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GRAPHING AND GRAFTING IN JAMAICA KINCAID'S GARDEN MEMOIRS

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Abstract

Benítez-Rojo's concepts of "plasma" and "metamachine" are at the core of this essay to understand Kincaid's foregrounding of otherness, discomfort and global underground memory in *My Garden (Book)*: (1999) and *Among Flowers, A Walk in the Himalaya* (2005). Graphing and grafting become privileged metaphors for Kincaid's work as an Afro-Caribbean.

Jamaica Kincaid wrote two books on gardens, plants and flowers: *My Garden (Book)*: (1999), about her first garden in Vermont, and *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* (2005) about her trekking trip in the Himalaya with three seed collectors, in which, in Bakhtinian terms, she dialogizes gardens—not only hers but gardens all over the planet. In both books, in fact, she produces texts on plants and gardens that she dialogically infuses with a complex network of treatments, interpretations and understandings of the world as she sees it (Bakhtin, 2014). Her enterprise is aesthetically phenomenological and existentialist, as these books are works of art that both explain the historical phenomenon that started with the 'discovery' of the Americas by Christopher Columbus and reveal the impact these past events still have on the singularity of Kincaid's vision and her existence wherever she is: in Vermont or in the Himalaya. As an Afro-Caribbean and an American (*i.e.*, someone whose ancestors and herself were transplanted to different spaces at different times), she graphs what can be termed Garden Memoirs in an idiosyncratic and global sense. Indeed "grafting" and "graphing" share the same etymology: the grafting knife that was used in the Middle Ages derived its name from the late

Greek and Latin words “graphium” (*i.e.*, stylus) precisely because of its resemblance to a stylus. In Kincaid’s garden memoirs, the two tools (stylus and grafting knife) are bound through another intimate connection: both of them are instrumental in collecting the seeds of memory.

As such, Kincaid’s garden memoirs reveal quite an unconventional vista of codes and subcodes that brings to light the world history of productions of wealth (material and cultural) in the colonial and the post-colonial world over the last five hundred years. Her perspective, I argue, is similar to that which is at the core of theorist Antonio Benítez Rojo’s *Repeating Island*. In his essays, Benítez Rojo redefines Caribbean culture through a set of multiple lenses—historical, economic, sociological, psychological, religious, etc.—to interpret the essential characteristics of that region as a blend of order and disorder, two notions that are not antithetical when applied to the Caribbean. According to him, the Caribbean can be seen as ruled by a form of chaos which is both unexpected and complex but which generates unforeseen creations. The Caribbean is therefore an archipelago of paradoxes that recreates and repeats itself. Kincaid’s writings exemplify Benítez Rojo’s analyses since book after book she recreates and repeats the founding experience of her Caribbean origins.

Benítez Rojo’s collection of essays on the Caribbean basin opens with a critical re-examination of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of machines, according to which desire’s *primum mobile* is to initiate a chain of productions. Their theory posits desire at the center of a mechanism which enables a machine to set itself in motion, interrupt itself, then connect itself to the previous interrupter which sets another machine in motion which in turn interrupts itself only to connect itself to a third machine *etc.*, to produce a desire that repeats itself and becomes in this very process a new form of production. According to Deleuze and Guattari, when applied to the Caribbean, the device highlights how the plantation economy was interrupted and then reignited in a capitalist system which in turn connected itself to another system. This, according to Benítez-Rojo, is a post-structuralist and post-industrialist view which is inoperative in the Caribbean. He adds:

The Caribbean machine, on the other hand, is something more: it is a technological-poetic machine, or, if you like, a metamachine of differences whose poetic mechanism cannot be diagrammed in conventional dimensions, and whose user’s manual is found dispersed in a state of plasma within the chaos of its own network of codes and subcodes. (p. 18)

This dynamic is typically, I argue, what is at work in any of Kincaid’s texts and these garden books in particular: they reveal to the reader a state of plasma within a chaotic network of codes and subcodes that are not only hers, but that also belong to the global world or more exactly to the unforeseen and invisible relations that connect the global world. To use Edouard Glissant’s notion of *rhizome* in *The Poetics of Relation* (1990), a notion that he borrows from Deleuze and Guattari, the Caribbean can be defined through multiple identities that expand

into a plurality of relationships (just like rhizomic plants that are connected thanks to their network of horizontal roots) contrary to the single, rooted, and vertical identity of the colonial world which annihilates relationship. Kincaid, I believe, weaves a rhizomic relationship with her readers through a discomfiting, eclectic machine that binds their underground memory to hers. In this article I concentrate on the idiosyncrasy of the author's perspective, on the way she uses intertextuality to relate with the great number of source texts she cites, and the ontological discomfort she deliberately spurs in the reader's experience of her "gardens" to understand how her metamachine works.

