"For most of humanity's existence, we walked": An Interview with Pennie Opal Plant of Idle No More SF Bay
June 28, 2016

Introduction

I met Pennie Opal Plant in June 2015, during a Refinery Corridor Healing Walk organized by Idle No More SF Bay. The walks began in 2014, in a move to raise awareness of the five refineries in the East Bay. While participating in the walk I was struck by its power as a form of creative resistance – from the beautiful screen printed signs and patches, to the experience of walking from one point to another and listening to stories relevant to particular locations along the way. For those who happened to see the walks, which occurred between 2014 and 2017, they were a compelling sight – particularly in a region where cars are such a prominent form of transit.

When considering the visual culture of creative resistance, walking may not immediately come to mind. However, this form has been prominent across histories and geographies – a topic I write about at length in a forthcoming book chapter.1 From the Longest Walk of 1978 to the March for Our Lives in 2018, this manifestation of creative resistance continues to flourish.

I asked Pennie if she would be willing to speak with me on the phone about the walks. Our conversation was wide ranging and we spoke about topics from the role of non-humans on the walks, to the importance of art in movements and how walking can be an entry point to sustained community activism. Pennie’s words give us insight into this particular approach to organizing in the Bay Area (which has resulted in some significant wins), as well as the importance of walking as a form of creative resistance.

Amber Hickey (AH): You said in your first email to me that you received the idea for the Refinery Corridor Healing Walks, and I’m curious to know more about that. Can you share the story of how the idea came to you, and what you did next?

Pennie Opal Plant (POP): Yes. [...] I was invited to be in a meeting of Bay Area activists and representatives from Climate Justice NGOs here. It was in January of 2014, and we came together to see what projects we could all work on, what actions we could create. And so this came out of the big Forward on Climate action in February of the previous year, and also the big action that we had in front of the Chevron Refinery in the summer of that year, which had exploded the year before sending 15,000 of my community members to the hospital. So those two big actions really united the Bay Area. And as we were sitting there […] going around the room kind of brainstorming on ideas, the concept of the refinery walk came rolling out of my mouth. And it wasn’t something I had consciously thought of. And so, for me, the kind of person that I am, it came from another source outside of myself. And it’s not the first time that has happened; my life has been actually guided by that. And so it was funny because when it rolled out, it made one of the top of the list – I think it was number two or three of the ideas that had the most enthusiasm for them. [...] So what wound up happening was that our Idle Nó More SF Bay group took it on as a project, with a lot of support by a lot of folks that were in that room, and a lot of other frontline community activists and people working at climate justice NGO’s definitely attended and provided support.

AH: So, this is a very large question. I’m curious to know what are some experiences of walking that have stood out to you during the eleven walks that have occurred since 2014?

POP: I think the number one thing that has stood out for me is how many people have come up to us after they’ve walked, and talked to us about what a profound shift they went through as a result of being on the walk. And that has included shifts in how they see the refineries, because you know when you’re walking through them you can see that there are rusted pipes, and they don’t look like they are being maintained, as they should be, and things like that. And then the shift that some people have around being in opposition and shifting that to what we’re for, and not what we’re against. And the whole concept that we talk about on the walks of our enemy not being any individual or groups of people, but if we have an enemy then that would be the ways of thinking that have allowed this to occur on Mother Earth. The ways of thinking about extraction, about commercialization, capitalism, the government and the laws that have allowed these things to occur. [...] And then there are the other non-human relatives that have joined us on the walks. And probably my favorite story about that would be the first walk that we had the condor feather on. And the vultures that are Indigenous to here were flying with us. Every single time I looked in the sky. And I didn’t understand why until I was praying about it for probably about two weeks, and finally the answer came to me. And I felt really like, oh I’m such a dork. Because the answer was that the vultures are the genetic relatives to the condors. They’re the little brothers and sisters of the condors, and they felt that powerful condor medicine with us, and they were honoring that condor by being with us on the walk. But there have been so many other stories about the animals that joined us. One year, there was a little fish that got captured in the water — you know when we have the water purge for the water and we carry the water — we carried a little fish the entire way. I think it was one of those longer walks, like the one from Benicia to Rodeo, and we carried the little fish almost thirteen miles with us. And there were hawks that have joined us... Last year and this year, on the second walk from Martinez to Benicia, at the exact same place there was a solid black butterfly that flew through us, and I’ve been trying to find out about black butterflies, and there […] aren’t any solid black butterflies here. So that was pretty unusual to see. It wasn’t real big, it was kind of the size of the
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little white butterflies that we get here, but it was solid black. Yeah, and I couldn't find anything about that little butterfly.

