

FROM WASTE TO HOPE: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARCO ARMIERO

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In 2015 a group of researchers from different Spanish universities got together and decided to engage in an academic study of the impact of globalization on US literature, and the LYG research project was born. In 2019 we embarked upon the second part of our project and decided to widen the scope to include both Canadian and US literature.¹ Just as we were concluding the first LYG project, we realized that many of our research lines converged upon one single corridor with one door at the end. We timidly opened that door when we explored the discontents triggered by globalization and encountered many “residual” communities. Having glimpsed what lay behind the door, we found the key to unlock it in what we had also considered residual until then: “waste.” However, instead of focusing only on the materiality conjured up by the term, we also decided to explore the human communities that have become residual or waste(d). In our endeavor, Waste Studies and Waste Theory have proved especially useful, for they allow scholars to grapple with the appalling consequences that our globalized economy of waste has for both human beings and the entire planet.² Therefore, in “LYG2: Communities of Waste,” we tried to tease out the different ways in which North American authors dissect the globalized economy of waste and its impact on residual communities, despite the representational challenges posed by social and environmental “slow violence,” to use Rob Nixon’s famous phrase. When Marco Armiero’s *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump*³ came out, we were thrilled by the felicitous coincidence, and even more so when Prof. Armiero agreed to grant us the following interview.

BEGOÑA SIMAL GONZÁLEZ (BSG): First of all, thank you very much, Prof. Armiero, for granting us this interview. Last year, in 2021, you published *Wasteocene*, a timely and highly readable book where you argue that “waste” is “the planetary mark of our new epoch” not only “because of its ubiquitous presence” but because of what you call the “wasting relationships” that “produce wasted people and places” (2). This is an excellent summary of what environmental humanities scholarship, from Slow Violence to Waste Theory, has been discussing in the last decade or so, so my first question addresses this shared interest: what is it in the current climate that has fostered this proliferation of waste-centered scholarship? And, in your particular case,

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was there an “epiphany” or any personal experience that led you to coining the term “Wasteocene”?

MARCO ARMIERO (MA): First of all, thank you very much. I am extremely grateful that you have been taking my work so seriously and really engaging with it. I would like to answer this question by explaining the Wasteocene is part and parcel of a growing reaction to the Anthropocene narrative. I have often said that the Wasteocene is one of these counternarratives that are born within and against the Anthropocene. In this sense I am not alone; many other scholars, better than me, have been rather uncomfortable with the Anthropocene narrative. Now, the “we” of the Anthropocene is very questionable. Who is that “we”? We may mean the human species, responsible for the global mess in which we are now, but we do not talk about the global “we” when we need to share the vaccines against COVID-19 or when we need to share the result of our research and our technologies—so that “we” is a bit questionable. Another problem with the global narrative of the Anthropocene is that it’s so planetary that it’s a bit disembodied. In a sense you learn about the Anthropocene reading papers, magazines, maybe journals—if you’re an academic—but you don’t experience the Anthropocene, whereas you do experience the Wasteocene. As much as the Anthropocene is disembodied and global, the Wasteocene is very place-based and embodied. You experience the Wasteocene through your own body, through the body of your dears, through the place where you live. Please, allow me to clarify that I do not believe that scholars using the Anthropocene label are racist or they are completely blind towards race, class and gender. I think this would be unfair, like building my own strawman just for the sake of being a little bit radical. I know a lot of them are actually well aware of these issues. In the book I mention a couple of examples like Laura Pulido, a well-known geographer, or Will Steffen, an Earth sciences scholar, very influential in the whole Anthropocene debate.

So, again, it’s not a matter of blaming someone, of building your own strawman. When I stress the limitations of the Anthropocene it is because the words that we use can be important to deliver a message. This is why I believe that Capitalocene is also a powerful concept, because it was able to

¹ The members of the LYG2 research team are José Liste (UDC), Pedro Carmona (ULL), Martín Urdiales (U. Vigo), and Begoña Simal (UDC), who is the coordinator (IP) of the research project. The “equipo de trabajo” (“work team”) was initially comprised by doctoral students and early-career scholars: Elsa del Campo (U. Nebrija), Sara Villamarín-Freire (UDC), and Martín Praga (UDC).

