Introduction

Navigating Climate Justice Thought and Action

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Introduction

Haiti, 2004; USA, 2005; Myanmar, 2008; Pakistan, 2010; Thailand, 2011; Philippines, 2013; Brazil, 2014; Caribbean, 2017; Tonga, 2018; India, 2018; Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi, 2019; Australia, 2019–2020; Germany, 2021; Pakistan, 2022; Europe and the United Kingdom (UK), 2022; China, 2022; the United States (US), 2023; Libya, 2023; Kenya and Tanzania, 2024; Brazil, 2024; Poland, 2024; Bangladesh, 2024.

In recent decades, different regions of the world have experienced disasters that are increasingly attributable to the climate crisis (cf. IPCC 2021).[1] These disasters, though differing in scale and geographical location, share common characteristics. In all these cases, those affected are at varying degrees of risk, both globally and in the place where the disaster occurred.[2] In all of these cases, the slippery slope of vulnerability correlates closely with prior marginalization based on race, gender, class, education, and other factors (cf. Méjean et al 2024; Cappelli, Costantini, and Consoli 2021; Belkhir and Charlemaine 2007; Giroux 2006). These disasters are not only 'non-natural' because they occur in the context of anthropogenic climate change, but also because they overlap with politically determined preconditions (cf. Dawson 2010, 317). As the human rights activist and actor Danny Glover graphically illustrated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (cited in Akuno 2006, 34),

> When the hurricane struck the Gulf and the floodwaters rose and tore through New Orleans, plunging its remaining population into a

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> carnival of misery, it did not turn the region into a Third World country [*sic*] – as it has been disparagingly implied in the media – it revealed one. It revealed the disaster within the disaster; gruelling poverty rose to the surface like a bruise to our skin.

The commonalities seen in climate-related disasters and the struggles associated with them underscore the need to look *through* the climate crisis rather than *at* it (Crist 2007, 40). This perspective shifts our understanding of the crisis from viewing it as a stand-alone problem to recognizing it as a lens that magnifies and reinforces pre-existing social inequalities. It illuminates, for example, that the rise in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions is not solely a primary concern; rather, it is a symptom of deeper underlying causes intertwined with systemic inequalities. The climate crisis is fundamentally a political crisis that does not occur in a power vacuum. It unfolds within existing power dynamics, revealing profound global inequalities at both macro and micro levels while exacerbating entrenched disparities. As a result, this convergence of compounding factors prompts critical questions of justice and necessitates a reconsideration of current approaches to addressing the climate crisis. It begs the question: can the solutions to these pressing challenges be found within the current trajectory of climate governance and justice initiatives?

Building upon the premise that climate justice must ensure the inclusion of all voices and leave no one behind, this introduction echoes Rudall's (2021) assertion regarding the universal 'obligation to cooperate' in addressing the climate crisis (cf. also Lefstad and Paavola 2023). In observing the dominant discourse,[3] we note that crucial voices and perspectives remain sidelined. The compilation of this book endeavours to challenge this prevailing trend, acknowledging it as a significant impediment to achieving transformative change (cf. Lefstad and Paavola 2023; Wilkens and Datchoua-Tirvaudey 2022). Motivated by the continued marginalization of critical actors and spaces in responding to the climate crisis, this volume aims to contribute to the search for just solutions. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of climate justice, it rejects rigid definitions and understands the term as an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of diverse theoretical frameworks and strategies. Rather than committing to a singular understanding, we advocate a nuanced approach that recognizes the complexity and diversity inherent in this concept.

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In what follows, we offer an overview of the expansive terrain of climate justice, laying the groundwork for deeper exploration. To achieve this goal, we first thoroughly examine the intricate connections between the climate crisis, capitalism, and social inequality. Our goal is to advocate for a more comprehensive approach to climate justice that addresses systemic problems and tackles root causes. This leads us to grapple with the complexity of climate justice, which can be difficult to grasp. Therefore, the second section of this introduction is dedicated to unravelling this complexity. Here, we emphasize the importance of adopting different perspectives, challenging dominant narratives, and overcoming power imbalances in our understanding and response to the climate crisis. In the third section, we address the task of realizing climate justice. We caution against initiatives that could unintentionally perpetuate existing power dynamics and instead emphasize the need for mutual learning and recognition of all beings in our pursuit of climate justice.