AH: That is so interesting.

POP: At the exact same spot. I mean, exactly. The same trees, the same bushes, it was right there. And the first year when we walked from ... we were still in Pittsburg, the very first year, these two big fields are fenced in now so we can't see really on the other side of them. But the first year the ground squirrels came out, and they walked with us. Not just on one of the walks, but they came out on the next after we crossed the street. And they were on the next block too. They came out and walked with us. So it's just a direct indication for people not familiar with the concept of all of our relations and everything being connected. But here's a physical experience.

AH: Yeah, and that also reminds me of a story I read about The Longest Walk. And how during part of their time when they were walking through the southwest, there were horses that accompanied them for I think a whole day. That just reminds me of that story [...] POP: Yeah. And for now, I think the people that have those experiences see the world with slightly different eyes, like who is this around me, and do they want to tell me something.

AH: [...] So, this is sort of a related question. One of the things I thought was really wonderful about the walk and the way it was structured was that people shared stories at different points throughout the walk, lots of different people, and I felt like those were for reflection and for listening and learning from other folks, and the stories that people shared on that one day were all so moving. So I'm wondering what's one of the most moving or memorable stories you've heard during the walks?

POP: It would probably be the last walk that we had. Isabella Azizi, who is one of my co-workers at the business that I own, as we were walking through the Conoco-Phillips Refinery in Rodeo, and it's ok for me to tell this story because she told it at the very end. ... She came to me, and she was sobbing, just absolutely sobbing [...]. I asked her what was going on and she had the experience of feeling the pain and the sorrow of the air and the water and the oil at the refinery, and the land and the pain that they are in and the sorrow that they have for what's happened. And it was hard, you know, it was really hard and, you know, I'm an action person, I always want to do something, and I didn't quite know what to do. And then I realized that, because I carry my medicine with me — my feathers and my herbs and stuff —, so I just handed those to Isabella, and said "here, carry my medicine until you start to feel a little bit better." And so she did, and it helped her as it helped me. And that was really powerful. And the other people that speak, you know, there are people that we know who are activists in the community that we always see [...] on the walks, and we want to make sure that the walkers know a lot of the other things that are happening in the Bay Area that they can plug into. So the walks aren't just about, you know, go on this walk and it's this powerful experience [...] They are also introductions to people who maybe haven't been as active as some of the rest of us are, and how they can do that. There are so many ways that people can plug into ensuring the safety and vibrant health of the future.

AH: Ok. So, this is a little bit of a different question. Before the walk that I took part in, I remember that there were all of these beautiful screen printed cloths that people could pin onto their shirts, and really amazing painted signs, and I know that there was also an art party before to prep for the walk. So I'm curious to hear your opinion about what the role of art is in these walks, and also in a broader sense, the role of art in environmental justice and social movements.

POP: It's vital. Art is vital to just being alive. I'm an artist and a poet, and my husband is an artist, an actor, and a jeweler, and my daughter is a singer, a musician. And I own a Native American art gallery, so ...

[both laugh]

POP: And I think that especially as a Native person, I don't know of any Indigenous language that has a word for "art." And all of the items that were made were made as beautifully as possible because of the joy that it brings. And regarding the movement, all of the movements in my lifetime, which I'm 58 so there have been a lot of amazing movements in my lifetime, the ones that have the beautiful art are the ones that people remember. We're fortunate enough to have David Solnit, who lives in Berkeley, and he's the most amazing activist. He travels all around the country and around the world, assisting communities in creating movement art. And so when I first met him, it was during making art, and since then we've become really good friends, and we've had countless numbers of art parties [...] for the walks where we silk-screen hundreds of t-shirts, and then hand paint a lot of them. And then those are the ones that we sell at the healing walks. And we get together and make the beautiful flags and the banners and everything. They are an opportunity to bring people together just to have fun and make art. And there's a type of bonding that happens during the art parties that is really good glue for different actions that the same folks go to you. You know, there's just a type of relationship that's created that is different than being at an action together. And we go to each other's art parties — the folks in the Bay Area. [...] Right before COP in Paris, I think it was in October, our Idle No More group and other folks were helping David Solnit make all those "Keep it in the Ground" banners and the "Stop CO2 Colonialism" banners, and that's been really amazing to see those banners show up all over the country, and to see them all over Paris during COP21. David also helped people make these immense puppets. So we have a giant mother earth puppet that — we don't bring her out to everything because she requires a
person to be inside and two people to handle her arms — but for the bigger actions we bring her out. And she's pretty impressive.