² Simal-González, Begoña. 2019. “The waste of the empire”: Neocolonialism and environmental justice in Merlinda Bobis’s ‘The Long Siesta as a Language Primer.’” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 55, no. 2: 209-22. DOI: 10.1080/17449855.2019.1590633.

³ Armiero, Marco. *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021 (ISBN: 9781108826747).



point at something that the Anthropocene was hiding. This does not mean that no one was thinking about this, but at least as a global narrative it was not put forward with so much power. I mentioned Capitalocene, but we could also mention the Plantationocene, the age of plantation. These narratives are born within and against the Anthropocene. When I say “within,” I’m not just playing with words; what I try to say with “within and against” is that, without the Anthropocene, most likely we wouldn’t have come up with Capitalocene or Plantationocene. I don’t know how to put it, but I’m grateful to the Anthropocene, because it has been able to unleash creativity, to ignite a lively debate. Let me be clear: I’m not really proposing the Wasteocene as a geological age, I’m not excavating in the geosphere to look for the golden spike of the Wasteocene. I’m contributing to an intellectual debate about the sociological crisis, rather than looking for a precise golden spike in geosphere.

BSG: As to the second part of the question, which was more personal level, was there any specific experience that led you to choose the term “Wasteocene” in order to capture the convergence of social and ecological concerns?

MA: The autobiographical inspiration is very important in my book, actually in all my work. I come from a country and, more specifically, from a city/region which has been affected very deeply by waste, in many different ways: by a waste crisis between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, but also by a *longue durée* socio-ecological crisis. I’m talking about Naples, in southern Italy, a city that is often considered a border city between the global North and the global South. I cherish this biographical inspiration, so present in the book, because I think it’s part of a different way of thinking about academic and intellectual work. We have been told so many times—as PhD students, as early-career researchers—that we should not be biased, that we need to separate our personal life from the academic life. However, feminist scholars taught us that the personal is always political. And I’m wondering, can we say that the personal is political and also academic? Somebody would say that this is bad scholarship, and I would say, well, “it’s revolution, baby.”

BSG: Although you’re not really against the term Anthropocene per se, as you have just explained, in your book you emphasize the need to make more visible the waste and wasting aspects of the current regime, and that is why you put forward the concept of the Wasteocene as an alternative. I agree with you when you claim that, in contrast to the Anthropocene, “the Wasteocene repoliticizes the socio-ecological crisis” (11). Do you think the Wasteocene will supersede the Anthropocene as the most popular or widespread concept?

MA: I believe there is no chance. In the academic arena and scientific debates, power matters. This is not just something that I write in a paper. I do believe that power matters. And I do believe I am on the wrong side, perhaps, we could say, I’m on the left side... Anyway, what I mean to say is that I am on the weak side of this debate, no discussion. There are powerful forces out there that actually make things go in a certain direction. A radical—we might even say revolutionary—point of view cannot easily become mainstream in the



academic debate. However, please allow me to go back to the conclusions of my book, where I tried to overcome the usual intellectual competition, claiming another way to be in academia.

As academics, I think that we now live in some kind of “publish-or-perish winter” in which we need to be popular, we need to tweet, we need to increase our h-index bibliometrics, and we compete with our colleagues in the department and elsewhere. I understand all this. Having said that, I truly believe in the need for a collective effort to dismantle the power relationships in academia, and in the world as a whole. What I mean is that I believe that Capitalocene is a very powerful concept that several scholars are using: Jason Moore, Andreas Malm, Michael Parenti, and more. Thus, if the point is that the term Wasteocene should win the competition against the Capitalocene or other radical critiques of the Anthropocene narrative, I am not playing this game. I am part of the same family, or, rather, I’m part of the same gang: we are all trying to sabotage, to dismantle the current regime and trying to provide a different approach to understand our sociological crisis. I am not hypocritical: I am happy that Jason Moore has been using the term Wasteocene himself; I am happy that you are interviewing me; I am really happy that the book has been translated into many languages [among them Spanish]. At the end of November, we will celebrate a symposium in China launching the Chinese edition of the book. I am happy and proud about the success of the book.

