

2021 Annual Report



Land Acknowledgement and Reciprocity

We work to imagine equitable futures. Futures where nobody is at greater risk of love or harm because of the colour of their skin, where they are from, what language they speak, what religious beliefs they hold, who they love, how they look, or how they navigate the world.

We believe we live in a world that has more than enough natural resources to sustain us if we treat the planet with respect and love.

We believe we live in a country that strives to be a true melting pot of cultures and values diversity.

We believe we can live in harmony with one another and the planet when we work to share responsibility for the problems we face together, rather than focus on the divisions between us.

To do this work, we at the Department of Imaginary Affairs strive towards being an equitable employer, organization partner, and collaborator. We often stumble on this journey and we are grateful for the compassion needed to learn together.

The Department of Imaginary Affairs is situated on the land and waterways that have known human activity for thousands of years, long before it was ever called Canada. We are extremely privileged to live and work on this land and owe gratitude and thanks to every caretaker of the land – past, present and future. We operate on the land within the Dish With One Spoon Covenant. This agreement made amongst Indigenous Nations governs how to share the resources that the land and water provide. At the heart of the agreement is the image of a single dish that holds all the bounty and one spoon to draw from that dish. The agreement that everyone will take only what they need, always ensuring that something is left for those who follow. The Dish With One Spoon agreement remains in effect to this day. We are all responsible to live by these terms.

Many Indigenous Peoples refer to North America as Turtle Island. The story of Turtle Island is one of identity, belonging, origin, and being connected to the land we live on. In this narrative, the story tells us that the world was once entirely flooded and that to make the land we live on today, sacrifices were made. While many stronger and braver animals tried, it was Muskrat that dove down to the bottom of the great sea and gave their life for a single bit of mud. It was then that Turtle offered their back for the land to be formed.

We are an organization that believes in the wisdom of story, and we honour where we come from and how we are connected as core to our work.

We acknowledge that the work we do requires us to centre our values of decolonization, care, and co-design in order to imagine equitable futures. We are actively (un)learning our roles and responsibilities when it comes to how we show up. We are committed to doing the work needed to address and dismantle systems of oppression and racism that exist around us.

The Department of Imaginary Affairs' work would not be possible without recognizing that we are on the traditional territories of the Mississauga of the Credit who are part of the Anishinaabe Nation, the Wyandot Nation, also the Haudenosaunee Confederacy of Six Nations, and many other Nations, recorded or unrecorded. The land we operate on is named Tkaronto - which you might colonially know as Toronto—meaning "where the trees meet the water" or "the gathering place". This land has been the site of human activity for over 15,000 years.

We strive to work in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples based on their invitation, rules of engagement, and boundaries to move beyond reconciliation and towards reciprocity.

Solidarity Statement

For an organization that is rooted in imagining equitable futures, the impacts of systemic racism, oppression, inequality, and inequity is what drives our work.

In 2021, we shared this solidarity statement on our website.

"We work to imagine equitable futures. Futures where nobody is at greater risk of love or harm because of the colour of their skin, where they are from, what language they speak, what religious beliefs they hold, who they love, how they look or how they navigate the world.

We believe we live in a world that has more than enough natural resources to sustain us if we treat the planet with respect and love.

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We believe we can live in harmony with one another and the planet when we work to share responsibility for the problems we face today, rather than between us.

To do this work, we at the Department of Imaginary Affairs work towards being an equitable employer, organization partner, and collaborator. We often stumble on this journey and we are grateful for the compassion needed to learn together.

We stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and with Indigenous communities in our shared work to imagine equitable futures. We take deep responsibility in practicing anti-racism, anti-oppression, and decolonial approaches to our work.

We at the Department of Imaginary Affairs are a community of people with multiple hyphenated identities who have the responsibility to seek truth and reconciliation and move towards reciprocity for harm that has been caused on the stolen lands that we live on.

We acknowledge that the work we do requires us to center our values of decolonization, care and codesign in order to do the work of imagining equitable futures. We are committed to doing the work needed to address and dismantle systems of oppression and racism that exist around us. We are actively (un)learning our roles and responsibilities when it comes to how we show up."

We see Canada as a place where everyone feels welcome and has a strong sense of well-being and belonging.