AH: I think I might have seen her. Was she at the Climate March in 2014?

POP: No, that was a different Mother Earth puppet!

AH: Oh, ok!

[both laugh]

POP: The other thing I wanted to add is that the walks have developed over the last three years. We've shifted the way our messaging is on the walks. So the first walk we had a whole lot of banners on wooden one-by-twos, and they were a little bit heavy, and they weren't really easy to read from the street. And so now we have these big ... they are almost like a silk fabric where the messaging is super clear: "Clean Air," "Clean Water," "Clean Soil," "Safe Jobs," "Refinery Healing Walks." And so the people that are driving by, they're happy, you know, it's like "oh, people are doing something!" And we have had numerous cars stop this year, when we started having these bigger flags with simple messaging on them, stop to ask us, "So what are you doing? We're so glad you're doing this. When are you going to do it again? How can we join you?" And I think that's another really important aspect of the art. [F]or us, it's helped people understand what we're doing. Because we're not against anything, and who could be against clean air, water, and soil?! [laughs]

AH: My next question was how have the walks changed over the past two years — you started answering a few things about the art, the different signs that have been made and the messaging and so forth. But other than that, how else would you say that the walks have changed or evolved over the past two years?

POP: Well, I would just like to start by saying that by the end of number sixteen, we will be able to do this anywhere with our eyes closed.

[both laugh]

AH: That's good!

POP: Yeah! There's been a lot of great evolution with the walks. So the first year, [...] the first two walks we didn't have any invited Indigenous frontline community guests, because we didn't have any funding for that. So the first walk, there was a lot more people, walkers talking a lot. They didn't understand about it being a healing, prayer walk.

AH: That's right. You're asked to be silent during the walk, right?

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POP: [W]e didn't understand how much education and how much framing we needed to do to help people understand the intention and the energy of the walks. But you know we took full responsibility for that. And so for the first year it was a process of Idle No More trying to understand how to frame that in the right way. And also how to take more leadership. [...] So, working together in our group, we had to figure out the best way to explain in the morning circle, after the prayers for the water, the logistics and the intention of the walks. And how to respect the walks. And how to listen to the monitors and the medics on the walks. So we finally got that down late last year, I would say. You know it was probably a year and a half of this, continuing to refine it to such a point that this year on the first walk, one of our friends who had been on several of the walks the previous two years came up and said, "I don't know what you did, what you've done to make this different, but this is a completely different experience I'm having. People are much more contemplative, they are much more respectful," and so we just had to continue to fine-tune it. Because here's a group of primarily Indigenous organizers, leading primarily non-Indigenous people who haven't necessarily even been around Native people. So it was definitely this process that happened, that we finally feel like we have down. To help people understand the ceremony part in the morning, the prayers for the water, and how we're related to water and how water communicates, and how everything communicates with us if we pay attention and listen. So that's been really rewarding, that evolution. So now the walks are very different than they started out to be.

AH: Yeah, I took part in the one from Benicia to Rodeo last year, and it felt very clear and well framed to me. And also very supportive. So if people were not silent, they would be very gently reminded by others, in a very nice way that I think worked well. And it felt like everyone understood the intention behind being silent. So I agree with what you're saying from my experience — my one experience last year.

POP: And you'll be happy to know, because you were on that walk, remember when we were in Vallejo that huge hill we had to walk up with all those houses and stuff?

AH: Looking back on it I feel like exhaustion was a really important part of the walk for me. But in the moment, it was difficult.

POP: Yeah, me too. That was the walk I got heat stroke on last year [...] I tried to crawl under a little bush to get some rest, and the medics were giving me tons of electrolytes because everything had gone grey. Well anyway, we now buy giant bags of electrolytes for everyone, and make people eat them.

