“Running Up That Hill”
On Love, Sex, and Work in Pose

“All the good ones died”: in more than one conversation with elder queer people about queer of color nightlife in 1980s New York City, I heard this expression when our conversation turned to the drag queens, transsexual women, and femmes lost in the early years of the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic. Most recently, the phrase came up in a lively discussion with three black gay men on living in New York during the formative years of ball culture. It’s a statement that tells you everything and nothing at once, summarizing a specific generational loss with abruptness and brevity that hardly feels complete. You, simply, had to be there. Amazement and grief filled this statement: amazement at the collective tenacity, care, and imagination of the lives lost and grief for the weight of absence in the ongoing struggle of community for black and brown queer and trans youth who inherit this loss. Given the homophobic reluctance of the U.S. government to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the first place, compiling statistics of the epidemic’s effect on a nominally incoherent identity group (e.g. drag queens, transsexual women, transvestites, and femmes) was unthinkable. Yet, in that moment, I was struck by the sheer life force fit into those five compact words. Where do black and brown women of trans experience fit into those five compact words. Where do black and brown women of trans experience

1. In this essay, ball culture is synonymous with ballroom and house ball culture, all of which refer to the black and brown queer nightlife communities that emerged from the Harlem drag balls in the early twentieth century. For a genealogy of house ball culture, see Frank Leon Roberts, “There’s No Place Like Home: A History of House Ball Culture,” TransGriot, 18 February 2008: https://transgriot.blogspot.com/2008/02/theres-no-place-like-home-history-of.html

See also Marlon M. Bailey, Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

2. By “nominally incoherent,” I want to highlight here that trans(-gender) woman as an identity is relatively new and consists of embodied practices long associated with drag queens, transsexuals, transvestites, and street queens (which were often drag queens and transsexuals who lived on or worked in street economies). Marsha P. Johnson and other people popularly memorialized as trans women pushed back against the term ‘trans woman,’ preferring at times the term drag queen while at other times preferring no term at all. I opt for the term transsexual throughout this essay, as it appears most consistently as a self-identifier among sex workers of trans experience among the narratives surveyed in part three. I also opt for to shorthand transsexual as trans throughout this essay, given its resonance as a contemporary shorthand for transgender. I intend for these multiple referents to signal the inclusive array of identifications that historically describe the population that has more recently self-identified as transgender.
fit into contemporary narratives of the HIV/AIDS epidemic? How and where do the (after-) lives of drag queens, street queens, and transsexuals appear in LGBT histories?

One show that grapples with these questions is *Pose*, an eight-episode FX television series that takes a historical fiction tour down memory lane of the emerging drag ball circuit in 1980s New York. In nearly every promotional interview with Ryan Murphy, one of the show’s creators and executive directors, statistics were rolled out to back up claims of how groundbreaking the show’s representation is: two of the series’ writers are trans, the majority of the cast identifies as queer, and the entire team behind *Pose* “includes 140 trans and L.G.B.T.Q. people.” And in terms of representation, it is groundbreaking for featuring five transgender women of color as regulars; the only other television show to cast trans women of color as a majority is Viceland’s *My House*, a documentary series that chronicles contemporary ballroom artists in New York City.

I’m concerned less with the brute statistics or percentages of representation and more interested in how trans or queer representation occurs in *Pose*. The show debuted at a time of heightened violence against transgender people of color, particularly black and brown trans women, whose average life expectancy is less than 35 years. At the time of writing, the lives of two black trans women’s lives, Dejanay Stanton and Ciara Minaj Carter Frazier, were cut short within one month in Chicago, a wrenching loss that presses us to consider the surge in trans representation in popular culture alongside the relentless, mundane exposure to structural violence faced by black and brown and poor trans women rather than as something exceptional to it. In other words, how does *Pose*’s particular engagement with black and trans life relate to ongoing dispossession and annihilation of trans women of color? How does the way a story is told affect what’s generated in its telling?

