

Surveillance, Discipline, and Regulation: Understanding Black Women's Experiences in the Academy

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Introduction

Race shapes a range of knowledge systems within the university, and it is important to identify how racism functions as part of this system. One such example of racism is the way that Black women's actions, attitudes, and responses are surveilled and regulated within campus spaces. In this working paper, we provide a preliminary analysis from a year-long study conducted with Black women students on their perspectives on discipline, surveillance, and regulation in higher education. We draw from Foucault's (1979) discipline theory and Collins's (2002) Black Feminist Thought to highlight the unique experiences of Black women students, and to critique the university's social structure as a type of disciplinary network. The purpose of this paper is to offer faculty and staff working with Black women students' insights into disrupting surveilling and regulatory behavior faculty and staff may be unaware of.

In this qualitative study, we aimed to make sense of the ways in which Black women students are socially disciplined by the academy's policies, everyday interactions, and traditions. We conceptualized that real-life channels of surveillance and regulation are key factors of discipline that do not allow for critical Black feminism to flourish within white institutions (Collins 2002). To do this, we emphasized the epistemic agency of Black women students through storytelling that elucidates how faculty place discursive boundaries on Black women students through regulation and surveillance, in part because of normative values of whiteness related to femininity and academic ability. Given that Black women student's epistemic agency is limited because schools/universities were built with racialized power dynamics within its policies and practices that continue today (Collins 2002; Ray 2019), addressing this head on is important for Black women students to feel like their knowledge has a place in higher education. However, actual inclusion cannot occur until faculty and staff are aware of how systemic racism informs our social practice on campus. For example, Black women students are trained by their professors to fit within the bureaucracy of their academic discipline for continued success. Our research is important because forms of discipline, such as surveillance and regulation, are understudied aspects of research involving Black women students. Consequently, faculty and staff often lack resources regarding proper support of Black women students, and do not have the

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skills to disrupt certain disciplinary behaviors as described within this paper. To address this, we provide faculty and staff with ideas to think about how they might modify and eliminate practices that surveil and regulate Black women students on campus. Our work is particularly timely given the revived call from racial social movements in the United States demanding change concerning the systemic disciplining of Black people that happens in many overt and covert ways.

Literature Review

Universities are situated within a sociological context that informs the disciplinary practices of the school that prevent infusion of Black epistemology (Collins 2002; Felder, Stevenson, and Gasman 2014; Vickery 2020). The push toward diversity, particularly within university initiatives, means that faculty and administrators want an increase in Black graduate and undergraduate student enrollment, but will also continue to engage in acts of surveillance against Black students once they arrive to campus (hook 1989; Rodrigues, Mendenhall, and Clancy 2021). Social surveillance of Black women students is done through increased monitoring that materializes as rewards and corrections when acting in accordance with or outside of dominant social standards on campus (Robinson 2013). Increased surveillance requires Black students to negotiate their positions within the power structure of the university through acceptance of the surveillance or resisting the surveillance by regulating (adjusting based on social control/discipline) their behavior, work performance, and appearance in classes and workspaces on campus (Phelps-Ward 2020).

Black women always exist within a web of racialized and gendered power networks (Collins 2002; hooks 1989, Overstreet 2019) where the critical knowledge of Black women is often stifled or ignored. Oftentimes challenging the status quo is dangerous for reputations and therefore, something faculty or staff are unlikely to enact. Related, universities and colleges are examples of racialized organizations where race itself is not an “object,” but race is a defined relationship or social contract (historically and presently bound) made up of the people in a society (Ray 2019). Organized places in society discipline in several ways through formal and informal punishment, and the disciplinary power sustains dominant culture’s status quo within a stratified society (Foucault 1979). Thus, people model their identity within a sociological context and learn acceptable responses to our cultural setting (Angod 2015; Galič, Timan, and Koops 2017; Gould 2021). Additionally, the image of a properly functioning human is already given to us by disciplinary power (Foucault 1979). Thus, Black women students cannot define for themselves what a “good” university student is for themselves because disciplinary power (e.g., surveillance and regulation) dictates the standards and expectations, which do not honor or account for Black life (Angod 2015; Gould 2021).