AH: Yeah. So that leads us nicely into the next thing I wanted to ask you. There are so many forms that activism can take. I mean, it can be rallies, marches, boycotts, posters. So what do you think is special about walking as a form of creative resistance?

POP: For most of humanity's existence, we walked. We walked, here in the Americas
people walked from New Mexico all the way to Ecuador to get little three or four inch parrot feathers that they needed in their ceremonies up there in New Mexico. People walked thousands of miles, and that's what we all did as human beings before domestication of horses. They say humans walked out of Africa. So walking is such a natural thing for us to do. And when we walk we experience the world in a completely different way than when we're driving a vehicle or riding a bike or on roller blades or skateboard. It's a completely different experience. Our eyes see things that we can't see when we're on anything with wheels or a horse. I grew up with horses, so I know that that's true. Our minds can relax when we're walking. [...] I think it engages a different part of our brain when we're walking, [...] I know that when I'm walking my brain feels different. So walking long distances and pushing through that resistance that most of us have who live in so-called developed countries is really good for us. We see the world in a different way. We see the beauty of the world in a different way. And we also see the horrors of the world in a different way. So when we're walking through the refinery we can see the rust and we can see the liquid that's dripping and we can see the oily water ponds and we can see the animals that live there and how that's not a good environment for them. We just see things in a different way when we're walking that makes the experience go into our being in a deeper way because we're slow. [...] In this fast-paced culture that we are forced to be in, that is hopefully transitioning to something that is healthier for everything for everyone, that compulsion to move really fast is something that the culture, our families, the school system, the entire system that we're in tries to push everyone into going very fast. When we're forced to slow down, part of us relaxes and is able to take things in a different way.

AH: My next question is much broader, and it also relates to Idle No More as a women-led activist group. What do you think the role of women is in movements for social and environmental justice? Is there a particular responsibility that women hold?

POP: Yes. The main responsibility for women, that women have, is to ensure life. To give birth, to ensure their children's safety, health, and welfare, and to ensure the health and welfare for their grandchildren, and for native people that goes seven generations into the future. And so as a Native woman, I understand that seven generations of my grandmothers were probably praying for me and thinking about me. Seven generations ago. I think that's true for all of us, because we are all Indigenous to this beautiful mother earth that was left to live on. And the other obligation that we have as women is to the water. [...] Grandmother moon, she's in charge of the water on mother earth. It's her influence that moves the water in the tide. And because of our relationship in our bodies to water and to the moon, she also covers the tides in our body that make us bleed every month — well I don't bleed anymore, but that make women bleed every month. Those cycles are guided by the moon. And when babies are born, they're first in the sea of the mother's womb. That's a little ocean that they are living in. And then they come out on a giant wave. The birth wave that comes out when they are born. And in a beautiful clean healthy non-toxic environment, that baby would be born in pure and clean waters. With pure and clean blood. But babies now are born with approximately 300 toxins in their bodies. And mother's breast milk also has toxins — around the world — that they are feeding their babies. And so our responsibility as women is to be on the forefront of the climate justice movement and the environmental movement. Because it is our sacred duty to ensure life, to ensure healthy life. And women by and large do things in movements differently than men. I'll give you an example. So [...] our Idle No More group rolled out of a group of Indigenous grandmothers that have been meeting in prayer every single month for about eight or nine years. And this group of grandmothers made the decision to be on the frontlines of all of the direct actions that our group is involved in. And in order to ensure the safety of the younger people in our group and younger people who are at a direct action that we are at, we have been working now for years to create really good positive relationships with the police in the cities in which we conduct the direct actions. To such an extent that at one of the actions at Chevron, [...] I had a bunch of stuff I had to look through a bag and I was holding an Idle No More banner and I looked at officer Joey, and I said, "officer Joey can you hold this for me?" So there's [...] all these pictures of officer Joey in Richmond holding an Idle No More banner.

AH: Oh! That's awesome.