In a mainstream media ecosystem that still regularly casts cis men as transgender women and white women as women of color, *Pose* breaks tradition with this setting in crucial ways. The purpose of this essay is not to contend that the actors in *Pose* inauthentically represent the lives of trans women but rather to ask what facets of transsexual life continue to be excluded from the mainstream trans narratives and what this absence or silence signals in relation to everyday life. Taking up a profession long associated with women of trans experience, I trace the conflation of sex work and romance in the fraught relationship between Stan Bowes (played by Evan Peters) and Angel (played by Indya Moore). I situate this conflation of work and love as part of how *Pose* aestheticizes the practices of survival sex work by trans women and street queens, a narrative revision that subsequently makes black and trans life presentable and non-threatening to a global audience. Rather than include explicit discourse around sex work among the show’s trans sex worker characters, *Pose* strategically deploys music, in this instance Kate Bush’s 1985 “Running Up That Hill,” to blur the line between professional and personal desire and suggest they are identical—that is, both the trans sex worker and her client aspire to the same romantic love.

When initially devising the material that would become *Pose*, Ryan Murphy intended to base the story loosely on the figures documented in Jennie Livingston’s controversial film, *Paris is Burning*, leading Murphy to option the documentary for eighteen months. Upon meeting with Livingston, Murphy was introduced by Livingston to several key members in the ballroom scene where several surviving family members opposed Murphy’s pitch. Nonetheless, the project was picked up again when Murphy and Brad Falchuk, Murphy’s longtime collaborator, caught wind of a script written by Steven Canals. Canals’s script followed Damon (played by Ryan Jamaal Smith), an aspiring young black dancer who finds the ballroom scene after his parents discover his gay identity and throw him out of their home. Falchuk, Murphy, and Canals reworked this script with the addition of a new character—Donald Trump.

Writing Donald Trump into the series as the archetype of the money-hungry executive makes one thing clear: everyone knows the villain from the outset. Even though Trump makes no appearance onscreen, the businessmen and executives on the show, including the timid client-turned-boyfriend, Stan Bowes, are identified by their degree of separation from Trump. As Murphy has stated, “It’s all about the haves and the have-nots . . . the Trump world versus the ballroom-artist world. Baroque, stunning stuff juxtaposed with poverty—and that idea of how you create magic on a budget.”

Pose’s primary sex work relationship goes like this: Angel, a trans Afro-Latina sex worker, is approached by Stan Bowes, an upper middle-class real estate executive. After working up the nerve to approach her, Stan takes Angel to a hotel room where he awkwardly fumbles through, what we later learn is, his first paid sex encounter. Although they both strip to some degree, no explicit sex act occurs. The appointment culminates in the two of them lying on the hotel bed as Angel, per Stan’s request, describes what she wants out of life in detail while 10cc’s 1975 “I’m Not In Love” plays in the background.

5. Most interviews on the show downplay Livingston’s role in the creation of *Pose*. The two articles I refer to here include Emily Nussbaum’s “How Ryan Murphy Became The Most Powerful Man in TV,” *New Yorker*, 14 May 2018 (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/05/14/how-ryan-murphy-became-the-most-powerful-man-in-tv) and Hamish Bowles’s “Inside *Pose*, Ryan Murphy’s Evocative New Television Series,” *Vogue*, 16 May 2018 (https://www.vogue.com/article/pose-ryan-murphy-vogue-june-2018-issue). When Livingston claimed she was being excluded from the development process, Murphy gave her a paid consulting-producer credit and the opportunity to direct an episode if the season was renewed. This is ironic given that Livingston, who felt undercompensated for her contribution to *Pose*, has herself been charged with profiting from ballroom culture without adequate remuneration to the members of the community on which *Paris is Burning* was based. See Jesse Green, “Paris Has Burned,” *New York Times*, 18 April 1993 (https://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/18/style/paris-has-burned.html). See also Judith Butler’s chapter “Gender is Burning” in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 121–42.

STAN: Tell me about you . . . what do you want?

ANGEL: I want a home of my own. I want a family. I want to take care of someone. I want someone to take care of me. I want to be treated like any other woman. It’s my dream.