Idiosyncratic Stance

Kincaid's literary approach is more often than not centered on her individual experience. When she first started gardening, she wanted flowerbeds and so had somebody dig holes in front and at the back of her house in Vermont; this was apparently so "ungardenlike" that, she realized, it triggered questions around her:

When it dawned on me that the garden I was making (and am still making and will always be making) resembled a map of the Caribbean and the sea that surrounds it, I did not tell this to the gardeners who had asked me to explain the thing I was doing, or to explain what I was trying to do; I only marveled at the way the garden is for me an exercise in memory, a way of remembering my own immediate past, a way of getting to a past that is my own (The Caribbean Sea) and the past as it is indirectly related to me (the conquest of Mexico and its surroundings). (1999, pp. 7-8)

Kincaid isolates two poles in her idiosyncratic quest: memory and conquest. As she digs holes in her garden, a map of the Caribbean is conjured up alongside her immediate past. In the course of her gardening and writing expeditions, she understands that another past is being summoned that she has to conquer: she is confronted with the conquest of her own memory—a personal memory that is dormant, silent, unexplained and brings about existential trauma—and the memory of a conquest to which she is indirectly bound as a Caribbean subject. That second aspect of memory which is as unconscious as the other one, *i.e.*, the five hundred years that preceded her existence, demands enquiries concerning the activities of the conquering class to face the trauma of what it is to belong to the conquered. The reader has to bear in mind those two aspects—the conquest of memory (her own, in her front and back gardens) and the memory of the conquests that started with Christopher Columbus—to understand the way Kincaid dialogizes both her fiction and her garden memoirs.

As far as personal memory is concerned, "conquest" is quite straightforward: she relates the *Portulaca* (a flower) to a stevedore she once met, the botanical garden of Antigua to her father and her female friends, the White Head Bush to her mother (1999, p. 119). After some time spent in gardening in Vermont and doing research on the names of plants and their origins, she states: "This ignorance of the botany of the place I am from (and am of) really only reflects

the fact that when I lived there, I was of the conquered class living in a conquered place” (1999, p. 120). Botany is hence a form of knowledge that she is determined to conquer, until she understands that the botanical life of Antigua as it is now, is part of a machine. The bougainvillea comes from tropical South America, the plumbago from Southern Africa, the croton from Malaysia, the hibiscus from Asia and East Africa, the allamanda from Brazil, the poinsettia from Mexico, the bird of paradise from southern Africa, the Bermuda lily from Japan, the flamboyant from Madagascar, *etc.* The list is poetically and terrifyingly vertiginous and signals a network of rhizomic conquests indeed that suddenly transforms Kincaid’s book into a protest. This list exemplifies the kind of memory that Kincaid unearths through careful research. It embodies a conquest over memory and a memoir of conquests all at once.

Yet, there are times when memory works erratically. Once, as she is walking in Kew Gardens, she comes upon one of the most beautiful specimens of hollyhock, which ranks among her favorite flowers. When looking at the label she discovers that it is not a hollyhock at all but a *Gossypium*, whose common name is cotton. This provokes the following reflection: “Cotton all by itself exists in perfection ... but the tormented, malevolent role it has played in my ancestral history is not forgotten by me. Even so, long after its role in the bondage of some of my ancestors had been eliminated, it continued to play a part in my life” (1999, p. 150). This incident triggers a long trail of memories related to her childhood in Antigua where she had to pick cotton at one of her mother’s friends’ place during the summer holidays. It was a fastidious job which made her hands sore. The details she (Jamaica Kincaid, the writer, not a character in a fiction, not even a botanist) gives of this past event are so vivid that she feels the urge to add: “This is not a fiction” (1999, p. 151). This is both a conquest over her own memory (the little girl picking cotton) and a memory of conquests (the *gossypium* / cotton which conquered the Americas and her ancestors).