Although this volume predominantly focuses on the multi-layered global nature of climate justice, we do not consider the intertemporal or intergenerational dimension (cf. Page 2006) to be any less important. Further, this introduction purposefully abstains from detailing the history of the climate justice movement for two main reasons. First, summarizing this rich and diverse history in a few paragraphs would be inadequate. Second, conscious of our education in predominantly European and North American institutions, we seek to avoid reproducing power imbalances reflected in the historiography of climate (in)justice. Suffice it to say that the climate justice movement did not originate in universities or in academic texts like this one; rather, it was born in the heat of social movements striving for a better and more just world. This text was written in memory of those movements, contextualizing insights gained from them in our increasingly globalized world. As we face ongoing challenges, it is essential to honour their legacy and recognize our role in advancing climate justice for all.

To address the global climate crisis, concerted collective efforts at different levels of society are imperative. This introductory text focuses primarily on the international level, establishing the basic context that forms the backdrop to the discussions in this volume. The main part of this volume comprises invaluable contributions of our esteemed authors, who provide insights into the intricate workings and interrelationships between this international context and various national and subnational levels. They explore various

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dimensions of the climate crisis, all closely intertwined with climate justice. Taken as a whole, these individual contributions form an anthology in which different local and regional contexts take centre stage, resulting in a mosaic representation of global dynamics. Together, the insights offered in this volume promise to deepen understanding and spark dialogue on climate justice.

Climate justice in the age of capitalism

> But was there ever any domination which did not appear natural to those who possessed it?
>
> —John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill (2009 [1869])

By now it is widely recognized that the consequences of the changing climate are distributed unequally and that those benefitting least from the industries and technologies that have caused and continue to contribute to the climate crisis have also contributed least to it (cf. Gilli et al. 2024; Méjean et al. 2024; Taconet, Méjean, and Guivarch 2020). As became evident in the aftermath of the aforementioned disasters and so many more, pre-existing social or economic marginalization within a capitalist system increases the risk of affectedness by climate-related disasters exponentially. All the while, capitalism's drive for profit often leads to environmental harm. A vicious circle results, as this harm continues to disproportionately impact marginalized communities (cf. Gonzalez 2021).

The main responsibility for both the unfolding crisis and the perpetuation of this circle of harm undeniably lies with the rich industrialized countries and the multinational corporations based within them (cf. Cuomo 2011). Neither could have amassed their wealth without contributing to uncontrolled environmental destruction and climate pollution. These actions not only benefitted these entities but also exacerbated exclusion and exploited those whose labour substantially contributed to wealth accumulation. As uncovered by critical schools of thought like postcolonial and feminist studies, the exploitation and instrumental utilization of people, land, and resources typically goes hand in hand, often justified and perpetuated by international law and practice (cf. Adébísí 2023, 38ff; Gonzalez 2021; Kapur 2020; Gonzalez 2015, 411ff; Pahuja 2011, 44ff; Anghi 2005, 13ff, 115ff; Mohanty 2003; Orford

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2002, 279ff). Environmental degradation, subordination based on social characteristics like race, class, gender, physical ability, and education, and the capitalist economy are deeply intertwined and interconnected. They intersect and influence each other, ultimately shaping patterns of inequality and environmental injustice.

As the consequences of the climate crisis can no longer be ignored, the capitalist system has also started to present solutions. The unfolding crisis has triggered several transformations, such as the transition to a greener economy and clean energy, along with policies and 'green' investments. However, instead of delivering the longed-for transformative change, these transformations often represent a burden for beings and spaces, further exacerbating existing inequalities (cf. Cambou 2020; Finley-Brook and Thomas 2011; Villavicencio Calzadilla and Mauger 2018). Many laws, policies, practices, and institutions formed in the name of climate governance pursue a very narrow focus on 'greening' capitalism and reducing emissions instead of scrutinizing the root causes of the injustices. Mitigation and adaptation have become the top areas of focus, and, like a mantra, discourses surrounding them often revolve around commitments to so-called technological solutions. These purported solutions frequently disregard the need for profound systemic changes.