Vision

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Mission

The Department of Imaginary Affairs is a national nonprofit organization. Our mission is to understand the evolving definition of what it means to be Canadian from new and developing Canadians.

Our work is centered around elevating and amplifying the voices, stories, living experiences and perspectives of Newcomers, Immigrants and Youth (especially those who identify as Black, Indigenous and/or People-of-Colour) and their visions and values that will guide us towards the equitable futures we are imagining.

We believe that Newcomers, Immigrants and Youth make up a majority population within Canada who are often underestimated when it comes to the design of empathetic programs, policies and services.

We define "new" as Newcomers, Immigrants and first-generation Canadians; individuals who have chosen to call Canada home, at least for now. About 1 in 5 individuals in Canada are foreign-born bringing their own culture, languages, and stories with them.

We define "developing" as Youth; individuals who are growing up in Canada. Approximately 25% of Canada's population are youth who are more diverse, connected, socially engaged, and educated than ever before. Our aim is to see the equitable futures we are imagining come to life.

Board of Directors

President Alexandra Tamiko Da Dalt

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Program Manager Mathura Mahendren

Storytelling Caretakers Ari Para

Chloe Kirlew

Darren James Aning Deluxson Yogarajah

Dolkar Lobsang Elvin Velasco Shemar Barnett



Photo Description: DIA Team and Partners playing "What if Parks Were Designed By Us?" participatory planning simulation

Photo Credits: Trevor Haldenby

CEO's Message

Phew! In so many ways 2021 felt like a pivotal growth year for this little organization.

As an organization rooted in imagining equitable futures and geographically located in Toronto, Canada, we were grappling with how to show up as humans as well as an organization.

Toronto lays claim to some of the longest closures due to COVID-19 in North America. As we toggled back and forth between lockdowns and reopening, I thought 2021 might be the year where we would start to see different actions taking place as the talk of recovery circulated.

As a nation, we witnessed the unearthing of Indigenous children's bodies on the lands of residential schools, increased acts of racism, and violence against unhoused people.

We also witnessed momentary expressions of collective grief and sorrow, before "we," as a so-called country, returned to the unified rhetoric that "as long as we are better than our neighbours 'down south'...", then things aren't so bad here. As if systemic racism, oppression, colonization, and white supremacy didn't live here too.

This continues to be a master's tool.

In 1984, civil rights activist, radical feminist and poet Audre Lorde shared these words "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."

At the DIA, we look to these words as a reminder that we exist within systems of power and oppression and that to do the work of imagining equitable futures, it is our work to name and dismantle those systems where we can.

In 2021, the response from our organization was to start creating larger containers for our questions and frustrations and strive everyday to show up and imagine equitable futures in the best ways we can.

We grew our thinking around participatory placemaking, collective futures, moving beyond reconciliation, capturing narrative-based evaluation, and integrating care into our daily operations.

This has not been as easy as it comes across in an annual report.

One of the ongoing inside jokes within this organization (especially when bringing on new staff), is how much I dislike being the "boss." This is mostly because I have not personally had a great deal of positive experiences with top-down leadership models, and so I strive for a collective model.

This year was my first full year leading this organization as a solo-CEO.

As the leader of this organization, I am in awe of the work we have been able to do and the voice we have gained for ourselves as we amplify the stories gifted to us along the way.

While our team changed several times over the year, I am grateful and proud of each person who came in and offered their wisdom and changed pieces of the way we work.

When I reflect on all that happened in 2021, I am flooded with emotions of how we have been able to grow as well as the challenges we have overcome as an organization.

I know Annual Reports are typically supposed to capture the successes of an organization and, while this report mostly does, I feel like it is important to be truthful to say that this work took a great deal of care and that the stories behind each of these snapshots is rich and complex.

I will end this message with an invitation to reach out if you'd like to learn more about those stories.

Take (self) care,

Jenn

Message from the Board

Looking back on 2021 is both challenging and energizing. In the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, communities grieved, persisted, and began to rebuild. Department of Imaginary Affairs was no different—facing new challenges, experiencing new joys, and continuing to imagine new futures and a different world.