On the other hand, I don’t want to play by the rules of the game and declare that Wasteocene is better than Capitalocene or that if you use the Anthropocene, you are bad. Laura Pulido has used the Anthropocene, so what? She’s one of my main sources of inspiration. I am not playing this game. I hope that the Wasteocene can become part of the debate, of that “community.” I believe that we need to act as if the revolution is already here; we cannot just wait for something to happen. I want a better world to exist now, not in the future, because, after all, I have been waiting for this better world for all my life and it never comes. I believe that the better world is now, and my very small, you might say humble, contribution to building a better world is to stop playing by the rules of this game. The Wasteocene is there for whoever is interested in using it, but it’s not in competition with others; it’s not better than others. I am not trying to supersede other kinds of labels, also because the Wasteocene couldn’t have been born without the work of Jason Moore, Laura Pulido, Cedric Robinson, Ashley Dawson, and we can go on and on. I acknowledge these intellectual debts in my concluding chapter not because I want to be humble, but because I want to be strong. I want allies; I don’t want competitors. It’s a matter of being smart; and I believe that humility is a crucial exercise because it teaches you that you are better only when acknowledging your limits and your debts. It’s not a matter of being humble. Humility is not precisely a set of rules but an ontological posture: it’s asking yourself how you can be a better person before being a better scholar. And you know that being humble means that



people will always see you as being better than you actually are, and this is a fantastic gift. It's not hypocrisy, it's more the gift of being seen with eyes that can change you. It cannot be a mirror; it must be another human being.

BSG: At one point in your book (pp. 7-8), you discuss the chronology of the Anthropocene and the different theories regarding its origins. In your opinion, when did the Wasteocene emerge? Does its emergence coincide with that of the Anthropocene? Would you trace it back to European colonialism, or maybe to the advent of globalization or the Great Acceleration?

MA: It is a relief that I am not really putting out the Wasteocene as a geologic epoch, because I don't need to submit an application to the International Commission on Stratigraphy, which looks for the origins and the golden spike of the Anthropocene. I feel relieved that the Wasteocene can be first and foremost a narrative tool, and I hope that storytelling can be seen as a methodology. I think of storytelling not only as a device to tell what we have discovered with other methods, but I actually want to employ storytelling as our method to understand, to make sense of the world, so I am using the Wasteocene in this sense.

But I don't want to dodge your question. First of all, I believe that the Wasteocene is there for people to use. Just to be clear, the Wasteocene is a narrative dispositive there to be used. Somebody working on the Roman Empire might find the Wasteocene a useful tool to understand something in the Roman Empire, or people can think of the Wasteocene as something that can help to understand something in the Middle Ages. In this sense, it's a tool there for people to explore, and exploring would also imply adjusting the concept. It's not precisely a very rigid tool: it's not like tools in a lab, which can be a little bit difficult to use because they are less flexible. The concept of the Wasteocene can be flexible. I have already seen people wrestling with it in a very creative way.

However, if I were forced to pinpoint the specific origins of the Wasteocene, I would say that colonial times were a key moment. Why? Because I believe that it really produced the ultimate "othering," the idea of a place where something can happen that is not something that we will allow to happen in this part of the world, whatever "this part" is. I am a big "fan" of the Orbis spike hypothesis put forward by Lewis and Maslin.⁴ I should also say that, in terms of waste, there's no discussion that the Great Acceleration is probably the epitome of the wasting, consumerist society. In early modern times, the production of waste was less massive and people were more

⁴ In brief, Lewis and Maslin propose the European invasion of the Americas as the starting point for the Anthropocene. They argue that the colonization of the New World not only had the characteristics of a planetary change but it also left a clear mark in the geosphere in the form of a significant decline in atmospheric CO₂ (circa 7–10 p.p.m). According to Lewis and Maslin, the causes of this remarkable decrease in atmospheric CO₂ lie in the combined mass-destruction of Indigenous people and the following reduction of agricultural practices and (re)expansion of forests.



careful with the remains of their production and consumption. I have read somewhere that in the global North, we trash what we buy an average of six months after we've bought it. It seems amazing, doesn't it? I guess this obsolescence is intended.

BSG: As in "planned obsolescence"?