On the surface, the omissions identified in these supposed solutions to the crisis and the resulting inequalities reflect a lack of recognition and participation of relevant voices, actors, and communities. However, they are also rooted in a deeper problem: the dominant discourse tends to be based on ideas and false binaries that ignore both the colonial legacy of the climate crisis and the risk that responses to it may reproduce its legacies (cf. Inoue and Moreira 2016, 10). The search for climate justice needs to initiate a discourse that acknowledges global inequalities so that they can actively be confronted, thereby leveraging the transformative and emancipatory potential of the concept while steering clear of oversimplification or dichotomous thinking. Such unjust structures become most visible when asking who has access to discourses, institutions, and decision-making – questions that determine whose knowledge and ontology are recognized – and when asking how resources and burdens are distributed. They thus become most apparent when addressing two central questions of this book: how can we conceptualize climate justice and how can we navigate its complexity in practice?

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How to think climate justice?

> The future brings us nothing, gives us nothing … we possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated and created afresh by us.
>
> —Simone Weil (2023 [1952])

Climate justice is anything but a clearly defined, uncontroversial concept. It is an umbrella term for efforts to find fair solutions to a crisis that is difficult to grasp in its complexity. Justice is inextricably linked to injustices, and any search for justice always necessitates close attention to existing inequalities. Thinking meaningfully of climate justice thus requires addressing the multiple layers of inequality exacerbated by the climate crisis. However, in doing so, it is crucial to avoid common pitfalls in the discourse.

To truly imbue the quest for climate justice with meaning, it is essential to acknowledge that the impacts of the climate crisis affect a diverse range of individuals and communities, rather than a singular, homogeneous group. As Dhawan (2013, 145) figuratively puts it, '[T]hough we might be facing the same storm, we are not in the same boat, and that makes all the difference.' The different boats in which we sit reflect many different existences, and each brings its own narrative of the crisis, its own way of knowing, and its own view of the world. It is essential to recognize the plural and heterogeneous nature of the crisis, which affects people, spaces, and existences differently according to the pre-existing injustices. In the dominant discourse on climate governance, however, an arbitrary binary is constructed along the line of wealth distribution and other axes of inequality. Seemingly guided by the principle that material wealth correlates with knowledge wealth, the privileged group is constructed in a way that it has all the relevant knowledge and therewith the sole power to set the norm. The other group, conceptualized as inferior in wealth, knowledge, and other classifications, can only be saved with the knowledge of the first group. Reducing existing heterogeneous identities and ways of being into one universal subaltern overlooks the distinct and varied experiences of those most affected, exacerbating already existing social and economic inequalities. Constructed as such, these artificial identities are denied their relationality, placing the less wealthy group in sharp opposition to the supposed norm, which in turn further legitimizes the power of the norm (cf. Spivak 1988).

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Particularly in the context of a global crisis, such dualistic thinking is also likely to be influenced by the fact that considering different local, regional, global, and holistic perspectives and examining international, transnational, national, and customary law and socio-economic norms and practices always entails confronting the major tensions and conflicts that will inevitably arise between them. The dynamics of global processes often have different trajectories, leading to inherent tensions and complexities between the different levels involved in these multi-layered interactions (cf. Claeys and Delgado Pugley 2017, 6). The search for just responses to such complex crises always requires enduring these tensions and conflicts and recognizing that they arise from different epistemologies and ontologies, each of which relates to its own specific reality, the peaceful coexistence of which is a precondition for justice. Only a general openness to the coexistence of various social, economic, and environmental processes, along with a recognition of the power dynamics that shape these interactions, can ultimately enable the exploration of pathways for global climate governance. This approach will support the incorporation of valuable local perspectives while achieving climate goals.