While Angel recounts her ideal life to Stan, we’re transported visually to Stan’s home life, with his wife and children carrying out the routines of domestic life, diligently awaiting Stan’s return from work. Inverting the description, Angel’s fantasy of domestic normativity (“like any other woman”) with the depiction, Stan’s reality of marital unfulfillment, counterposes the two as though they exist as opposite ends along the axis of the good life. This fantasy-reality inversion carries with it a sense that they both want what they don’t have; their compatibility consists in the belief that what they want is the same thing. At this point, “I’m Not In Love” fades as we leave the space of Angel’s monologue. In the moment she reaches out to caress Stan, Kate Bush’s “Running Up That Hill” brings us back into the nervous immediacy of their encounter. With the music overtaking the dialogue, the scene then cuts to Stan’s car as he returns Angel to the street corner where he found her. After exchanging money for Angel’s time, Stan asks whether he can give her a kiss. Without saying a word, Angel looks at Stan, her lips upturn ever so slightly into a smile, and the two slowly move toward each other for a passionately restrained kiss as the chorus to “Running Up That Hill” reaches a fever pitch. Once the kiss has ended, Angel lingers for a moment, intimating to Stan that “this song . . . is gonna be our song now,” referring to Bush’s anthem, still booming from the car radio. Stan and Angel’s attachment persists, even when Angel is “off the clock,” blurring the terms of their interaction as something more than a worker-client relationship.

Three weeks later, Stan tries to meet Angel again, only this time he finds her working at an adult entertainment store as an erotic dancer. He courts her and they strike a sugar deal where he furnishes her with a year-long lease to an apartment and provides for her financial needs as long as she leaves the sex work industry to be with him, an attempt to reframe their relationship outside of material exchange. During a later scene in which Stan for the first time shows Angel her new apartment, Angel asks Stan to promise her that he’ll visit her on Christmas Day. The radio in the background plays Janet Jackson’s 1987 hit, “Let’s Wait Awhile.” Stan vows to visit her—a promise he does not keep—and while Jackson’s song plays out, the two move to the bed where they have sex.

Most of Stan and Angel’s interactions follow this pattern. Their dialogue is emphatically understated, leaving plenty of room for music, gestures, or glances to share the scene, if not steal it entirely. As Juana María Rodriguez argues, gesture works between actions and meanings and emphasizes interpretation. Racialized female sexuality, for Rodriguez, offers a site of “polymorphous perversity, a place of dangerous possibilities” that seems far from the kind of femininity articulated in Angel’s dream of transnormative femininity. In an article on the representation of trans women of color in media, Julian Kevon Glover explores how media space is given to trans women of color primarily through appeals to transnormative respectability.

8. Ibid., 16.
politics, especially around the topic of sex work. This term helps to name the ways that mainstream media apprehends black and trans narratives to make them legible within an extant frame of transphobia and antiblackness. While gesture invites interpretation for Rodriguez, in *Pose* the songs undermine the potential for alternative interpretation due to their predetermined moods and normative orientations of desiring. 10cc’s “I’m Not in Love” accompanies a visual inversion of fantasy and reality. Kate Bush’s pleading anthem rarifies a mundane scene of ritual exchange—the trick paying the sex worker—into an instance of exceptional intimacy where love is believed to begin. Janet Jackson’s downtempo love song helps transform a scene of sex work between the two into a scene of making love. In each instance, the songs cue to the viewer that the scene is something deeper or closer or more real than mere business. As the fantasy-reality inversion smooths Angel and Stan’s separate desires to two sides of the respectable transnormative dream, their relationship becomes meaningful and legitimate on screen precisely when it passes for a love plot.

Meanwhile, Patty Bowes (played by Kate Mara), Stan’s wife, discovers her husband’s infidelity and kicks him out of the house, which Stan uses as an opportunity to further explore his interest in Angel and her life. After Angel brings him to one of the balls, Stan, flustered by the cultural shock, comes to the unsurprising realization that he cannot pursue a life with Angel. It turns out that his erotic fantasy loses its eroticism when it becomes real.

When Stan returns to Angel in the finale, her tune has changed, too:

**Angel:** You remember what else I said back in that hotel room? It was your first time, but it wasn’t mine. You’re not my first Prince Charming. You’re not real. We were just good ideas in each other’s minds. And they turn into bad ones when they get out into the real world, right?

**Stan:** I’m asking you, I’m begging you to just try, try.

**Angel:** You’re not listening to me. What I want has changed. I got a family. They already take care of me. I wanna do right by them. I wanna look after them. They need me.