MA: Right. But I also want to make sure that, with the Wasteocene, we do not focus on material trash, merely saying: "Oh, my God! How much trash we see in the city these days! It's terrible! Once upon a time when I was a kid, the city was so clean..." This can be a very regressive approach. What I want to focus on are the wasting relationships producing this, and the wasting relationships were not created by the Great Acceleration, they were already there, in place. The Great Acceleration probably had the power to increase waste production, and especially to detach us from the waste that we were producing. In this sense, recycling is a crucial practice. And yet, as I have tried to explain in other talks, I don't think that recycling is the antidote to wasting relationships: the antidote is commoning, not recycling. I recycle myself, as much as I can, and I believe that recycling is powerful because it reconnects the consumer with what has been consumed. And this is an important step: at least you understand that there is not a magic dump where everything can disappear. Nonetheless, since my main concern is not waste as "a thing" but waste as "wasting relationships," I do maintain that commoning, not recycling, is the path for dismantling them.

BSG: I want to go back to the alternative that you give, commoning—rather than recycling—as the antidote to the Wasteocene. In the last chapter in your book, you explain how, in contrast to wasting relationships, "based on consuming and othering [...], commoning practices aim to reproduce resources and communities" (46-47). The focus here seems to be on community-building, a project that seems to go against the current individualist logic. I think this is a long fight that requires intergenerational cooperation, since it will be our children who will "inherit" the legacy of the Wasteocene. In your opinion, are the younger generations really aware of the impact of the Wasteocene and, if so, are they taking an active role in "sabotaging" it through commoning?

MA: This is a challenging question. Wasting relationships produce profits for a few through othering and extraction. In contrast, commoning is reproducing communities through sharing and caring. In this sense, recycling can eventually work within the logic of the Wasteocene. In the book, I mention the case of an abandoned factory, which some developers proposed to recycle into a shopping mall. Basically, you have a "waste," the abandoned factory building, and you do something with it. Well, this *does not* change the wasting relationships. It is radically different if the building is "recycled" or repurposed as a social center and the area around it transformed in a natural park for the people in a poor neighborhood. This *does* change and dismantle the wasting relationships.

As to whether the young generations are aware of the wasting relationships, I would say that Fridays for Future is a huge movement that started in a



very peculiar way. As you know, I live and work in Stockholm, so when Greta Thunberg started her Fridays for Future strike, alone in front of the Swedish Parliament, somebody like me from southern Italy and with my kind of political background—which, in case you are wondering, is a Marxist ecosocialist background—I was a bit skeptical. You know, it's very individualistic. She's one person. It's so Scandinavian. We need a larger movement. I liked my guys, my gals, back in Naples getting organized. There you don't do anything if you are not at least 100 people, right? This time, however, I can say I was happily wrong. Greta started something which went beyond individual action. She was teaching me a lesson: sometimes you also need an individual action, as long as the individual action is not an obstacle to building a collective, but it's just one step towards the collective. I see a lot of interesting things happening with Fridays for Future. I believe that Greta has now taken a much more radical position than at the beginning—at least as I understood her at the beginning. I think that her meeting with Indigenous people in the US and around the world, her meeting with Naomi Klein, with Ocasio-Cortez, I believe all of that changed her. She is now openly anti-capitalist. And I completely agree with her. I am very hopeful about this. In Italy there is something happening right now which I believe is amazing, something called the “convergence.” The convergence is an experience which started from a workers' collective in a squatted factory in Tuscany. The factory had been shut down by the owners, and these workers started thinking about the possibility of changing what they were producing. Now they are producing, and asking for, a convergence of all the social-environmental struggles happening in Italy. There have been two big marches so far—one in Bologna, another one in Tuscany—and now there will be one in Naples, in my own town. Why is it so powerful? Because it brings together workers, Fridays for Future, and people fighting for the right to housing. They are now building a wide social platform. On the other hand, Italy now has a right-wing government and proud of being so. In other words, we can be optimistic, but we can also be very, very pessimistic about what's going on in Italy.

Commoning can also be fruitful because it can change our idea of what being politicized means. Politicization does not happen only when you march with the flag, it does not happen only in a political meeting. Politicization can happen when you help your neighborhood; when you meet somebody in the hospital because your kids are both sick with the same disease; when you understand that, if the place where you live is a dump, it's not because you are uncivilized and not taking care of it, but because you are poor, because somebody is using you as a dump. So maybe what is missing here is trying to build communities, rebellious communities, everywhere we are.