For example, Mayorga-Gallo (2019) found that many diversity frameworks are missing key elements of how to address systemic power and historical marginalization, and those missing elements of inclusion make institutional inequity impossible to fully achieve. However, while diversity commitments and statements perpetuate nice optics, these initiatives do nothing to improve education for the benefit of Black women students (Gould 2021; Matias 2016). Black women students (undergraduate and graduate) at white[†] institutions are low in number, making

[†] We intentionally do not use the term “predominately-white” because this implies that most colleges and universities are spaces where whiteness is not the default expectation (see Masta and Holly 2021).

the social part of academic study very isolating and their experiences of marginalization are passed over (Gay 2004; Grant 2012). Thus, when Black women students explain social problems within the academy, they receive quick fixes that do not address the root causes of a racialized discipline within higher education (Felder et al. 2014; Overstreet 2019; Phelps-Ward 2020). Therefore, when researchers theorize about Black women's experiences of discipline and act in support of Black women students based on our work, we also must acknowledge the multiplicity of Black women student's identities and experiences (Collins 2002).

The Current Study

Within our project, we made theoretical connections to Foucault's discipline theory while listening to stories shared by Black women students. Foucault's concepts are useful for understanding Black women student's experiences on campus because discipline theory critically examines systems of power. Black women students are bombarded with advice and correction, which insinuates that they must behave in a prescribed/normative manner. Although Foucault's discipline theory is viewed in terms of discursive boundaries, it is imperative that researchers and educators acknowledge the concrete effects of power within the social structure of a university, to facilitate a positive and educative experience for Black women students on campus. For example, when Black women students are in spaces where they feel their identities as Black people and women are valued, they feel freer to be themselves. However, when Black women students feel these identities separate them from others, Black women students do their best to seem nice, gentle, and proper. The participants' display of personality was also dependent on the social setting. Black women students are aware of stereotypes as part of surveillance, and actively try to brand themselves as the opposite of those stereotypes (opposite as in being gentle, dainty, quiet, studious, well-dressed) because Black women students feel that they represent all of Black women students, and their behavior will influence how their peers and professors might interact with other Black women in the future. Consequently, Black women student's proximity to whiteness influenced their personality at school (and beyond) because of the white norms related to valued white femininity around them.

Black women students also explained that the discipline they received was based on white heteronormative values of femininity that related to dialectical images of Black women students. Thus, there are different behavioral presentations for various social contexts in higher education. Participants felt they have cultivated many personalities to fit in on campus. Participants did this because Black women students receive messages and "advice" about what a proper college graduate should look like to receive accolades and employment (Collins 2002). Techniques of discipline are varied and often disguised through what is considered normal or "natural" (Foucault 1979).

Theoretical Framework

We apply Foucauldian disciplinary concepts to theorize, name, and then critique university norms applicable to socially disciplining Black women undergraduate and graduate students. Disciplinary surveillance and regulation results in Black women students on campus having "practiced" norm adherence (Collins 2002). We identified Foucault's (1979) discipline theory as giving critical insight into the various veiled materializations of discipline in social orders. Notably, Foucault is clear in stating that techniques of discipline are historically linked, shift throughout time, and are context dependent. We also drew from Collins' (2002) *Black Feminist*

Thought interpretation of Foucault's discipline theory. Collins' theoretical interpretation of Foucault's theory gives context and guidance for studying how Black women are "trained" to act a certain way to be "successful" in higher education. Collins' (2002) interpretation of Foucault's discipline theory gives context for how Black women are trained to act a certain way to be "successful" in higher education. In other words, Black women students receive messages insinuating that they must behave in a prescribed manner that allows everyone to feel comfortable within white institutions.

We examine surveillance and regulation as key factors of discipline that do not allow for Black feminism to flourish within white institutions. In this paper, we define surveillance as a tool of disciplinary power that ranks, orders, and normalizes individuals, and regulation as a process where one's actions and behaviors are modified based on surveillance either by themselves or others (Foucault 1979). Even though Black women are recruited to campus (often via several types of diversity initiatives), systemic biases do not allow Black women students to be themselves. Foucault's (1979) discipline is a theoretical view unearthing the way society and its networks discipline a collective body of individuals. For this theoretical perspective, the collective body of individuals was Black women students. Foucault would argue that universities, as imbued by larger society, are amenable to disciplinary surveillance and regulation. Collins (2002) furthers this theorization by explaining that power over Black women student's expressions, presentations, and responses is accomplished through constant inspection, correction, and rewards.