Finally, thinking about justice requires an openness to diverse forms of knowledge and knowledge production. As demonstrated earlier, like any concept of justice, climate justice is not immune to appropriation by existing power structures. The vagueness of the term carries the risk that its definition will be determined by those who have power over the discourse. Just as norms and policies are shaped by society, social actors play an important role in the contested struggle for knowledge (cf. Davis and Todd 2017; Rothe 2020, 146). Language, methodology, and prominent concepts such as justice, freedom, equality, and sustainability – along with emerging ideas like the transition to a greener economy – promote certain ideals that are closely linked to pre-existing social structures. These structures, including imperialist ideologies and entrenched power dynamics, influence how such concepts are understood and implemented. Constructed like this, they always carry the risk of reproducing and legitimizing existing inequalities (Wilkens and Datchoua-Tirvaudey 2022, 136). When thinking about climate justice, it is crucial to acknowledge these preconceived ideas about the world and the underlying power dynamics.

The existence of different perspectives on nature, climate, space, and time reflects a variety of epistemological and ontological standpoints. Climate

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justice has also been conceived, conceptualized, and shaped in many different ways (cf. Wilkens and Datchoua-Tirvaudey 2022, 133). These diverse modes of knowledge production and representation serve as key areas of contention and are integral to understanding the colonial legacy of the debate (cf. Quijano 2007, 169). The over-reliance of the dominant climate governance discourse on academic, scientific, and institutional work leads to a justice narrative that from the outset ignores the injustices perpetuated and newly created by the climate crisis and those most affected by it (cf. David-Chavez and Gavin 2018; Wilkens and Datchoua-Tirvaudey 2022, 127f.). It creates and continuously reproduces a hierarchy of different ways of knowing, undermining the rich knowledge that exists beyond dominant knowledge production spaces, as well as the various concepts of climate justice that exist around the globe (cf. Hutton and Cappellini 2022). Without vigilant attention to power dynamics shaping knowledge and different ways of knowing, justice initiatives risk reinforcing existing inequalities instead of addressing them.

Thus, thinking about climate justice involves delving into the complexities of the crisis, acknowledging its heterogeneity, and recognizing the importance of diverse ways of understanding and representing reality (cf. Escobar 2016, 13). Questioning and deconstructing prevailing narratives is crucial for unravelling the complexities of social dynamics and inherent power imbalances. Such critical engagement is essential for fostering a deeper understanding of climate justice. It also has significant implications for addressing the multifaceted challenges of our time.

Navigating the complexity of climate justice: recognizing agency, embracing diversity, and shifting paradigms

> If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.
>
> —Lilla Watson, aboriginal activist, scholar, and artist (cited in Wijsman and Feagan 2019, 70)

A shift in thinking can only lead to transformative change if it is accompanied by an adapted way of doing. Efforts to do justice and give voice to marginalized communities are often portrayed as empowerment within dominant discourses. However, true empowerment cannot be achieved within existing power

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structures; such efforts may inadvertently reinforce binary thinking and perpetuate the marginalization of those falling outside the norm (cf. Spivak 1988; Shawoo and Thornton 2019). Inclusion under these conditions serves as a mere facade, maintaining the silence of those deemed outside the dominant discourse, while upholding stereotypes and reinforcing inequalities. This creates an illusion of boundless strength and autonomy for those within the norm, depicting others as passive and deficient.

To realize climate justice, it is crucial to critically examine empowerment initiatives to ensure they do not inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics, which are central issues in achieving climate justice. This examination must evaluate whether other epistemologies and ontologies require a re-evaluation of current approaches. It involves questioning the production of knowledge informing these paths and recognizing the challenges faced by indigenous researchers, for example, who navigate the complex terrain between their communities and the Western academic establishment (cf. Smith 1999). Recognizing, respecting, and incorporating diverse ways of knowing and experiencing the climate crisis are not only moral imperatives aimed at addressing colonial legacies but also essential for comprehensively understanding the crisis's effects and developing just responses.