BSG: Speaking as a teacher now, are there ways in which we can get our university students involved in this commoning project?

MA: When people tell me that our students are not involved, I wonder if we really know what they are doing. I wonder if students are sabotaging our academic



system, piece by piece, or doing something to help each other or support each other, or changing the language, or changing gender relationships. Maybe we don't even know them, so I am optimistic, which makes sense in somebody who believes that revolution is not only possible but is happening now. But I need to change my idea of revolution. Revolution will not be an army marching on the Winter Palace, but it will be somebody yelling "Fuck you, people in the Winter Palace." In fact, revolution may be happening in the margins, very far away from the Winter Palace.

BSG: As you know, we are also Humanities scholars, although, in our case, we come from the field of English Studies, more specifically North American literature and film. Since this is a transdisciplinary conversation, let me ask you about the literary and cinematic references you use in your book. When you discuss the perils of the Wasteocene and the need for commoning practices, you offer both data and stories because, as you aptly put it, "[d]ata is powerful, but [...] stories even more so" (28). You give some examples from literary and cinematic narratives, mostly speculative fiction, because, in your own words, "more than scientists, writers and filmmakers have remarkably influenced our collective imaginaries about the future, and waste, in its manifold forms, has often been a key feature of those imagined futures" (13). The literary and filmic examples you provide, from *The Road* to *Elysium*—to mention the US American ones—envision dystopian futures where the consequences of the Wasteocene become sadly visible. However, very few of these narratives seem to offer alternative, viable futures. I think that, while dystopias and post-apocalyptic narratives can work as a wake-up call and shake us into action, they can also be paralyzing. It might be even more interesting to analyze hopeful rather than defeatist narratives. Can you think of specific literary texts or films that provide alternatives to the current regime? If so, in which way do they disrupt the Wasteocene and (re)imagine "the commons"?

MA: You are absolutely right that dystopia is the key genre, the cipher, in a sense, when we try to imagine the future. I believe that it's easier to imagine the dystopia, because the utopia can sometimes be a little too naïve, or it can be a dystopia under a different guise. At the Environmental Humanities Laboratory in Stockholm, we have a project called the "Atlas of the other worlds," which is available at our website.⁵ There, you can find a section called "Occupy stories": we asked people, mostly students, from all over the world to imagine their own cities or towns 200 years from now. And what happened is precisely what you said: more than 90% were dystopias. I was one of the very few who imagined a utopian revolution. Even in my case, though, I left the door open to a possible dystopian future. At the end of my short story—I'm not a writer, so the story sucks, of course—I explain that

⁵ <https://occupyclimatechange.net>.



I am writing a letter to the people in the future, adding that you—the reader—are now wondering if the future I describe is possible, how we did all this, what happened with capitalism, and so on and so forth. And why are you asking all these questions? Because if I told you that everything is a mess, that I live in a favela without water, if I had described the usual dystopia, you would not ask any question because that's the normal. Therefore, I hint at the possibility that maybe I am indeed writing from a favela, just dreaming about a utopian future.

Utopias can be also a problematic. I am not a literature or a film studies scholar, but I'll try. Let's talk about *Elysium*, for instance, which is a Hollywood kind of movie that I have been studying, especially because it intertwines two themes that I'm really working on: the environmental crisis, but also migration. Well, you can say that it is a utopia, in a sense, because... Can I insert a spoiler?

BSG: Yes, I think so.

MA: In the end, the migrants are able to break into this Elysium, some sort of satellite where the rich people live. It will become flooded by illegal spaceships arriving and bringing migrants. That's a utopia. It's the kind of revolutionary move that I would like to see. However, it's also a movie with this white male hero, played by Matt Damon, who saves the girl. Can I say it's my ideal kind of narrative? No. Can we say that ideal narratives don't exist? Yes. Maybe we just need to deal with what we have. And I do believe that *Elysium* is better than other terrible movies, even though it's still problematic.

BSG: I thought of a couple of films, also from Hollywood, where, as you say, you often find the "white savior" kind of narrative. Still, there are a few interesting Hollywood movies dealing with wasting relationships, like *Michael Clayton* or *Dark Waters*.