**Stan:** I need you.

**Angel:** Stan, I care about you. You alright at the end of the day. But go home and be with your wife and kids. Go be a man.

Angel flatlines her relationship with Stan by revealing to him the affective, intrapersonal negotiations that factor into what people in sex work activism refer to as “intimate labor.” In revealing to Stan his obsolescence as a viable love interest, Angel redraws the relationship along the lines of work. Angel might’ve fallen for the trick before, but in reaffirming her own community as the desired recipients of her care, she articulates, in the final episode of the series, a nascent sex politics. No pop songs accompany their interaction

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this time—it’s emphatically uneasy. By the end of their conversation, Angel’s transparency has brought their relationship to a close.

Stan and Angel’s relationship is not the only representation of sex work on the show. The second relationship represented features Elektra Abundance (played by Dominique Jackson). Over the course of the season, Elektra withstands dehumanizing rejection from her sugar daddy once she undergoes vaginoplasty—a ten-year affair is over as soon as Elektra loses her penis. As Elektra’s chances of finding a sugar daddy suitor decline, she returns to dancing at the same adult entertainment spot that employed Angel. We learn that Blanca Evangelista (played by MJ Rodriguez) finds Elektra dancing and resolves to help her secure a job as a hostess at an upscale restaurant. Blanca saves her mother by helping her get away from stripping. This isn’t the first time we’ve seen someone be "saved" from stripping. Stan also “saves” Angel from stripping in exchange for an apartment that Angel can call her own, year-round.

*Pose* approaches the topic of sex work primarily through a non-sex worker lens. Part of this has to do with how the show invokes the trope of the deserving client. The deserving client, Molly Smith and Juno Mac write in *Revolting Prostitutes*, is a figure that makes sex work more respectable by granting legitimacy to the sex worker. The client’s needs are seen to entail intimacy more than carnal passion and thus, “professionalises and sanctifies the sex worker.” This respectable form of sex work is not without risk, though. In *Pose*, sex work pays, we are told, if you surrender control of your body to your client (as with the stipulation that Elektra keep her genitalia unmodified for her client); but throughout the show sex work is also linked to increased rates of violence and reduced life expectancies. The casting sessions, according to one interview with Murphy, were particularly unsettling: “. . . many of the trans actors lacked health insurance and bank accounts; nearly all had stories about sexual violence. But he didn’t want to make the show too gritty or downbeat . . . he was interested in ‘leaning in to romance instead of degradation’—and making something hopeful and ‘aspirational.’ ‘Pose’, he theorized, might even be family-friendly.” Yet when it comes to the consequences associated with doing sex work, *Pose* is quite vivid in depicting the disposability of black trans women sex workers in the eyes of their clients. When Elektra, for example, decides to invest in herself and pursues her sex change operation against the will of her sugar daddy of 10 years, he cuts all ties with her, eliminating all monetary, residential, and medical support that he had previously financed. If terror and pleasure frame the histories of black women’s sexuality as a spectacle, available for public consumption, *Pose’s* engagement with black trans women’s sexualities minimizes this frame in order to mobilize terror and pleasure as dramatic plot points, as effects or consequences of failed relationships, rather than as constitutive elements in the sexual economy in which its subjects live.

11. I should note that by the end of season 1, Elektra has switched houses to the House of Evangelista.
13. Emily Nussbaum, “How Ryan Murphy Became the Most Powerful Man in TV.”
The lack of explicit discourse around sex work or sex politics on the show, described as “leaning in to romance instead of degradation,” raises questions about what was possibly omitted from the dozens of interviews within black and trans communities as their narratives were worked into something aspirational, open to compassion and empathetic identification with audiences. In casting the structural barriers, material inequity, and experiences of violence faced by gender non-conforming black and brown people who turn to sex work as undesirable for a broader consuming public, Pose opts for a narrative perspective that elides the ways that antiblackness, transphobia, and misogyny interact and punctuate everyday life for its central characters. Family-friendly trans narratives, we are told, even family-friendly sex work narratives (is there such a thing?), must downplay the ordinary violence and structural inequity (e.g., lack of health insurance or credit) that drives the show’s gender non-conforming people of color into sex work to begin with.