Climate justice efforts are often associated with the protection of specific people and spaces. However, a broader understanding of justice must extend beyond protection to include restoration and regeneration, recognizing all humans as capable, active subjects with agency. It is imperative that 'others' are not treated as mere objects of research but recognized as active participants with their own narratives. Moreover, viewing climate justice through a multi-species lens offers valuable perspectives on the interconnections between humans and the broader ecological community (cf. Tschakert et al. 2021).

The search for climate justice unfolds across different places and spaces, involving various beings. It requires mutual listening, learning, and unlearning old, outdated practices. Integrating restorative justice principles, recognizing agency, embracing diversity, and shifting paradigms can enhance our understanding of how to rectify past harms while ensuring equitable participation in decision-making. Ultimately, this approach will pave the way for realizing climate justice.

With this in mind, this volume features important voices in the ongoing struggles for a comprehensive understanding of climate justice. They pick up on the thematic thread developed in this introduction and vividly illustrate

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the unequal impact of the climate crisis in different regions of the world, underlining the urgent need for a renewed focus on climate justice.

The word 'seeking' in the title of this book was chosen deliberately. One might critically remark whether it should instead be about 'finding' climate justice. Although finding is undoubtedly the goal, it is essential to emphasize the exploratory nature of this endeavour. There is no singular definition of climate justice; it is a constant search – a forward and sometimes backward movement that involves critique, refinement, deconstruction, and even destruction. It encompasses experimenting and failing, but also succeeding, mourning and celebrating, pausing and continuing, imagining and dreaming. Ultimately, it represents both a way of thinking and a practice.

Positionality

As white, cis-gendered, European researchers, educated in Europe and the US, and currently based in Germany, we acknowledge the presence of specific conceptual and theoretical biases inherent in our backgrounds. These biases have inevitably influenced the thought process underlying the creation of the text of this introduction and this volume, introducing potential limitations to our work.

We are acutely aware that these limitations and biases hinder our ability to fully dissolve the power structures that influence both our work and our connection with the subject of our research. This volume is the result of our own thirst for knowledge. As researchers based at a European institution, it was our objective to create a space in which critical voices could interact and exchange. We perceived and continue to perceive our role primarily as that of platform providers and facilitators, both as editors of the book and in the context of the Climate Justice Conference that preceded the compilation of this volume. The conference took place in Nuremberg in May 2023 and brought together critical researchers and practitioners from around the globe, all concerned with the question of what a just approach to the climate crisis might look like. We express our sincere gratitude for the invaluable interactions facilitated by the conference and the collaborative efforts involved in the production of this book. It has been a privilege to engage with the diverse and inspiring community of activists, academics, and practitioners who responded to our call for collaboration.

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Seeking climate justice: seven insights

This book brings together seven unparalleled and unique perspectives. While each chapter analyses a distinct theme, all threads converge in the common struggle of seeking climate justice. The authors' diverse backgrounds, often located at the intersection of academia, activism, and practice, are reflected in the chapters, which bridge the gap between in-depth exploration of theoretical concepts on the one hand and concrete experiences and realities in different parts of the world on the other.

The first two chapters deal with concepts that are instrumental in understanding the issues at hand. In the first chapter, Lívia Regina Batista-Pritchard examines environmental racism, a fundamental framework for the emergence of the environmental and later the climate justice movement (Schlosberg and Collins 2014, 361). While this lens is crucial to reveal racial discrimination in environmental decision-making, it is only very rarely and insufficiently applied in the global order. Batista-Pritchard counters this practice by placing environmental racism in the context of power imbalances in international climate negotiations, arguing that racism functions as an essential technology for bio- or necro power. Batista-Pritchard concludes by examining how counter-hegemonic approaches that take into account the interconnectedness of capitalism, colonialism, and the climate crisis can challenge the international climate regime to enable more climate-just policies.