Surveillance. Surveillance works as a disciplinary method based on its ability to have an unverified presence, like an invisible ever-present authority effect (Foucault 1979). For example, given that faculty and staff cannot always carry out the punishments and explicitly enforce a regulated or controlled learning environment, the automation of surveilling effects makes any explicit punishment from faculty redundant (Galič et al. 2017). Thus, faculty serve as a comprehensive "inspector" of academic relationships, experiences, and milestones, and faculty view aspects of higher education from their own standpoint epistemology or understanding, which is rooted in white patriarchal norms of education (Grey and Williams-Farrier 2017). Not only is physical isolation a factor, but the academy cuts off Black women's standpoint epistemology—the unique knowledge that Black women have about social inequity (Collins 2002). Therefore, Black women are well-versed and are quick to understand what faculty at white universities require for academic success and social networking (Collins 2002; Gay 2004).

Regulation. Regulation is the process experienced by others who try to control their behavior and action. Regulation, whether it stems from social norms or surveillance, remains because societal norms and the power that enforces those norms goes unnoticed. Norms, and the discipline to sustain them, is unnoticed because they are woven into society's organizations (Foucault 1979; Ray 2019). Accordingly, schools developed endogenously with panopticism (Galič et al. 2017). For example, teachers observe, punish, correct, and indoctrinate students while school administrations, parents, and politicians monitor teachers to be a mechanism within the panopticon. Schools are a place where teachers are easily surveilled at any time (Callendar 2020). As Galič, Timan, and Koops (2017) write "when everybody can potentially be under surveillance, people will internalise control, morals and values" (p. 16). Significantly, Black teachers are under increased expectation to internalize, model, and correct in accordance with

dominant U.S. cultural norms. This means that sharing emotions and truths about systemic violence against Black people are disallowed in their pedagogy.

As Foucault (1979) theorizes, the reach of disciplining behaviors extends beyond a school or university because people are constantly being disciplined, and the discipline and subsequent normalized behaviors are reproduced, modeled, and sanctioned. Surveillance and regulation are upheld through many interactions in organizations that reinforce a racialized structure (Ray 2019). Most of the participants explained that they were expected to act like a “white girl” to do well in academia. This version of discipline, automated responses, is a form of self-discipline that is aligned with organizational norms that are infused with racial constructions that dictate credentials (e.g., “whiteness” as a character trait is achieved), and rules (e.g., social orders that leave Black women without much agency to learn on their own terms)

Methodology

As noted in the introduction, this paper presents preliminary findings from a year-long qualitative study that we conducted between September 2020 and May 2021. The research team consisted of two women professors (who identify as Native and white) and two doctoral students, who are Black women. We spent considerable time discussing how our positionalities informed study design, data collection, data analysis, and drafting of manuscripts. The study design for this project was based on research conducted by the Native professor on the experiences of Native women, whose study highlighted the intersectionality of race and gender. Since both professors did not share a racial identity with the participants, the professors provided administrative support during data collection, while the Black doctoral students conducted the interviews with participants. We all participated in the data analysis stage, but the professors deferred to the doctoral students if there was misalignment in the interpretation. Both professors made significant effort to not let their experiences supersede that of the Black women doctoral students, who approved all the preliminary findings discussed in this paper.

We conducted a series of open-ended interviews with 22 Black undergraduate women and 19 Black graduate women attending a white Midwestern university. The Black undergraduate women and Black graduate women represented a range of colleges at Purdue University, including the College of Engineering, the College of Liberal Arts, and the College of Health and Human Sciences. However, given the few numbers of Black women students in certain majors and disciplines, we cannot provide more specific details without the risk of revealing identifying information about the participants. Each interviewee participated in three interviews, with each interview ranging between 30-75 minutes in length. Our study was approved by Purdue’s Institutional Review Board. The first two interviews centered on understanding participants’ experiences in education, with specific emphasis on discipline, surveillance, and regulation actions that occurred. The third interview involved interviewees reviewing initial findings and providing the research team with any feedback or additional insight. After we transcribed the first two interviews, participants had the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy. Participants chose pseudonyms that were utilized from the point of transcription.