III

In the early stages of research for this piece, I noticed a trend among criticism of the show to refer to Angel and Stan’s relationship as the season’s central love story. In one article from the New York Times, titled, “Why I Love the Soundtrack to Pose,” the journalist recounts the pivotal scenes in Angel and Stan’s relationship in prose punctuated by GIFs of the show interspersed with lyrical excerpts of “Running Up That Hill.”

For the writer, “Running Up That Hill” perfectly encapsulates the love lesson that Angel and Stan’s relationship visualizes: love might be easy but relationships are hard work. Who is expected to perform this “hard work” and what adequate compensation looks like for this work remains unaddressed in the piece. Lacing GIF’d gestures from the series with lyrics from “Running Up That Hill” performs something of the interpretative flattening I mentioned above: Kate Bush’s lyrics refract a scene of sex work through a romantic lens. Romance distinguishes this interaction as excessive, something more than “the standard hooker-john transaction” (figure. 1). What concerns me here is less whether romantic entanglements occur between clients and workers (no doubt they may), but how this romantic fabrication of what is, fundamentally, a scene of material exchange for intimacy also redistributes responsibility and leaves instances of violence, control, manipulation, and aggression un(der)conceptualized for the viewer as exceptional and individual. When sex work is romanticized, it veers close to a concept of individual agency and responsibility that blames the worker for “falling for it.”

“Running Up That Hill” thus aids in blurring the line between love and work that Pose’s respectable representation of sex work elides. This elision misnames the motivations for both sex buyer and sex worker: Stan is unsatisfied with the comforts of his upper middle-class life and, like many upper middle-class married men, seeks companionship from people outside

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15. Several promos for the TV show allege that Murphy and his colleagues spent eight months “in the community” doing research and casting for the series. See Lisa de Moraes, “Ryan Murphy Says FX’s ‘Pose’ Is Intensely Personal Project,” Deadline, 5 January 2018: https://deadline.com/2018/01/pose-ryan-murphy-intensely-personal-ball-culture-transgender-actor-cast-father-tca-1202236702/
his marriage; Angel is portrayed as an unhappy sex worker who simply wants the comforts of a heteronormative domestic life. The sexualization of trans becomes incidental to both in the respectable sex work set-up. Eliding their respective motivations is precisely what allows their relationship to be framed through a grammar of love rather than through sex work. Smith and Mac note that the conflation of the client’s interests with the workers has a track record in respectable sex work rhetoric, insisting that “[u]ltimately, the worker is there because they are interested in getting paid, and this economic imperative is materially different from the client’s interest in recreational sex.”17 When sex work is understood through a grammar of love, the uneven precarity of trans sex workers’ lives are reinterpreted as heartbreak, an unavoidable side effect of love, rather than as a product of the ongoing dispossession and annihilation of black and trans lives. Perhaps, as bell hooks has argued, because love in American popular culture remains a vague, abstract noun rather than an active verb, it’s easier to

17. Molly Smith and Juno Mac, Revolting Prostitutes, 33. See also Heather Berg’s essay, “Working for Love, Loving for Work: Discourses of Labor in Sex-Work Activism,” Feminist Studies vol. 40, no. 3 (2014): 693–721. Berg argues that “[t]he implication that individual characteristics are responsible for human outcome . . . is rhetorically effective as it fits neatly with a neoliberal belief in individual responsibility for social welfare,” a neoliberal rendering of sex work that has devastating effects on sex work activism more broadly, p. 704.
generate audience empathy and pleasure through a sex worker’s imagined desire for love than through a sex worker’s desire for something otherwise, such as the eradication of the structural inequity, antiblackness, and systemic disenfranchisement that undergird the economy of racial capitalism. 18

In surviving accounts of street queens, their sex politics stands out as one of their most distinctive organizing assets. In a recent zine compiling essays and interviews on the radical organization Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.) founded by Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, several interviews with Sylvia Rivera reveal a sex politics and demonstrate the practice of knowledge sharing around sex work among street queens, something noticeably lacking in Pose’s representation of sex work. 19 In “Queens in Exile, the Forgotten Ones,” Sylvia Rivera recounts how she and the other girls working on the street would avoid the police:

“But it was dangerous on 42nd Street. We all stuck together. The police were constantly chasing us. We had a code: If one of the girls or one of the boy hustlers spotted a cop, word was passed down that ‘Lily in blue’ was coming. This meant we would disappear. So a warning of ‘Alice in the blue gown’ or ‘Lily’ meant to disperse.”