The DIA team set in motion a number of exciting projects, installations, and programs this year. A focus on grief and space guided much of the organization's work, with the team exploring how Newcomers' experiences with loss were shaped by migration and language.

A Tale of Two Parks asked, "What if public parks were for everyone?" and encouraged participants to engage differently with the green spaces in Tkaronto and their role in the lives of Newcomers and Youth.

The Elevate & Amplify conference offered a virtual platform to highlight the voices and Black, Indigenous, and people of colour in social innovation, and the Stories of Us continued to branch out its impact in exciting ways and reach new readers.

We are energized for the year ahead and the possibilities it holds for our organization and its growth.

The DIA board welcomed new members with valuable experiences and insights to lend to our work. We are imagining how our engagement and governance work might look different and evolve as we move forward.

We are wishing you and your loved ones care, warmth, and safety. Thank you for the interest in, and support of, DIA's vision of the future.

Sincerely,

Alex, on behalf of the DIA Board of Directors

Wayfinding through our work

We describe our work as designing artifacts of the future.

Making programs, policies, services, solutions that we imagine existing and then working to unpack why they didn't already exist, and at each of those artifacts needs in order to thrive and survive.

We aim to create tangible versions of the futures we imagine so that we may provoke and spark change.

We have come to see as projects as multi-pronged versions of bringing our imagined futures into reality.

Here is a legend for understanding the ways we categorize our work:



Project

A time-bound container that we put around our work, which includes roles, tasks, timelines, deliverables, partnerships, and ideally budget



Product

What is created through our work



Process

How we approach our work through principles of care and reciprocity



Vision

The systemic change we imagine being created and catalyzed based on the work we have invested in









The Stories of Us

"The word that comes to mind in this meeting is "group therapy". In this meeting people have the chance to share their emotional experiences. I appreciate that you prepared this meeting. It's a good feeling to be here and sharing my experience. Thank you." - JUMP Program Participant

Closing a Chapter

When The Stories of Us started as just an idea in 2017, we didn't realize the impact this project would have.

The Stories of Us as a project aims to create accessible, relatable and representative English-learning materials for adult learners. We have done that through the creation of the first—and only—English-Learning Library in Canada filled with stories told by and for Newcomers and Immigrants. In order to create the library, we designed a storytelling process that grew Newcomers' and Immigrants' confidence in their own ability to share their stories. As a vision, The Stories of Us represents a future we imagine existing where every Newcomer and Immigrant sees themselves represented within the learning materials and communities they interact with in Canada.

In 2021, we closed the first chapter of The Stories of Us project aligned with the initial funding we received from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. In this final year of the first chapter, we focused on building as much scaffolding for sustainability that we could knowing that this project requires more funding to fully exist.

We ran train-the-trainer workshops, certified trainers, spoke and shared at multiple conferences, partnered with other organizations to build new resources and captured a month of artifacts of how this project has impacted facilitators, participants and co-designers.

Snapshot of The Stories of Us in Numbers

# of participants	
# of workshops	105
# of stories in SOU library	159
# of languages in SOU books	18
# of ESL teachers we co-designed with	26
# of SOU curriculum downloads	75

"This marks the end of a really significant chapter for our organization. For those of you who might be newer to learning about the DIA, in 2017, Blair and I were just starting to figure out what kind of organization we wanted to be (a design challenge that continues to evolve). It had been 2 years since we first started the organization, we had taken a bit of a break in 2016 to do some strategic thinking, and because I was on Mat Leave with my first babe. So in 2017, we were both in full generator mode and ready to brainstorm what we could do within the DIA." Jenn Chan, CEO, "Saying Goodbye (for now)" blogpost



Photo Description: Stories of Care participants in the park for story sharing circle

Photo Credits: Jenn Chan









Stories of Care

"The Stories of Care program gave the Filipino care workers **a platform to share their pandemic stories** as well as showcase their talents. Given the program's workshops and community building activities, it must have been a horizon-expanding experience for them." - Program Observer