In the next chapter, the North–South divide already explored by Batista-Pritchard is assessed from a slightly distinct perspective: Manele Mpofu investigates disparities in the implementation of human rights, with a special focus on economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCRs). Examining the influence of the climate crisis on ESCRs in the African context, Mpofu places a particular focus on the disproportionate impact the climate crisis has on marginalized communities. By examining the legal systems of the Global South and the Global North and the associated differences in the status, protection, and enforceability of ESCRs, Mpofu calls our attention to a growing gap between the countries of the Global North and the Global South in the realization of these rights.

The following three chapters look at the role of laws and regulations. They show how harmful structures can be embedded in legal frameworks and use detailed case studies to illustrate both the limits and the possibilities of law.

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Kelsey Jost-Creegan examines the intricate relationship between law and extractive practices, delving into how law initially facilitates the emergence of 'lawless' extractive enclaves, influences profitability, and governs the use of violence, both towards people and the environment. Employing the perspective of legal geography, Jost-Creegan scrutinizes a series of case studies centred on high-conflict agricultural socio-environmental disputes in Latin America. Despite acknowledging the inherent limitations of legal systems, the study also explores the potential for social movements to harness law as a tool of resistance in agrarian conflicts.

In the chapter by Silvia Rojas-Castro and Laura Duarte Reyes, the influence of Jost-Creegan's concept of legal geographies in extractive agriculture becomes evident, especially in one specific sector: the agro-industrial sector for genetically modified soy and pesticides in Latin America. This market not only contributes significantly to GHG emissions but is also monopolized by a handful of transnational corporations. Through insightful case studies, the chapter examines the consequences of this dependence on ecosystems and the rights of the rural and indigenous communities affected. In response to these challenges, the authors argue for the integration of climate risks into the human rights and environmental due diligence obligations of transnational agribusinesses.

Having discussed the limitations of law, in their next chapter Katya Regina Isaguirre-Torres and Tchenna Maso turn our attention to the potential benefits of law. They highlight the significance of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas in safeguarding the rights of rural populations, particularly concerning forests and biodiversity. By underscoring the pivotal role of rural, aquatic, and forestry communities in the ecological transition of agri-food production, Isaguirre-Torres and Maso explore how international environmental and human rights norms, championed by rural movements, can empower resistance against transnational organizations, corporations, and unfavourable green economy initiatives.

In the last two chapters, the attention is turned away from the law and towards specific struggles, as we follow the authors to the perspectives of collectives and individuals who resist structural injustices. Through a multifaceted case study, Fahmi Rizki Fahroji explores how the climate-related impacts of global capitalism and ambitious development efforts affect the indigenous Dayak community in Borneo, Indonesia. Using the concept of corporate occupation as an example, Fahroji discusses how the Dayak

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people's struggle can be linked to the broader framework of climate justice. A key aspect highlighted in this context is the strategic formation of alliances within the Dayak movement.

In the concluding chapter, Jorge Andres Forero-González and Diana María Paisa amplify the voices of social leaders representing indigenous, Afro-descendant, and Campesinx climate justice advocates from Abya Yala, which is the pre-colonial name for Latin America. Through first-hand interviews, the chapter offers insights into diverse perspectives and proposals for climate justice from communities and regions impacted by the capitalist extractive economic system. The interviews not only provide a critical examination of concepts like climate justice but also showcase the ideas, visions, and lived alternatives of the interviewees, which are essential for advancing the pursuit of climate justice.

Notes

1. The disasters mentioned at the beginning of this chapter are representative of many other climate-related disasters that have occurred in recent decades. The non-mentioning of other, equally devastating events should not be misunderstood as diminishing their relevance and severity.
2. At many instances, this volume refers to the concept of the 'Global South'. As understood here, this term encompasses both a geopolitical designation and a political identity. It encompasses territories and communities positioned in subordinate roles within the context of global capitalism (cf. Mahler 2017).
3. Within this introductory text, we frequently reference concepts such as 'dominant' and 'dominant discourse'. While we recognize the risk of oversimplification, vagueness, and the inherent limitations of these terms, we have chosen to employ them for the sake of analytical clarity.

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