We analyzed the interview data in multiple steps. The initial step involved reviewing the transcripts from the first interview. After we reviewed the transcripts, the research team met to discuss any patterns or trends we identified in the data and identified additional questions to pose

in the second interview. The second step involved reviewing the transcripts from the second interview. The researchers drafted analytic memos for each interview that were reviewed by the research team. After we reviewed the second set of transcripts, the research team met to discuss additional trends or patterns in the data. The third step involved reviewing the transcripts again, along with research memos and meeting notes. From this, we created preliminary findings. The fourth step involved sharing the preliminary findings with the participants during the third interview to gain their perspective and insights into the data and conduct a form of member checking. We then took their feedback and identified the following themes to understand how Black women students experience discipline, surveillance, and regulation with higher education.

From these narratives, we pinpoint significant moments and places of discipline that Black students experienced from their faculty. The stories Black women students tell subvert hegemonic power structures, and the critical knowledge is used to challenge racism that is present in society's organizations (hooks 1989). For example, the norm on a university campus is tied to valuing white heteronormative femininity (Collins 2002). From participants' stories we noticed that Black women students experience surveillance and regulation by observing outcomes of what happens when acting according to, or in contradiction of, that dominant social standard. Black women students all recalled that this surveillance and regulation began at an early age that extended to university life. Although the experiences of Black undergraduate women and Black graduate women differ in significant ways, this working paper focuses on findings that represent their shared experiences as Black women students.

Shared Insights for Awareness

In this section we present our preliminary findings, renamed as insights, to offer perspective to faculty and staff who might be unfamiliar with the experiences of Black women students.

Insight 1: Teachers enact discipline, surveillance, and regulation in K-12 settings, which informs Black women student's experiences in college.

From an early age, Black women are set apart *from each other* based on both the location of their K-12 school and their performance in these schools. Within the K-12 environment, Black girls are labeled as either "good" (e.g., taking Advanced Placement coursework, seeming approachable, living in suburban areas) or "bad" (e.g., taking no Advanced Placement coursework, seeming "rude" and loud, living in urban areas). This sorting/ranking of Black girls from an early age ends up reinforcing an unspoken rule that there is only one type of Black girl who can succeed in society. Sorting causes Black women students to regulate their own behavior, as well as evaluate other Black women students based on the unspoken rules of "good manners." The sorting experienced by Black women students in K-12 schools informs how Black women students experience colleges and universities.

Liana[‡], an undergraduate student, reflected on experiences of teachers in the K-12 schools watching her behavior and navigating the subsequent regulation:

Yeah. It's like, do they assume that we're all poor or that even if we aren't poor, we just have a lack of something? That's why for me personally, I have a hard time with the idea of like "professionalism," talking so professionally, and changing my tone of voice. I'm

[‡] All names are pseudonyms

just a Black person. Like, and if I talk like this, then that should be respected because I can do what I can because I'm in the same room as everybody else.

The regulation that Liana discusses is sometimes labeled as important career and/or academic advice. However, the advice itself is based on problematic assumptions on race. When professionalism is defined as using and behaving in ways that reflect whiteness, Black women can never meet those expectations.

Insight 2: Black women are both invisible and hyper-visible in academic settings.

The everyday experience for Black women students involves the dialectic between invisibility and hypervisibility. Invisibility involves the exclusion of Black women student's perspectives and the failure of non-Black peers and mentors to recognize the time and effort required to understand the unwritten rules. Black women students experience a form of hyper-visibility. Black women students are watched constantly, and therefore regulate themselves (physically/emotionally) to anticipate and manage the perceptions of others. Hyper-invisibility is fostered through the numerical underrepresentation, making Black women students "stick out" in spaces where there are only one or two Black women students present. Janice, an undergraduate aspiring to work in higher education student affairs shared a story about watching a Black woman who advocated for minoritized students in STEM. Janice said,

She's doing the work, but her salary is not equating to all the work she'd done...Like they need us for whatever is wrong with the university, or they need us, whatever, to fix the diversity work in the university.

Janice also has a campus job with residence life and sees the dynamic between visibility and invisibility often related to diversity, but she notices that Black women's ideas rarely get the compensation or appreciation deserved. For example, university administration might seek out Black women's knowledge and suggestions for diverse appearances, but then do no work within the university to include Black women.