But, of course, the reverse of the coin is that the expertise that she acquires in terms of conquest over memory and memory of conquests makes her part of the conquerors. Or perhaps she was idiosyncratically so to start with. The confession is actually hers: “I have joined the conquering class: who else could afford this garden—a garden in which I grow things that it would be much cheaper to buy at the store? My feet are (so to speak) in two worlds” (1999, p. 123). And the 'rest' follows: the craving for possession (in her case the possession of seeds and plants), the naming of things, the desire to kill whatever does not behave in her garden (a wisteria on page 13, rabbits, slugs) and the compulsion to scour the world (the U.S., Europe, China, the Himalaya). This feature was already present in her trilogy *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *The Autobiography of My Mother*, culminating in this last novel in which Xuela is taking possession of herself, scouring the island and the whole Caribbean archipelago in a trance-like dream, killing a turtle, then a dog and naming the world in English instead of Creole as a four-year old child. Remarkably, in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, she is not mourning her mother but is at last free to give birth to herself, without the sufferings of a mother (and also

far from a problematically emasculated colonial father figure). The graphing is scathing and again, complex and unexpected: Kincaid grafts onto the Caribbean discourse a new idiosyncratic vision whereby one could literally kill to be born again and stop numbering among the conquered.

The repetition of the conqueror's act of possessing is further developed in her garden memoirs, especially when, in *Among Flowers*, the author states:

a gardener is a person who at least once in the gardening year feels the urge to possess at least one plant. ... You can hear this form of possession in the voice of someone who will utter a sentence like this: "I saw some *Codonopsis* growing up there, couldn't tell which one it was but I took the seeds anyway." ... The person who says such a sentence is in a complicated state of craving ... they feel godlike. (2005, p. 32)

Kincaid is supposedly not in that godlike position; in this excerpt she merely witnesses the phenomenon as an outsider. As a gardener, however, she faces the same predicament as the gardeners she depicts. She is equally overwhelmed by an urge to possess plants as she anxiously waits for the catalogues of her favorite plant nurseries. She is therefore both an outsider and an insider, in a position of in-betweenness that structures her entire literary enterprise. As she repeatedly focuses on the symptoms of the conquered and the conquerors, her Garden Memoirs prove she is both. Hence, being in two worlds, she creates a new space where her writings relate to her readers in a rhizomic way, which is in keeping with Glissant's concept, at the same time as they signal a paradox producing a new form of creation: Benítez-Rojo's repeating island.

Intertextuality: Kincaid's Conquest Over Graphing

When Kincaid first started to dig holes in her back garden in Vermont, she was (unconsciously?) addressing the essence of her "poetic-technological machine," to use Benítez Rojo's term. Kincaid's machine is resonant with "The Ancient Mariner"'s machine as the Ancient Mariner is not only compulsively repeating his ballad to passersby but also repeating lines to incrementally extend them with the details of his traumatic adventure. Each stanza contains a repeated line and is further augmented with the fearsome elements of his story, which gradually reinforce the depth of his trauma on the reader/listener's mind. Kincaid's technique is thus akin to the ballad form, whose haunting trope is incremental repetition, as shown by Kincaid's account of how the garden started in *My Garden (Book)*. If one believes Kincaid's account, her garden started with a hole and a book:

This is how my garden began; then again, it would not be at all false to say that just at that moment I was reading a book and that book (written by the historian William Prescott) happened to be about the conquest of Mexico, or New Spain, as it was then

called, and I came upon the flower called . . . zinnia, and after that the garden was to me more than the garden as I used to think of it. (1999, p. 6)

This confession appears at the very beginning of *My Garden (Book)*: and it is only halfway through the book that the reader has the explanation of such a cryptic sentence, at the same time as the explanation of the appearance of the Caribbean archipelago in Kincaid's garden. The name of William H. Prescott is repeated, and so is the title of his book, but what is added is the story of the dahlia. The original name of the dahlia in Mexico was "cocoxichitl," it was "conquered" there, then sent to Europe where a Swedish botanist, Andreas Dahl, renamed it. Andreas Dahl was the pupil of Carolus Linnaeus, another Swede, who invented the binomial system of naming plants. This is information that Kincaid gathers from another book: *The Oxford Companion to Gardens*, which she says she often wants to hurl across the room, so full is it of prejudice (p. 121). This train of thought leads her to note:

This naming of things is so crucial to possession – a spiritual padlock with the key thrown irretrievably away – that it is a murder, an erasing, and it is not surprising that when people have felt themselves prey to it (conquest), among their first acts of liberation is to change their names (Rhodesia to Zimbabwe, LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka). (1999, p. 122)

She does not share the example of her own name change (from Elaine Cynthia Potter Richardson to Jamaica Kincaid) but the fact is that we are back to something that repeats itself: the conquest, the loss, the naming and the graphing of the loss. Kincaid uses a vast number of texts, magazines, catalogues, dictionaries, history books, novels to graph her own vision of what should be grafted in her own ideal garden and what should be discarded or ferociously cut off, like the wisteria that did not behave (1999, p. 113). Hence an excerpt from Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1999, p. 114) is discarded on the grounds that it is redolent of the conquering class, and Vita Sackville-West's garden writing is declared too oblivious of how "the world cannot be left out of the garden" (1999, p. 82). She sees an excerpt from a novel by Tsitsi Dangarembga as the epitome of what personal *liberation* means (1999, p. 116): planting for joy when previous and present generations had been planting for a living, and when that work had been torture. Writing about such a revelation in the midst of contradictory strategies of survival seems to be the appropriate aesthetic gesture for Kincaid: a seed to be planted in her own library.

In the end, most of the intertexts that Kincaid deploys in *My Garden (Book)*: point to one issue: we, readers, are in a narrative because we belong to a Western world that is not new and that repeats itself, like the garden with its plants conquered all over the planet and renamed within a binomial system invented by Carolus Linnaeus, who wrote a document of this narrative. Here is what Kincaid says:

The invention of this [binomial] system has been a good thing. Its narrative would begin in this way: In the beginning, the vegetable kingdom was chaos, people everywhere called the same things by a name that made sense to them, not by a name arrived at by an objective standard. But who has an interest in an objective standard? Who needs one? It makes me ask again, What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? Should I call it history? And if so, what should history mean to someone who looks like me? Should it be an idea; should it be an open wound, each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again, over and over, or is it a long moment that begins anew each day since 1492? (1999, p. 166).

Hence, her awareness of the loss of so many memories since 1492 reactivates the chaos and plasma that Benítez-Rojo discusses. One also has to bear in mind that all these intertexts point to Kincaid's scientific method. For example, in *My Garden (Book)*: before she sets on a journey to China with a dozen plant collectors, she explains:

A journey like this, for someone like me, begins in so many ways: in a book by the plant hunter Frank Kingdon-Ward, *Plant Hunting on the Edge of the World*, an account of his travels looking for plants in China; a book by Ernest Wilson, *Plant Hunter's Paradise*, an account of his travels looking for plants in China; a book by Patrick Synge, *Mountains of the Moon*, an account of his travels looking for plants in Africa; a book by Reginald Farrer, *Among the Hills*, an account of his travels in the Alps looking for alpine plants (1999, p. 190).

Many other volumes are listed in the two garden books—some of them history books, novels, essays, *etc.*—apart from the catalogues and the dictionaries. They form and inform the researcher and the memory collector that Kincaid is. This is not fiction indeed, but a body of knowledge she has to appropriate and master, almost in an encyclopedic mode (just like the Latin denominations of plants and flowers that Linnaeus spent his life encoding encyclopedically) to master and to push forward the seriousness and the universal directionality of her quest. After she has hoarded such knowledge, the author can afford to stand her ground. In China, as she is on a seed-gathering expedition, a plant collector named John insults her by saying she is always “bitchin’ and bitchin’” (1999, p. 207). She turns this into a badge of honor, saying: “If a person who stroked his beard and caressed his nose was against bitching, then most certainly a person like me must be a bitch” (1999, p. 208). Kincaid does not spare her reader either. She draws her into her own ontological discomfort: one that is both physical and intellectual. The author has already noted that reading for her—like gardening—is a physical activity. She says that gardening and reading are the two things she loves best and she must have the two (1999, p. 78), adding, “I read my books, but I also *use* them; that is, sometimes the reading is almost a physical act” (1999, p. 81, italics in the original). There are allusions to the smell of her body when she has been gardening a whole day and allusions to the exertions and functions of the body when she is trekking in China and

the Himalaya. The reader is therefore taken into an adventure which is historical, botanical, intellectual, physical, and sensual. It is a complex experience which involves the body and the mind whereby the reader can unearth her own discomfort.