"Being chosen to be an artist for the Stories of Care project was a healing journey for me as a queer, non-binary, 1.5 generation Filipinx-Canadian-Immigrant-Settler, and having an mother who likes to think they were not a caregiver to my 2 cousins when we first immigrated here in November 1997. Holding the stories of these Filipina care workers was important for my own healing and understanding of what my own mother's story may be during that time period of her life. She left her entire family back home to pursue a "better" life for her children, where she took care of not only myself, my two siblings, cousins, and my father's extended family, she was trying her best to take care of her well-being especially in a long period of isolation from community. Being able to visually interpret Ate Leny's story empowered me to listen more to my own family's stories & how I can preserve them with as much care & nuance in how I held Ate Leny's & how Jenn supported me & the Filipina care workers in the process. The care that Jenn provided throughout my journey as an artist was something I will never forget, especially when they reminded of my craft, my story, and how doing this not only preserves & amplifies one story, it helps bridge generations together for intergenerational healing & listening to the impacts that imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism, and feudalism has done to my own motherland The Philippines. It is to recognize these cistems and do our utmost best to help support transformative change to happen in ensuring liberation occurs for my peoples." - Elvin Velasco, Artist for Stories of Care

Amplifying Narratives

The aim of the 'Stories of Care' project is to capture and amplify the stories of Filipinx/a/o care workers and the impact of the pandemic upon their lives. So far, the project has revealed stories of employment, unemployment, family, grief, healing, community, and resilience.

In 2021, we amplified narratives. Through the stories collected around care in 2020, we were able to hire 3 Filipinx Youth Artists to participate in a digital installation to bring the written stories and narratives of care workers to visual format.

We added 5 books to The Stories of Us library in Tagalog, and we continued to share about Stories of Care through public media appearances and professional development presentations.

This project is built on individual stories, relationships, and trust. The work is centered on acts of self-care as parts of community care and the evergrowing tension between advocating for yourself and being grateful for what you have.

Through the "Stories of Care", we connected with nurses, live-in caregivers, childcare providers, dietitians, therapists, community organizers, mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, and artists.

We created a digital art installation, added 5 stories to The Stories of Us library, made a zine and shared the work of "Stories of Care" on OMNI Television, The Philippine Reporter, CTV, and Global News, as well as settlement sector conferences, UBC, and Waterloo Architecture School.

Snapshot of Stories of Care in Numbers		
# of participants	33	
# of workshops	10	
# of media engagements	10	
# of professional development workshops	3	

"This project, as well as many others in the past year, has made me begin to explore and learn more about trauma-informed design practices. Up until a few years ago, I believed it was enough to integrate community development and people-centred design practices and tools together to do this work. I no longer think that is true. Especially in communities that are already over surveyed and over-researched in colonial ways, I think it is extremely important to be critical of the approaches that are recognized and celebrated as innovative. This project was built on relationships and trust, the stories that were shared on paper were not the same as the ones shared verbally or confidentially. As a designer, researcher and project lead, it is my job to keep their stories safe until the individuals are ready to share them. Sharing a story under duress is a tool of colonization and can be retraumatizing." - Jenn Chan, CEO, quote from "Stories of Care" project page

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Elevate & Amplify Conference

"For me, it's about the fact that believing survivors in society is something that does not entirely exist. A lot of places are not survivor-centric and trauma-informed, even if some of the work they're doing is for survivors of trauma... dealing with racism and sexism when you are going into spaces to do a particular kind of work and you encounter misogynoir, white supremacy, and paternalism. It becomes harder to work with folks because they might not see the thing you're doing as important. We see several instances where Black women or women experience violence from extremists who have a hate for women. This is where that comes from. Sometimes it exists in spaces that are supposed to be offering that support and that healing." - E&A panelist

Beyond What We Know

In 2021, from a place of frustration, we launched the Elevate & Amplify Conference. Elevate & Amplify, a virtual conference centered Black, Indigenous and People of Colour voices within design and social change, happened on June 3rd, 2021.

We hosted and curated the Elevate & Amplify Conference to bring together practitioners within Canada (and beyond) who are seeking ways to critically think about their roles and experiences within social innovation and design.

Elevate & Amplify is an artifact of the future. Elevate & Amplify is a product and a vision.

This conference demonstrated that the white-led social innovation and design spaces that we are accustom to have been harmful in more ways than one and that we are able to create new versions of what we are craving.

