interventions" (Laferrière 51). It is tempting to assume that the 'problem' of difference may be 'solved' through the usage of profiling categories. We must reconceptualise understanding 'alterity' not as a means to towards universal answers but as a mode of

arriving at pluralistic co-existences. We suggest that literature has significantly more potential in this direction rather than as entirely mimetic depictions of the ‘other.’

Likewise, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr’s novel *The Most Secret Memory of Men* challenges the idea that literature must be an act of ‘committed writing’ derived from the author’s ideology. The character of Diégane (read as Sarr’s alter-ego) makes no claims of literature being morally superior to politics and even goes to the extent of being ashamed to be honest with his lover, Aida— “What did the question of writing weigh against that of social suffering?... Literature before politics? Elimane in front of Fatima? So I lied to Aida” (323). Yet—through his writing—he insists on freeing literature from the domain of politics arguing that literature exists in a world of its own. A text is not and must not be taken as a mere reflection of every author’s ideology. Rather, we must acknowledge that it demands its reader(s) to engage with the egocentric concerns depicted in the text to arrive at an understanding of the existential human condition and the ethics of engaging with the ‘other’ through literature’s emphasis on accommodating ‘difference’ or ‘alterity’. When Sarr was posed the question of whether a writer had to be committed, he replied, “Commitment is always the meeting of an author’s temperament and a reader’s sensitivity. Never absolute, it is always relative, fragmentary” (Juompan-Yakam). The novel also critiques the present predisposition of readers to reduce a literary text to being a mere assertion of the author’s identity. In the novel, Diégane wonders:

“A writer who considers himself misunderstood, misread, humiliated, commented on by a prism other than literary, reduced to a skin, an origin, a religion, an identity, and who begins to kill the bad critics of his book out of revenge: it is pure comedy. Have things changed today? Are we talking about literature, aesthetic value, or are we talking about people, their tan, their voice, their age, their hair, their dog, their pussy hair, the decoration of their house, the color of their jacket? Are we talking about writing or identity, style or the media screens that dispense with having one, literary creation or the sensationalism of personality?” (282-83).

Sarr adopts a plurivocal strategy in his novel to demonstrate the escape of narrative from rigid identifications and the multiple truths or perspectives that literature offers through narrativisation of characters and events. He weaves the plot through a blend of narrative forms and points of view ranging from many first-person accounts, diary entries, epistolary to the protagonist referring to himself in the second-person “You” to ironically simulate not identification but difference and even a chapter in the third-person omniscient view to illuminate events unknown to the characters themselves. The “truth” here is not singular or objective but one that is contingent. The reflection of identification and “authenticity” as contingencies, fleeting “givens” from which we may read still allows them to not be taken as the full measure of the text. Living, writing, and articulating may be bound up with identity but the ways in which these bindings are twisted, tightened or broken apart could not be studied in a monologic reading or a uniform perspective. On the question of identity, we may be required to acknowledge the paucity of answers, we may even be required to be content with that.

The Malayalam authors, Johny Miranda and PF Mathews, who belong to the Latin Catholic or Cochin-Creole community, argue for reading novels for their aesthetics rather than for historical precision. Miranda says:

It is very difficult for a writer like me to make his presence felt in a literary culture that has always been dominated by Savarna voices. To make matters worse, when I am read, the focus is usually not on what I set out to achieve. It is a terrible dilemma. Does anyone ask M. T. Vasudevan Nair how he feels to be the voice of the Nair community? Why do people choose to focus on aesthetics when they discuss MT, and burden writers like me and Miranda with the responsibility of being some sort of cultural ambassadors for our community? (Thomas).