Insight 3: Black women student's understanding of stereotypes informs their behavior in the academy.

Black women students understand how stereotypes work—Black women students recognize that stereotypes about Black women inform the people around them, they recognize the regulatory regimes associated with these stereotypes, and they acknowledge that their understanding of stereotypes influences their behavior inside and outside of class. For example, Black women get praise if they are viewed as "nice," "proper," and "professional." However, if they are viewed as "unprofessional" Black women get advice to alter their personality and/or appearance. For example, several participants noted that Black women should aspire to be like Michelle Obama, who represented (in their minds) what proper Black womanhood looks like. Rachel, a graduate student, acknowledges the possibility that the people she works with might think she was accepted into the university because of her minority status, and not her skills. Rachel states,

I worked over the summer and one of the faculty has actually kind of talked to me about it and he was like, 'You did such a great job over the summer. You worked really hard. I really appreciate you.' I think that they liked me. I don't know. I do think though that

there is, I don't know, that little sense of like, 'Oh, maybe she isn't good enough to be here or maybe she only got in because you know she's a minority.' I think that they know that I have a lot of clinical experience, just experience in the field, but maybe not as much research experience...I definitely try to use bigger words and not use slang or anything like that. I always say yes for the most part. Like if they ask me to do something, I'm not going to say like, "Oh, I don't have time." I'm like, "Okay, yeah! That sounds great. I'll get to it." Even if I know I already have a huge list of things to do.

Rachel also points out that this extends to stereotypes related to physical appearance:

I think it [the way I come to class] would be a little chaotic, I guess, not as presentable. I straightened my hair, most mornings. I get ready for class. I want to look professional, but if it was real me, it would be my hair all curly and frizzy.

In addition to the regular burdens of being a graduate student, Rachel has the additional burden of anticipating stereotypical perspectives and determining how, and if, she should modify her behavior to prevent someone from aligning her with their negative stereotypes of Black people.

Insight 4: Being in the academy requires the additional burden of identity negotiation for Black women students.

Black women students recognize that their academic work requires ongoing identity negotiation. This extends beyond just their performance in undergraduate and graduate milestones—it informs every part of their daily lives in that they must negotiate their own perspectives on race to learn when and where it is (or is not) ok to bring up racialized topics, and that they frequently try to find ways to distinguish their behaviors from those that are considered “racialized.” For example, Liana shared feeling safe around other Black friends as well as the Black Cultural Center on campus:

Feeling safe [around Black friends and at the BCC] was feeling like I could just be myself, like nobody was going to look at me crazy if I was talking in a certain way or if me and my friends were talking to each other in a certain way.

Lizzie, an undergraduate student, shared,

We're the only two Black people in the lab to begin with. And a lot of times you can't participate as an experiment or in a lot of studies because we bias the information. So, if anything was going to be isolating.... That doesn't really make me feel any type of way, but I know that those are some things we can't do because we bias the information. They're testing for things like that, and you can't be Black and be the experiment because you're going to upset the veil or the collection process or whatever.

The additional burden of identity negotiation for Black women students reinforces that their being is not the “standard” for campus norms.

Insight 5: The academy disciplines, surveils, and regulates Black women students through various policies.

Colleges and universities regulate and surveil Black women students through various policies within all levels of the organization (Ray 2019). These multiple prongs of regulation occur formally and informally. Regulation and surveillance are pronounced in graduate spaces, which tend to be small and have few Black people present. Within graduate spaces, regulation and surveillance is especially noticeable in relationships with faculty and with peer interactions. For example, graduate programs often have a series of expectations or milestones used to assess the progress of students. Navigating these milestones is more complicated for Black women students for two reasons. First, Black women students are held, both internally and externally, to a higher, unattainably perfect, standard. Second, Black women students are often assumed to be “wrong” or deficient by their faculty and/or peers. Black women students then depend on these milestones to help mitigate the regulation and surveillance they experience when trying to navigate between these two sets of expectations. Stryker, a graduate student, highlighted this in her own experience:

I saw our milestones or the sheets that we agreed upon on expectations. Once I saw that and I saw how many more things I had listed [than white peers] and how many more like the weight of the fact that I was trying to apply to like three external fellowships and like an, a supplement, a diversity supplemental grant, something that she invited me here for, and really was like set on rather than my goals of the external fellowships to independently fund me. Um, there are the issues of the trajectory of my thesis in terms of the brainstorming ideologies that I had in the collaboration. I was suggesting it to her...and she just was not really trying to have those types of discussions with me. And then eventually she [the professor] really threw me against the wall when she wanted to say that I wasn't being cooperative or trying to, I guess, share...she felt like I wasn't being as inspirational during lab meetings.

