

## *GENDER TRANSITIONS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN VISUAL ART*

**Keywords:** *gender, difference, queer, representation, American visual art*

**Abstract:** *The present study locates its concerns at the intersection of Gender Studies, Queer Studies and visual culture, in order to prove that there is a coherent dialogue between the theoretical discourses about gender and the visual representations of it. Starting from the contemporary theories of gender, the present paper focuses on two instances of representing queer identity in contemporary American photography, which are consistent with de Lauretis's gender-as-representation model and with Butler's gender-as-performance model, respectively. The study also correlates these visual representations with the theoretical descriptions of queerness consecrated by various gender theoreticians in the 1990s. In contrast with previous accounts of lesbianism or homosexuality, which called for the necessity of a third gender, the present study argues that the queer, as represented in contemporary visual art, resists definition and epitomizes a state of permanent transition located in-between the two genders consecrated by traditional Western thought. Transition and transgression are the essential coordinates of representing the queer body, which, by itself, subverts the definite contours of the gender binary. In this respect, the study considers the various descriptions of the human body generated by the contemporary Western episteme, all of which support the relevance of the body as cultural entity. This study also considers the issue of representation as problematic for Queer Studies, which argue that representation is always partial and incomplete, bound to generate stereotypes and inaccurate frames of mind. The visual representation of queerness emerges, in the case of the two artists chosen to motivate this study, as pure subversion, as straightforward challenge of the traditional gender model, as a representation of the unrepresentable, as transition in the process.*

Social science defines identity as a very complex process, which subsumes social, psychological, physiological and historical variables. However, many people will tend to identify with their bodies, as that entity which gives the illusion of stability and reliability, to such an extent as to sincerely believe that they *are* their bodies. Whether they loathe them or take pride in them, people generally feel strongly about their bodies, and about the way in which others perceive their bodies. This emerges as a consequence of the body's visibility, of its exposure to the others' gaze. People are categorized, hierarchized and disciplined on account of their bodies' peculiarities. The body bears physiological inscriptions, such as sex or age, but so much more; it is a receptacle of

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meaning. Clothes, cleanliness, hairstyle, accessories, all contribute to the body's ability of making statements, of entering games of power. Visual arts have always speculated this quality of the human body to reflect culture and ideologies. In fact, the history of visual arts is a very accurate account of how the human body has made transition after transition, from primeval representations of polytheistic deities to the refined masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance and, more recently, to the commercial and ubiquitous display of nudity.

### **The body as cultural entity**

Contemporary society glorifies the body at the expense of all the other constituents of identity. We witness nowadays an obscene, seemingly endless exposure of bodies, continuously used and abused. Mass media abound in images meant to incite and excite through the excessive display of naked bodies. However, these bodies no longer belong to the natural order, as they are the epitome of a society of simulacra, to echo Baudrillard's words. Here, everything can be faked. Beauty, sex-appeal, eroticism and sexual arousal have entered the age of technology and artifice.

However, the significance of the human body exceeds the sphere of visual representation. The history of Western philosophy reveals the fact that the human body represents a site of much interest for metaphysical discourses. Ancient Greek philosophy focussed on the notorious body/soul dyad. Since the Middle Ages until the Renaissance, the body was commonly perceived as the impure, material and inferior component of human identity. It was therefore held responsible for most human misfortunes. Resting on the body/soul union, religion played a crucial part in the stigmatization of the body. The body was considered as the site of devilish passions and was often cleansed and disciplined through a set of practices meant to mortify it and redeem the soul. Thus, the history of religion, and particularly the history of the Church, abound in infamous methods, designed to obscure the body and its passions to the point of erasure. The body thus entered an era of control, discipline, manipulation and confinement, which gradually inscribed upon it political meaning. As Michel Foucault acknowledges,

body and soul, for example, are doubly 'convenient': the soul had to be made dense, heavy, and terrestrial for God to place it in the very heart of matter. But through this propinquity, the soul receives the movements of the body and assimilates itself to that body, while 'the body is altered and corrupted by the passions of the soul. (Foucault 18)