Through a virtual conference, we brought together 11 BIPOC panelists to share their experiences through 3 panels followed by a social networking event.

Summaries of Panels

- 1. Navigating Systems that are not Designed for Us a panel of "recipients" engaged in design processes who are charting their own paths and designing alternatives
- 2. **Beyond Broken Promises of Co-design** a panel of designers who have adapted their practices and approaches to engagement as they learn from failure
- 3. Now what how do we do Systems Change? a panel of those leading systems change work who grapple with the tension of solving immediate/urgent problems and long-time change

We created an example of a conference where all the speakers identify as Black, Indigenous and/or Person of Colour where every speaker received the same speakers' fee and there were different tiers of paid tickets depending on attendees' individual access to financial supports at the time of the conference. Every panel was recorded and shared on YouTube.

of BIPOC panelists # of virtual conference attendees % of attendees who self-identify as POC 11

"As a person of colour, an Asian woman, in the nonprofit sector and in the world, I have been feeling really exhausted, frustrated, infuriated, and anxious about the weight and responsibility to be responsive each time something happens.

CONTENT WARNING: Listing of acts of racism.

It has been over a year since the murder of George Floyd, there has been an exponential increase in anti-Asian hate crimes, the attacks on Gaza, then the discovery of several mass graves Indigenous children was unearthed at residential schools and then an act of Islamicphobia in London, Ontario. This list is nowhere near the extent of continuous racial, social inequities and crimes that have occurred in the last year, but also over generations of colonization and oppression.

The constant reminder of white supremacy is relentless.

I find myself craving information, trying to learn, wanting to take action but so unclear of what I could possibly do to make change at this point.

I am a settler on stolen land. I benefit from white supremacy too. I can choose to retreat within my privilege and comfort. Words are not actions. Thoughts and prayers are not enough. We need policy and systems change.

The work we do requires us to do a lot of emotional labour alongside mental labour. We will not be able to think our way through this work. We need to feel it too." - Jenn Chan, CEO, "Why I have superhero hair" blogpost







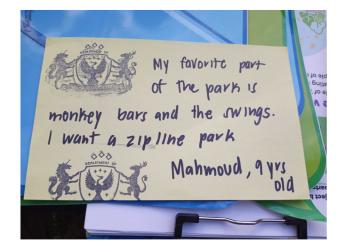




Photo Description: Collection of photos from talking to people in Dentonia Park

Photo Credits: Ari Para









A Tale of Two Parks

"Thank you for remembering Shwasti and the work you did for us." - Nadira Dolly Tasbussum, President of Shwasti

Amplifying Narratives

In 2021, we launched A Tale of Two Parks as a response to doing parks engagement amidst an ongoing pandemic. We knew there were many untold stories and we got to work finding ways to unearth them.

Through A Tale of Two Parks, we were able to hire a larger team for summer programming.

A Tale of Two Parks is an artifact of the future. A Tale of Two Parks is a series of products, a project, and a vision.

We worked with a team of 7 racialized Youth to support in story sharing, storytelling and story collecting at Dentonia Park (East York) and Edgeley Park (Jane and Finch). The initial goal of this project was to engage with BIPOC Youth and community members that frequent these two parks to get a better sense of the needs of the communities in these areas. As the months went on, this project grew to include an installation, storytelling experiments, several design labs, writing workshops, and zine making projects.

Through the first year of A Tale of Two Parks, our team has captured the stories of Bengali Seniors who reimagined their use of public spaces during the pandemic, piloted a month-long writing program, launched a zine, created a 5 week meet-up in the park program with young people, designed an audio mediation to reflect on individual and collective relationships to parks and land as a part of our ongoing reconciliation work, prototyped a game to simulate participatory parks planning, and started working on an in-person installation.