POP: Yeah. And he, I don't know if you saw, we had a direct action at Shell on the summer solstice as part of the Indigenous Women of the Americas Defending Mother Earth Treaty, but I called officer Joey because I didn't know whether the gate at the Shell refinery where we were doing the action [...] was county or city, I couldn't tell from the map. So I called in and I asked him, you know "can you help me figure out who I need to call?" And he goes, "oh yeah, Pennie, sure." So he called and he found out it was the sheriff. He talked to the specific sheriff whose job it was going to be to work with us. And he explained how we roll, that we're totally nonviolent, that we're going to do prayers, the whole thing. He has always been at our actions in Richmond. And he told me that Officer O'Mary was going to be calling me. So when he did, we went and met with them, and as a result of this awesome meeting that we had there were only two officers at the action. And Shell had blockaded their own gates. So it was framed in a way that yes, we got to do our action. We trespassed onto Shell property after an hour and a half of praying and teach-in, the way Idle No More rolls out our actions, and when the officer started, when I saw him starting to walk the half block or so up to the Shell refinery gates, he got in his car and drove away. He didn't even want to be there to witness us trespassing. So the long view of that is that someday there might be an escalation of people doing our best to ensure a safe and healthy future for generations to come. And if that happens and I pray that it doesn't, but if that happens, in our area it will be the grandmas on the frontlines, who have relationships with these officers. And if officers are being instructed to hit us, they're
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going to have to hit grandmas who they have a relationship with, which is going to be really difficult for them to do. So it's much more difficult for officers to even ... if they're being instructed to commit acts of violence against nonviolent protestors it's much more difficult for that to happen if they know the people that they are being told to harm.

AH: Because they can't de-personalize them.

POP: Yeah. And I know that there are really sick mentally ill police officers around the country who are murdering people of color. I know that that's true, it is horrible. It needs to stop. I'm really glad that the rest of this country is finally starting to realize that that happens, and American Indians are killed more often than any other ethnic group in this country. It's just that there's a smaller percentage of us, so people don't hear it. But to take that long view and say, ok all of that's true and, "how are your kids?" to the officer. "How are your kids? How's your wife? We're going to pray for you right now. We're going to pray for your family and your children to have safe and healthy lives." So I think the role of women right now is really important, especially if things escalate. And the power of nonviolence is ... we can't ever resort to violence. We will always be out-armed. And I've been at actions, when I was younger, where an elder right next to me beaten with billy clubs by the police. And I got one of the most profound lessons of my life. The women in my group pulled me out, I was the youngest, I was twenty-two or twenty-three, pulled me out of the groups, stood me up, we surrounded the three police officers in a very loose circle, and started singing in very soft voices, "we are peaceful, loving people, singing for our lives." And within forty-five seconds, one officer stood up and he had tears running down his face. And as soon as he stood up, the other officers stood up and backed out of the circle.

AH: Do you remember what action that was?

POP: It was one of the actions at the Lawrence Livermore Nuclear Lab in the early eighties. It was out there a lot, and was arrested multiple times out there.

[...]

AH: So my next question is about results. And I feel like especially with creative activism, it's kind of difficult to trace results directly. But the question is, what do you think the walks have resulted in thus far, or what have your wins been. Those could be both very concrete wins, like that refinery was shut down, or that planned refinery wasn't opened. Or more personal or experiential or general wins.

POP: So before the Refinery Healing Walks were organized, the words "refinery corridor" were not part of the lexicon here. [...A]fter the first year we started hearing that and now are seeing it in government reports. So people in the Bay Area, even though they drive by two of the refineries on Highway 80 and two of the refineries on Highway 4, it wasn't part of the mindset that there are five refineries here. So that's been a huge win, that now it is widely known that there are five refineries in the northeast bay. And that's an important step into understanding the health effects in those refinery communities, and how far the wind takes those toxins, all the way into San Joaquin Valley. And so the health effects are more broadly known now because of the healing walks. So those are two huge wins. The other wins are the people at the refineries who work there. The truck drivers who are driving semis full of fossil fuels in and out of the refineries, they don't see us as ... the ones that we talk to don't see us as being the enemy. There have been baby steps into relationships with the refinery workers, so much so that at the last Shell action there was a man driving into work at the Shell refinery, and he stopped. He said, "What's going on?" I explained to him what we were doing and he said, "You know, I'm really sorry I work here, I'm really glad that you're doing this." We had a short conversation about his children -- I always ask if people have children --, about the jobs that are becoming available in the renewable energy sector, and how that's one of the fastest growing job markets right now. But just to hear him apologize that he worked there was really huge. So there are these little relationships that we have been forming over the years. And that's a huge win. That people don't see us as the enemy. They understand that we're here for clean air, water, and soil, and safe and healthy jobs. They're for that too. [...] there's no need for anybody to be in opposition to one another right now. And that we have so much to remember and to learn about how to live in balance and in harmony, within this system of life that can do very well without us. Did you walk away with that?