MA: I watched that film, yes.

BSG: I think *Dark Waters* is both realistic and hopeful. In fact, the protagonist, Robert Bilott (Mark Ruffalo), seems to be a low-key, normal guy.

MA: I met the actual guy, Rob Bilott. He was the keynote speaker at the World Environmental History conference in Florianopolis before the pandemic. I liked the idea of a keynote speech that was not the usual boring stuff... Let me give you another example, a TV series that is not American but Brazilian: *3%*. In the series there is some sort of island called Offshore where the rich people live. Again, both in *Elysium* and in *3%* you have this perfect world in which even diseases have been cured, magically cured, and then you have the global dump at the heart of the earth. However, in *3%* some kind of utopia is described. They build something called the "Shell," if I'm not mistaken, a community in the middle of the desert with some technology thanks to which they are able to survive. It's very communitarian; in fact, it looks a bit like commoning. And yet, *3%* is also problematic because it's a neoliberal narrative. I actually stopped watching the series because I got very angry and I started talking back to the TV set, and then I realized that it was a bad sign—for my health, my mental health—that I had started to





interact with the characters on the screen. Anyway, my point is that, in 3%, you have the bad guys—no discussion—and then you have the revolutionary army, called “a causa”—“the cause”—who are bad as well. And I really don’t like this. It looks like the political correctness of our times: “Sure, those people are terrible, but people fighting back are terrible too.” Why? I am a very simple guy, you know. I am the kind of person that says that there were the Nazi fascists and there were the partisans, and the partisans were right and the Nazi fascists were wrong. The rich are bad because they are eating up all the resources in the planet. I am not very sophisticated. You might say I see things in black and white, and I agree. Another example is Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, where the socialist planet doesn’t look precisely like the place where you would like to move tomorrow. However, the main point with an ecosocialist horizon is that it’s a horizon. It’s not that you get there and you build your social utopia; it’s more that there is a place over there that you try to reach, and what matters is the path going there. Speaking of positive, hopeful narratives, I believe that there are some examples in my book, but, it’s true, they’re not coming from literature or movies. For instance, isn’t it a hopeful story the one about the “resisting lake” in Rome where a working-class community builds a multispecies alliance? Or isn’t it a hopeful story to learn about the Worker’s University in Tuzla, where students are thinking about a different future? Or you can think of Can Sant Joan in Barcelona, isn’t it hopeful? Can Sant Joan is an especially interesting case, because in the end the community won. Although the factory is still there, they won because it’s not a wasted community anymore. For instance, in that community there is now a theater, where they create films, and a poetry festival. You can say, “Marco, I don’t see the connection between the pollution from the factory and the poetry.” Well, you are wrong: the main point is that you are sabotaging the logic which claims that you are getting polluted because you deserve to be. You are saying “We are not a dump.” This is a place where beauty is strong. Beauty is poetry, film, an art exhibition... The power and the beauty lie in the fact that, when the factory tries to buy you out saying “Ok, we can sponsor your soccer team,” you tell them: “Not interested. Our uniform is terrible, we don’t have money, but we are not out for sale. You cannot buy us.” Isn’t that a powerful story? Is it a story in which you win or lose? Maybe the whole point of winning and losing is another neoliberal trick, to make us feel that we are never modern or victorious enough. Maybe the main victory is to escape that very logic. Still, you are right: I couldn’t come up with very positive, optimistic stories coming from literature. In the book I mention McCarthy’s *The Road*. What do you think? Does the novel have a positive ending?

BSG: Well, there are many theories regarding that ending.

MA: (*whispering*) I think they are going to eat the boy.

BSG: I may be naïve, but I’m optimistic about the ending. I think there’s room for hope there.

MA: By the way, I have a dog and my dog's name is Hope. This is because we thought that we needed to raise Hope, that hope is not something that will be given to you, but it requires a lot of hard work, of caring and love.

BSG: So, now, every time you call Hope the word is there, in the flesh, so to speak. That's a great idea.

MA: Sometimes we become a bit upset with Hope, but still we love him.

BSG: He probably doesn't live up to your expectations, but he's still there, right?

MA: Yes. I can also discover that my expectations were wrong, and it can be beautiful that he (Hope) is going wild in all sorts of directions.

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