In his *Chavunilam*, Mathews complicates the concept of identity through the overlap of characters within space and time. The space of the *paazhnilam*, or the wasteland, upon which the lives of the characters play out in cycles of death and decay, acts as an aperture through which the dead encroach

upon the living. The dead are more than haunting within Mathews' setting. They predict, they endure, they dissect themselves into fragments and re-compose themselves into wholeness. They bury themselves within the living, directing them and devouring them in their dreams. *Paazhnilam* and the church act as fundamental pivots of identity, and as the realm of the wasteland encroaches upon that of the church, the distinctions between sin and virtue are hollowed, along with the distinctions within temporality and identity. Calling upon a readerly identification with the dead, Mathews disrupts the I-Other continuum between the reader, writer, and the text. The experience of mortality grips both the narrative and its audience in a series of extremely uneasy identifications. These identifications which are fragmented and fused together could only be comprehended through a pluralistic reading. There is no correspondence as much as there are fraught entanglements. The rejection of the church embodied within the character of Peru, as well as the ill-omened deaths that proliferate within the home, posit this space as oppositional to the identity created through the church, and warps the dimensions of community. Evoking the biblical passage of Jesus conducting "evil spirits" into the bodies of swine, the novel establishes a continuity with the parable. The spirits who were extinguished by the crazed swine within the waters reverberate and resurrect continually, never truly destroyed. The text then suggests the existence of residual and constantly resurrecting identities without any recourse to essential forms or figures. It also establishes a continuity with the other Wasteland, Eliot's declaration of the unravelling of modernity, each text imposed upon another, each meaning escaping the bounds of a single text.

The novel's narrative structure mirrors this overlap and intertextuality, as it does not register "breaks" in temporality, but posits the endurance of the past within the present and the future within memory as the "natural" extensions of time. This persistence is further echoed with the proliferation of stillbirths and early deaths within the novel; birth, the beginning of life, is already imbued with the death of another, and as such birth is rarely followed by a mooring of the self into identity. The lepers and the pigs, the women like Barbara who have been consigned to silence and namelessly buried within the wasteland, on the other hand, "return" in these fragments of death, "extending" beyond the bounds of their deprived identity. Thus, the nameless re-enact their deaths through the "as-yet-unnamed", positing identity as derived, not only from the trajectories of lineage and linearity, but rather, through repressed, fragmented residuals against which the "form", or in this case, the "house", has been constructed. The novel is thus populated by spectral presences, both living and dead, as the living glimpse fragments of themselves as the experience of death, and thereby identify further with the dead.

The novel begins and ends with a funeral; the "named" funeral of Eeshi begins the novel, or rather, the recognition of Eeshi's death becomes the conduit by which the dead floods back into the text, only to be ended with the funeral of the unnamed, stillborn child of his daughter, Anna. This funeral is then witnessed by Mathappan, who treads the ambivalent, transgressive space between the church and the wasteland, with a prophetic finality. As each birth is already haunted, lineages arrive already disrupted, and thus identity within this amalgam is perpetually left "unfinalized." "Incomplete", or "fragmentary" forms of identification may be read in terms of the instability that governs identity itself, the uncertainty which renews the meanings of community and belonging. Here, "identification" functions as a force of unexpected "sameness" along with unexpected "difference", and as such may only be read within as radically linked to 'others'. The concept of identity renders the boundaries between the 'self' and the 'other' murky, and no identification "sticks" to the skin of the characters inasmuch as the wasteland invokes a chaos that governs nothing but un-homed, tangled selves. As such, in the body of the text, there are differences, and violences, but there is no 'other.'

As we earlier suggested about the nature of binaries, the reification of binaries ultimately serve to strengthen the position of its "dominant" element. Marginalising non-British writers as belonging to the Anglophone and the non-French as belonging to the Francophone, in our view, serves only to strengthen the position of the colonial metropole from where these categories are created. While the

British, the Indian, and the Caribbean writer undoubtedly write from varying positions and perhaps of varying circumstances and in varying ways, we must not characterise one as having a unique claim to English literature. Questioning a binary conception of self and other would also lead to a questioning of the standard and variants. In criticism, we often grapple with the assumption of a fixed self and a destabilising other. Pluralistic comparative readings may be utilised to disrupt these relationships to place self/other and standard/variant(s) in intersections and continuums. This may also enable us to further appreciate alterities of aesthetics, forms, thematic engagements without centering the 'self' in such a reading. In other words, uneasy identifications must become rules rather than exceptions in Comparative Literature. Conversely, uneasy disidentifications must also be understood as possibilities. Naturally, within the post-Cold War, post 9/11 context, we already know which side stands to benefit from any notion of a unique claim to identity or reality. That is a risk we cannot afford to take!