AH: I did.

POP: So I think that people who walk away with that, they talk about that with other people. It's a message that is easy, it's clear, and it's true.

AH: I think in addition to that for me there was something really terrifying about being so close to a refinery, and not having a car window in between the refinery and myself. And like you said being able to see the oil dripping down and the rust and the smell in the air, and also the sounds. People try to avoid being close to them. But there was something really powerful about confronting that reality, because of course we all know that the extractive industry exists, and about all of the negative things that it has resulted in and is still resulting in. But it's something different when you're that close to the machine itself [...]. I hadn't expected to feel so moved by that part of the walk.

POP: That's really good for me to hear. Because I grew up in San Pablo and Richmond the refinery was a part of my life. But I don't have an experience of not having been there, so that's really good information for me, thank you.

AH: I guess that there are other things that different people ... they would be more
used to certain things than others. I grew up in southern California, so I was very accustomed to driving past the nuclear power station, Diablo Canyon I think it is, the nuclear power plant down there. I thought it was this weird looking thing that I always saw when I was growing up. Now that I know a bit more about nuclear energy and the terrible things that uranium mining and extraction can do, it's different when I go by it. But still something that I was used to as a kid.

POP: I think that's a really important thing for us to remember, that what we grow up with we are accustomed to and we don't question it. Like so many things that we've grown up with that we've become accustomed to.

AH: Ok, so [...] what else do you hope the walks will bring about. Are there any other wins you'd like to see happen, or any other way you'd like to see the walks develop?

POP: Well there have been other walks that have been inspired by, well another walk that was inspired by this one. And it is, on walk number two, there was another walk in Napa. A healing walk. That was directly a spin off from our walk. And then our friends in Houston are talking about doing some refinery healing walks. But there are like thirty refineries and chemical companies in Houston. One of our frontline activists last year was Bryan Parras from Houston, and he was really inspired by the walks. And then on walk number two the first year, Desmond D'Sa who was the Goldman Prize winner that year, environmental award winner from South Africa, he was really inspired and was talking about doing walks like ours in South Africa where they have a number of refineries in Durban. And so I think that for the future of the walks that is the best thing that can happen for us, is that people are so inspired by what's been created and how they've been created that more walks like this will happen. And with more walks like this happening, more activists will be created. More people will get involved in the climate justice movement. And with a slightly different perspective than one coming from anger. And where the perspective comes from love.

AH: That sounds great, and I'd love to see some of these walks happening closer to where I live now. I'll keep my eyes open for those.

POP: Yeah, and really I'll go anywhere and tell anybody how we did it. Anybody who wants to know, if they can get me out there I'll go and I'll give the lowdown on how we did it with intention and love and positivity and what we did from the very first meeting. All our meetings start and end with prayers. You know and for people who aren't spiritually minded they can just start with an intention, a loving intention.

AH: I feel like that's a nice place to end, just thinking about the future and supporting other walks popping up throughout the country.

HEMISPHERE

POP: And the world. We all get to do this together, we get to re-imagine everything. That's our biggest job.

Conclusions

Walking with Pennie in silence, and then having such a rich conversation with her was a privilege. Although the Refinery Corridor Healing Walks ended in 2017, the impacts of the walks continue to echo. Idle No More SF Bay's work continues, and readers may follow it at: https://www.facebook.com/INMSolidaritySF/.

Amber Hickey is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Visual Studies program at the University of California, Santa Cruz (Advisor: Derek C. Murray). Her dissertation focuses on the visual culture of decolonial movements in the U.S. and Canada.

Pennie Opal Plant (Yaqui, Mexican & Undocumented Choctaw/Cherokee) is a member of Idle No More SF Bay. She also owns Gathering Tribes, a gallery and store in Albany, California, featuring work by Indigenous artists.

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