Snapshot of A Tale of Two Parks Numbers

# of people engaged	
# of workshops	10
# of media engagements	10
# of professional development workshops	3

"When I first started working with DIA as a social researcher for the "A Tale of Two Parks" project, I felt tremendous amounts of anxiety. I had just finished working on a play that I had co-created with a friend that shared my story, focusing on my personal experiences with gender and faith, which at best was met with tolerance, at worst, indifference. I started to worry that my role as a Storytelling Caretaker may be influenced by these experiences. I was anxious that I would start to listen to the stories I collected in the same frame of mind that my stories were perceived in. Having been told that my storytelling experience was "an excuse to use theatre as therapy" or "a self-serving project", I had to work hard to unlearn that that there is no right way to tell a story, and the issues my critics had with my play had little to do with the contents of it, and more to do with who they thought was allowed to share stories. Having this experience in a theatre department at a University known for its out-right racism in a town that is primarily White and Christian, this shouldn't have been a surprise. This experience is what made me gravitate to the role of Storytelling Caretaker/Social Researcher for "A Tale of Two Parks." Ari Para, Storytelling Caretaker, Engaging With Community: Shwasti in Dentonia Park blogpost





Hosting & Holding Grief

"I think when we're learning about grief we need to come from a place of non-judgement. Growing up in Jane and Finch and now working at the Jane and Finch Centre, a lot of people won't understand your experiences, so when you work with BIPOC youth, you have to listen and be receptive to hearing things you're not used to. When people are comfortable with you, they share certain aspects of their life that they would never talk to anybody else about." - Workshop Participant

Grief in motion

In 2021, we initiated a larger research project to understand the grief we are individually and collectively facing, initiated by and exacerbated by the pandemic.

Hosting & Holding Grief is not yet an artifact of the future. Right now, Hosting & Holding Grief is still a vision and a process. We are still learning what might be possible.

Throughout this pandemic, we have been asked, encouraged and mandated to keep 6ft apart from each other for our own safety. The physical distance between us has exacerbated pre-existing (though seemingly newly created) emotional, mental, socio-economic and racial divides that have contributed to a great deal of loss. As a consequence, we as a collective must now contend with how to host and hold grief.

In June 2021, we began this research partnering with a social listening firm to get a broad perspective on how people are publicly sharing (via social media) their thoughts and feelings about reopening.

In the fall of 2021, we learned about grief literacy and ways to think about and design communities of practice around our grief.

In the winter of 2021, we hosted 3 co-creation workshops with Frontline Workers (especially those who identify as BIPOC) and worked directly with Newcomers, Immigrants and Youth.

We ended 2021 synthesizing this work.

Snapshot of A Tale of Two Parks Numbers

# of co-creation workshops	
# of frontline workers engaged	24
# of participants who identify as BIPOC	27

"After the workshops, we took our grief poem and translated it into languages representative of the communities in the Toronto/Scarborough/York West area. While translating the poem into Tamil with the help of my father, I realized how much can get lost in translation, and the way that impacts how people process and deal with grief. The biggest surprise for me while doing the translations was that there is no singular word for grief in the Tamil language." - Ari Para, Storytelling Caretaker, Lost in Translation blogpost











Strategic Planning

"Wow—thank you for this, it was a little turbulent, because oftentimes my voice gets heard, but only to stroke people's egos. However, I feel included in the process nonetheless." - DIA Staff

Learning through growth

We imagine artifacts of the future and then work to understand why those artifacts didn't already exist and what they need in order to thrive and survive on their own.

As an organization where imagination is always the answer, a strategic plan can feel restrictive.

In 2021, we are halfway through our Strategic Planning process and looking at how we can start to see it as an artifact of the future. A document that we can look back on and see that we were headed somewhere that felt right, even if we didn't yet know how we were getting there.

This year we worked collaboratively with our team and Board Members to refine our strategic directions, to revise and hone our vision, mission and values, and to develop scenarios of what else might be possible to sustain our growth.

Snapshot of A Tale of Two Parks Numbers

of brainstorming sessions

10

of virtual post-it notes used

19283523

"I've been in community orgs that have traumatized me; however, I am comforted & safe in this space to be part of this process of dreaming." - DIA Staff

"Happy to puzzle through this. Looking forward to more discussion on all of it." - DIA Board Member

Partners

Our organization has grown because of the vital work of our partners who fill in the blanks to make our visions of the future come true. Our work is not possible without them.









Funders



Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

Immigration, Réfugiés et Citoyenneté Canada



Work of Imagination

We are so grateful for the work of our volunteers, storytellers, artists, partners, funders and every single person who dares to imagine equitable futures.











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