At the end of the study, a graduate student participant mentioned that “none of this is new, but it feels good to have it on paper.” Black women students throughout time have expressed comparable stories and alarm regarding the limitations placed on Black women students through social discipline. Still, nothing has significantly changed. This means that our studies cannot solely be based on theorizations but also refined by actions, such as how we disseminate our work and provide suggestions/insights for awareness to the academy of how to be inclusive of Black women students. The stories of Black women students trying to fit in and graduate without making waves sounds like Black women students are just expected to push through pain for the promise of a decent job that might even the playing field—the above insights offer guidance for the social norm of accepting institutionalized oppression to change.

Implications

The goal of this study was to make sense of Black women’s experiences in colleges and universities through the lenses of discipline, surveillance, and regulation. Making sense of discipline within the university’s social structure is significant; the process of discipline reinforces white, patriarchal norms and limits inclusion of Black women student’s identities in academia. Discipline restricts their identities through surveillance and regulation. Even though Black women students are brought on campus to fulfill diversity initiatives, systemic biases do not allow Black women graduate and undergraduate students to be fully included.

Black Feminist Thought and Foucault's theory of discipline is an important and unique combination as a theoretical lens. Foucault's goal of understanding discipline is to make what was obscured to society seen, and that is done by accepting and knowing critical truths. Narratives elicited from the Black women student participants in this study provided that critical and noteworthy truth that is necessary for university administrators and educators to validate and make change based on the recommendations. Moreover, forms of discipline, like surveillance and regulation, are understudied social disciplinary networks of power involving Black women students that must be named to challenge the racialized and gendered hierarchical power organization of higher education. Collins' (2002) theoretical take on the everyday discipline of Black women in higher education asserts that technical differences have been made (e.g., diversity), but no foundational changes have been made in larger society that would affect the inclusion of Black women in education, correlating with Foucault's conceptualization of a controlled society that does not challenge the hierarchical status quo. Investigating discipline within the university's social structure is critical; the process of discipline reinforces white, patriarchal norms and limits inclusion of Black women student's identities in academia.

The findings we present in this paper represent our initial analysis of the data. We will continue to analyze the data more deeply, looking for detailed nuance about the everyday ways the academy disciplines, surveils, and regulates Black women students. Further analysis allows us to understand how faculty interact with Black women students and can provide insight into useful interventions. We also plan to develop a narrative study focused on faculty reflections on their engagement with Black women students. However, our current findings allow us to provide several suggestions for faculty and staff to consider as they engage with Black women students on campus. Our first suggestion is to evaluate how program policies/milestones might implicitly privilege white students. Are faculty adding additional milestones to Black women students for no discernable reason? Are Black women students expected to do more service and committee work at the expense of their own academic progress? Department chairs should pay attention to the experiences of Black women students in their departments. Our second suggestion is for faculty and staff to make space for, and listen, to Black women students when they share their struggles with stereotypes and identity negotiation. Faculty and staff should not dismiss Black women's concerns as "this is just how it is"—attention should be paid to the context shared. The messages Black women students receive about professionalism and academic behavior derive from white patriarchal norms. Faculty and staff should ask themselves if their mentoring of Black women students involves reinforcing whiteness. Lastly, faculty and staff should recognize that Black women students have experienced discipline, surveillance, and regulation for the entirety of their experiences in K-12 schools. Black women student's past experiences inform their current understanding of colleges and universities—therefore, faculty and staff should build trust with Black women, knowing that the trust building process for Black women students takes time and should be encouraged and fostered—not ignored or hastened.

Our goal is to continue to refine our suggestions and offer more nuanced ways for faculty and staff to support Black women students in colleges and universities. We recognize this is demanding work and requires constant dedication. However, if colleges and universities are committed to the goals of diversity and inclusion, and want Black women students to thrive and succeed, institutional change is paramount.

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