Ontological Discomfort and Otherness

Kincaid concentrates on her discomfort. Both her Caribbean origins and her compulsive stance as a gardener drive her scientifically to describe the ontological phenomenon that triggered the object of her existential discomfort. Her approach is therefore by essence scientific, since it aims to decipher the core reality and origins of the object of her discomfort. In her garden memoirs, the “object” is plants. What she finds is a chasm between ontological discomfort and existential questioning.

In *Among Flowers* discomfort seems to be less acute than in *My Garden (Book)*: *My Garden (Book)* teems with questions: “What to do?” “What should I do?” “Should I call this History?” “What is a wild garden?” “How should I feel?” “Where should I place myself?” (1999, pp. 153/166). At the source of these questions for Kincaid as a Caribbean, there is a date, 1492, when Christopher Columbus first landed in the West Indies. 1492 signals the starting point of her trauma and her discomfort. This discomfort is ontological because it encapsulates the essence of her being, it is part and parcel of her DNA. Metaphorically speaking, it was a seed planted in the Antiguan soil in 1492 and which historically, sociologically, and “plasmatically”, rhizomed to her own existence centuries afterwards. Hence, at the source of the questions she asks herself, there is an island, Antigua. Paradoxically, there is also the garden in Vermont which is a place where she can at last “come inside” and allow the questioning to arise but also thoughts of doom and life: “Walking around the garden, then, I am full of thoughts of doom, I am full of thoughts of life beyond my imagining. I come inside” (1999, p. 61). In a word, the “coming inside” starts the ontological research. The outside/inside movement as much as the in-betweenness trope exposed earlier generate meaning.

Doom and thoughts of life are part and parcel of her ontological discomfort. This point has been developed by critic Patricia Donatien under the apt phrasing of “exorcism of the wound” (*L'exorcisme de la blès*). Whatever mastery Kincaid can acquire through her rumination over the loss of memory, and world machinery, that started in 1492, discomfort is lurking at every corner of her graphing expedition. As she says on page 224: “A gardener, any gardener, is not a stable being; That gardener, any gardener, is not a model of consistency.” (1999, p. 224). Perhaps also because a garden does not behave. While she “first came to the garden with practicality in mind, a real beginning that would lead to a real end” (1999, p. 219), she had to acknowledge that a garden leads to no end. It has a beginning: it had one for Kincaid in Vermont a decade or so before, and it had another one for the Caribbean and the global

world from 1492 onwards; but the process proved unending. What is a wild garden then? The prototype Kincaid has in mind is of course the Garden of Eden, with a tree of life and a tree of knowledge. We all know the story which Kincaid graphs this way: “Is this Eden, that thing that was banished, turned out into the world as I have come to know it—the world of discarding only to reclaim, of rejecting and then claiming again, the world of such longing that its end (death) is a relief?” (1999, p. 222). In this particular instance, Kincaid grafts rather than *writes* since The Supreme Gardener had written the story of Eden that cannot be rewritten. The graphium/stylus remains therefore the appropriate human tool when Eden is no longer an option.

So, what to do? By the end of *My Garden (Book)*: Kincaid puts forward an idiosyncratic answer: “Eden is like that, so rich in comfort, it tempts me to cause discomfort; I am in a state of constant discomfort and I like this state so much I would like to share it” (p. 229), which she does with a perfect mastery of her stylus. *Among Flowers*, the story of her trek in the Himalayan mountains with three plant collectors, offers a more slanted view, if only for two reasons, both related to physicality and corporeality. The four hikers/collectors have to walk through areas infested with leeches that suck their blood, climb steep mountainous slopes in drastic conditions, sleep sometimes literally on rocks, and eat whatever is available; yet they walk on day after day to reach their destination. The book tackles the experience of being faced with an arduous mountainous environment where time and distances are flimsy notions and where the body itself becomes the basic *tool* to understand, capture, dialogize whatever sits inside and outside. In these drastic conditions, Kincaid very often finds herself lagging behind her trekking companions and she explains:

And my difficulties were these: I found each plant, each new turn in the road, each new turn in the weather, from cold to hot and then back again, each new set of boulders so absorbing, so new, and the newness so absorbing, and I was so in need of an explanation for each thing, that I was often in tears, troubling myself with questions, such as what am I and what is the thing in front of me. (2005, p. 135)

It seems that the writer is coming to terms here with the notion of the wild garden, a moment of reckoning that is also most probably cathartic. She is no longer confronted with History, memory or conquest as in her book on her garden in Vermont: rather, the discomfort experienced in those few lines surges from the “novelty” of the wild environment. She cannot connect this “new” garden to anything (in her story or History at large) which had contributed to mold her as a person. Hence the question “what (and not “who”) am I.” Before this wild garden, she is naked (a new Eve?) and is faced not so much with an ontological discomfort as with some existential one.

The second reason for her discomfort is the marauding presence of the Maoists. They could be seen as a repeating symptom of violence and conquest, which they are, but more

intrinsically they are the symptoms of death, including the death of dreams. When the three seed collectors and Kincaid have almost completed their journey, they reach a village called Donje, where the Maoists appear not as a mere background threat but as a physical, actual presence: they are belligerent and loud, and ask the whole village to sit down for a lecture that lasts the whole afternoon. Meanwhile, the plant collectors start cleaning the seeds they had just been collecting and she writes:

Perhaps that moment is one of many that holds in it a metaphor of the very idea of the garden itself: we had in our possession seeds, that, if properly germinated, would produce some of the most beautiful and desirable flowering plants to appear in a garden situated in the temperate zone; at the very same time we were in danger of being killed and our dream of the garden in the temperate zone, the place in which we lived, would die with us also. At the very moment we were projecting ourselves into an ideal idyll we were in between life and death. (2005, p. 169).

The ideal idyll (the Garden of Eden) is recalled and becomes “discomforting” since it was also the symptom of a displacement for Adam and Eve, away from the “dream of the garden” as they conceived it.

In these two books—which were not conceived as a diptych—Kincaid creates for her reader a dynamic discomfort, a sense of in-betweenness which is nonetheless echoed from *My Garden (Book): to Among Flowers* and in reverse: between inside and outside, between graphing and grafting, between the past and the present, between Antigua and the rest of the world, between the garden in Vermont and the Himalaya, between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. This movement through graphing is disquieting: it is akin to the criss-cross pattern analyzed by Andrée-Anne Kekeh-Dika (2016, p. 22) in her work on Jamaica Kincaid, which suggests that writing codes and reading codes have to be continually reassessed. At the center point of these skills and strategies lies the *desire* of relationship. Criss-crossing writing was a practice that imposed itself throughout the nineteenth century in letter writing, very often between relatives: the blank page that was folded into an envelope and sealed, forced the authors of such letters to write horizontally and diagonally, thus saturating the space with information whose meanings had to be decoded by the recipient of the letter. This graphing and decoding demanded a kaleidoscopic, rhizomic, creative, relation-based insight which was not binomial (as Carolus Linnaeus opined in the early eighteenth century).

Hence Kincaid, whose writings are more often than not self-centered, idiosyncratic, disobedient, and written against the grain of convenient clichéd images, presents her readers with a kaleidoscopic vision that is initially hers but ends up being theirs. The experience is all the more discomforting in *My Garden (Book):* and in *Among Flowers*, as it was precisely what she wanted to share, what she actually had warned her reader about: Eden had never been the right place to be as a human being. The graphing of this experience on gardens is intimate but

turns out to be collective. It is a world machine that was grafted centuries ago by the Western world. Yet, what is also revealed contrapuntally in those texts are a series of existential and essential questions: what are *we* readers, and what are these things in front of us? These are the questions that Kincaid asks: the answers are to be collected here and there, they are unstable yet rhizomic. They rhizome from Antigua to Vermont to the world at large and graft themselves onto the reader's memory.

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