These concerns are echoed in the increasing tokenisations that are operating particularly within the Western literary and critical spheres. They are also echoed by the increasing attempts to curb the voices of marginalised authors through persecution and ostracization within our own society no matter what those voices may be saying. Reading a work as a reflection of an objective reality or purely as a sociological statement may be detrimental to the cause of plurality. As Đurišin has suggested in his criticism of the early French school of Comparative Literature, literary relationships never develop between two elements but at several levels simultaneously. To read comparatively is to reinforce that old axiom that literature is always already comparative. The complex operations of integration and differentiation that circulates through the creation of an engagement with the text imply that a one-to-one identification is a restrictive and even a monolithic way of approaching narratives (qtd. in Dominguez 100). Furthermore, departing from such categorisations may also allow us to tread the spaces between them or rather tread the space at all as there is no clear-cut division between what makes a literary analysis "interliterary" or comparative and what makes it "intraliterary".

We suggest that it is at this volatile juncture that it is crucial to foreground 'relationality' or co-existences without complete accord, without viewing an individual and particularly an artist solely as the sum total of their identity. Rather, it would make for meaningful resistance on the part of the literary analyst to do the opposite; to revive the "surplus" as not marginal but central to human existence and expression. Literary analysis that functions primarily through this assumption may well be complementary to identity-based analysis and it may well be instrumental in ensuring that we evade the dangers of a single story.

In this final section of the paper, let us examine why literary revitalisation is particularly relevant to the Indian context. Rather, let us attempt to examine how the Indian context is particularly suited for this revitalisation if we look at the perspectives upon which the discipline has been founded and has grown within this country. Sisir Kumar Das in his essay, "Why Comparative Literature" justifies the need for comparative literary methodologies in understanding Indian literatures by suggesting that the inherent nature of Indian literature(s), that is, its multilingualism and multiple nationalisms demand wide literary perspectives (100). In order to avoid what Das terms as "linguistic parochialism" we suggest that it is necessary to not read these literatures through reductive sociological lenses at the expense of creating a solid functional methodology for comparative literature. The pitfalls mentioned earlier of faulty categorisations and deterministic meta-narratives could be possibly evaded through the robust practice of reading. In her *Phenomenology of Love and Reading*, Cassandra Falke suggests that while reading does not substitute for human relationality, it nevertheless makes us receptive to the approach of the 'other' and the ability to be changed for the better through the active understanding of the 'other.' She says, "Love expands us like water expands the river" (24) implying the same of reading. Therefore, even while Das reminds us that "Literature is not a body of impersonal knowledge without any relation to the people or to the time to which we belong,"

(100) it remains true that the most meaningful tool in the comparatist's arsenal is the ability to arrive at understandings, narratives, and conflicting truths without the need or necessity for reductive answers. This ability lies in the strength of our literary analysis. Therefore, we suggest that literary analysis is our means of journeying "from comparative Indian literature to comparative literature" and not vice versa (102).

We recognize that to argue the case for the centering of literary analysis only through frameworks of product and utility would always be frustrating and futile. The larger project, tangled with the politics of capital, politics, production, and competition over resources and the fundamental ways in which academia functions would be in shifting or re-working those particular frameworks. And that particular crisis, of having to "market" knowledge across unequal and reductive lines is in fact trans-disciplinary in its own way. To conclude with a brief illustration; the paper "A Caterpillar that eats Tortoise Shells" was published by the Archbold Biological Station, following a chance discovery from one of their interns, on a moth that builds life off of the shells of dead turtles. Against most odds, the paper gained traction beyond the circles of the Life Sciences, not due to the curious oddity of the moth, but rather the entomologists' moving case for its conservation in its final section "On Being Endangered; An Afterthought": "We should speak up on behalf of this little moth", they write, "not only because by doing so we would bolster conservation efforts now underway in Florida, but because we would be calling attention to the existence of a species so infinitely worth knowing" (Deyrup et al.).

Let that be our concluding, overarching persuasion for revitalizing the strength and potential of comparative literary analysis. That every story, like every moth, is infinitely worth knowing.

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