Trans women, particularly trans women of color, face extremely high rates of incarceration; Rivera’s essays contain searing vignettes about the negotiations and tactics they used to survive in hostile environments. Rivera also describes her tactics for avoiding rape in jail, cultivating a persona as a “crazy bitch” for biting an inmate’s dick to prevent harassment from other inmates. In Leon E. Pettitway’s Honey, Honey, Miss Thang, a similar trend emerges among the trans women who did sex work. The narratives Pettitway compiles also include the informal codes that street queens devised to discuss pricing, tips for solicitation, secret phrases used to notify each other of cops, and other tricks of the trade. 20 In representing trans sex workers, Pose avoids representing the conversations and codes sex workers have long employed to navigate their hostile work and life environments, opting instead for the codes of pop song romance to suture acts of trans sex work within the overarching context of heteronormative love.

The lack of dialogue between and among the trans sex workers of color on the show leads me to the following questions: For what audience does a show that spotlights trans sex workers of color avoid discussions of their experience as sex workers of color on-screen? What would happen if, rather than relying on the grammar of love to display a worker-client relationship, a grammar built by trans women sex workers was employed, in both senses of the word, instead? What would it mean to portray sex work not as something from which women need saving but rather as a means to surviving used not only by trans women but by many marginalized women pushed to the fringes of society? And what else is learned about the sexual economy of racial capitalism if, as Treva Ellison has stated,

transness is not the sole or primary axis by which black trans women and drag/street queens of color conceptualize their experiences.\(^{21}\)

In a conversation about Pose’s writing room between Ryan Murphy and Janet Mock, the two discuss the kinds of stories they encountered while interviewing Black and trans people involved in the contemporary ballroom scene in New York. “I don’t think we should kill people on the show—I love them too much,” Murphy told her, to which she responded, “You almost have a responsibility to crush your audience. To say, ‘You love them? Well, look what’s happened when you don’t get involved.” Mock’s comment speaks to the responsibility of honesty and nuance in representation. Her response also marks the survival of all of the show’s trans women of color as one of Pose’s most conspicuous anachronisms.

Far from criticizing a piece of historical fiction for being, well, fictional, my focus concerns the modifications and reorientations needed to make black and trans life in the 1980s appear “aspirational” for a cable TV series audience, swapping survival codes developed by street queens for the conventional scripts of popular love songs. Returning to the epigraph that opened this piece, the specific qualities that exemplified “the good ones” may have been qualities quite opposite from those considered aspirational by Murphy and Falchuk. Depicting trans desire that conforms to transnormative respectability politics merely appropriates trans bodies to retell normative desire, a ventriloquism that already underpins the sexual economy of racial capitalism. What if Angel had not wanted the white picket fence to begin with? What if trans sex workers’ desires didn’t align with those of their clients as, presumably, it does with Stan and Angel?

What’s more, the representation of sex work in Pose is striking because it visualizes sex work to represent sex work: in Angel and Stan’s long embrace at the end of the first episode, both actors kiss. In telling a story about a black trans sex worker through the optic of love, the series relies on the capacity of a black trans actress to simulate sex work by engaging in sex work. What I want to stress here is that Pose’s representation of trans sex workers still requires the availability of black and trans bodies for sex work. Predictably, the optic of love downplays the “work” of it all and the labor that goes in, narratively and emotionally, to rendering such a scene on screen. What would it take, as a method of storytelling, to displace the reading of their relationship as a love story and offer instead the possibility that maybe Angel was simply good at her job, at letting her client play out whatever fantasy he had as long as she was in control of compensation, at managing the affective investments and intimate expectations unevenly heaped onto black women broadly construed as the labor of care?\(^{23}\) To take the cue from Angel herself, setting aside the “love” between Angel and Stan invites us to imagine other practices of care and trajectories of desire among black and trans lives that sustain the work of surviving and make the present a more livable space.

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