Foucault's philosophical theories are relevant to the present study as they insist on the body's potential to signify. One of Foucault's major contributions to the contemporary episteme consists in the recuperation of the body from the negative conceptual framework it was historically exiled to. In this sense, Foucault's theories represent a point of departure for the present section of this research. With Foucault, the meaning of the human body transcends the limitations of physicality, and enters the arena of discursive practices and philosophical discourse. Thus, Foucault prepares to announce the death of the subject, which stormed through the Humanities in the 1960s:

[...] to man's experience a body has been given, a body which is his body - a fragment of ambiguous space, whose peculiar and irreducible spatiality is nevertheless articulated upon the space of things; to this same experience, desire is given as a primordial appetite on the basis of which all things assume value, and relative value; to this same experience, a language is given in the thread of which all the discourses of all times, all successions and all simultaneities may be given. This is to say that each of these positive forms in which man can learn that he is finite is given to him only against the background of its own finitude. (Foucault 314)

A proper exploration of the body's capacities to signify ought to consider all those non-normative instances, all those transgressions and transitions which actually contribute to the understanding of the body as a cultural entity. In this respect, the female body, as the embodiment of the problematic Other, and the monstrous body, as the visible marker of the unacceptable Other, have both been subject to very strict disciplinary practices and representations meant to comfortably control their difference.

Tracing back a history of the female body in both philosophy and art is a difficult task because of the symptomatic invisibility to which women were confined by the dominant patriarchal ideology. However, within this rigid system of thought, woman was assigned certain fixed roles. These were intended to regulate the politics of intersexual relations and confine her within manageable boundaries. These roles were also imbued with religious connotations, since they could easily be detected in the Holy Bible: the Mother, the Virgin and the Whore. The prevalence of these roles affected the conceptual evolution of the female body.

Just like the monster, the deviant, the female body insinuates difference. From the very beginning, within the logic of the patriarchal system of thought, the female body was perceived as different. Of course, this difference threw woman at the negative end of the dichotomy it generated. Her body was consequently perceived as incomplete, as the inscription of a lack:

[...] about woman and her pleasure, this view of the sexual relation has nothing to say. Her lot is that of "lack", "atrophy" (of the sexual organ), and "penis envy", the penis being the only sexual organ of recognized value. (Irigaray 23)

It would be relevant at this point to bring forward Freud's psychoanalytical theories on human sexuality. Although highly controversial nowadays, they remain the starting point for most contemporary theories of sexuality. Essentially, Freud's theories support the idea that human sexuality stands at the foundation of all human behaviours. Freud claimed that sexuality could account for the vast majority of psychiatric disorders. Freud thus identified sexual desire as the primary motivation for all human activities, defining it as the source of human energy.

The relevance of Freud's theories to the present research lies in the observations he formulated with respect to female sexuality and female psychopathology. Explaining female sexuality as derived from the male one represents the major limitation of his theory. This proves particularly harmful to any attempt at liberating woman from the

phallogocentric dominance. The primacy of the penis in both the male and the female sexual evolutions legitimizes the question of the male referent in physiological terms:

[...] anatomy has recognized the clitoris within the female pudenda as an organ homologous to the penis, and the physiology of sexual processes has been able to add that this little penis which no longer grows behaves in the childhood of the woman like a genuine and real penis, that it is the site of excitations which leads to its being touched, that its excitability gives the sexual activity of little girls a male character, and that it needs an effort of repression in the years of puberty to make the woman develop through discarding this male sexuality. (Freud *Collected Papers* vol. 2 67)

Following the patriarchal line of thought, Freud echoed thus, in a scientifically documented demonstration, the tenets of ancient philosophers. He acknowledged male sexuality as being the norm, underlining the gulf between male and female. His theories decisively contributed to the perception of woman as deficient. His view about the beginning of sexual differentiation consisted in attributing both men and women a penis. This would, according to him, represent the starting point for both sexualities. For women, however, this was to turn into an unavoidable lack:

It is precisely in that sexual constitution which we must recognize as a normal one that the penis is already in childhood the governing erotogenic zone, the most important autoerotic sexual object, and the estimate of its value is logically reflected in the impossibility of imagining a person similar to the self without this essential part. (Freud *Collected Papers* vol. 2 55)

This female, defective, but obscure, sexuality is indicated as the origin of exclusively feminine psychiatric disorders, which are the subject of a large part of Freud's research. Hysteria, anorexia and bulimia are the most representative.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that feminists have repeatedly attacked Freud's phallogocentric discourse. In doing so, they tried to dissociate themselves from any discourse which situated woman at the negative pole. However, Freud's theories about female sexuality reflect the general conception of traditional Western thought. If women want to create a discourse of their own, they have to exit the paradigm of men's discourses about women.

It is particularly interesting to note that the female body, as incomplete or defective as patriarchal discourses describe it, also represents a site of horror and of obscure powers. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud admitted that under certain circumstances, the female body becomes a locus of power, as well as a source of horror generating power:

The countless taboo regulations to which the women in savage communities are subject during menstruation are said to be due to a superstitious horror of blood, and this is no doubt in fact one of their determinants. But it would be wrong to overlook the possibility that in this case the horror of blood also serves aesthetic and hygienic purposes, which are obliged in every case to cloak themselves behind magical motives. (Freud *Totem and Taboo* 115)

In this particular case, Freud managed to grasp the complexity of female sexuality and of the female body. Much later, feminist criticism was to enlarge on the monstrous feature of female difference, claiming that the female body is essentially perceived as anomalous:

If we define the monster as a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-à-vis the norm, then we can argue that the female body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror. This logic of attraction and repulsion is extremely significant; psychoanalytic theory takes it as the fundamental structure of the mechanism of desire and, as such, of the constitution of the neurotic symptom: the spasm of the hysteric turns to nausea, displacing itself from its object. (Braidotti in *Writing on the Body* ed. Conboy, Medina, Stanbury 65)

Feminist theory also claims that such horror is due to the anatomy of the female body, and particularly to that of her sexual organs, which are less visible, and therefore more obscure. In this sense, Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One* is perhaps the most compelling demonstration. As always defined according to male parameters (Irigaray *This Sex Which is Not One* 23), the female body entered the arena of disciplinary practices meant to contain its ambiguity. This may certainly account for women's historically domestic confinement and for their subsequent absence from the discursive arena.

Thus, the difference of the female body emerges as ambivalent. It is held responsible for women's oppression in its defective aspect, but also encloses the seeds of women's empowering in its aspect of mystery and horror.

Within the theoretical framework of contemporary discourses about the female body, one voice in particular stands out: that of the British critic of Australian extraction Germaine Greer. Greer's aggressive discourse insists on the prevalence of the body in shaping the female identity and experience. Her 1970 theoretical investigation of womanhood, *The Female Eunuch*, caused much controversy. Its main statement was that women could only achieve emancipation if they started with their sexual liberation. Strongly reminiscent of de Beauvoir's radical theories, Greer's considerations on the female body display a powerful note of anger and revolt. Surprisingly, this is not targeted, as one would expect, against men, but against women. In claiming themselves feminists, women have ironically contributed to the mutilation and the atrocities performed on their own bodies. Although too radical, Greer's considerations stress the importance of the body as the primary component of female identity:

A woman's body is the battlefield where she fights for liberation. It is through her body that oppression works, reifying her, sexualizing her, victimizing her, disabling her. Her physicality is a medium for others to work on. (Greer 135)

According to Greer, one is born a whole woman, but gradually becomes disabled through a number practices meant to conveniently define who she is:

a woman who did not exist to embody male sexual fantasies or rely upon a man to endow her with identity and social status, a woman who did not have to be beautiful, who could be clever, who would grow in authority as she aged. (Greer 6)

The female body and the monstrous body share thus a dangerous proximity in their relationship to the norm. As an allegory of the transgressive nature of the female body, the freak overtly challenges stereotypical representations of the body. As “a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-à-vis the norm” (Braidotti in *Writing on the Body* ed. Conboy, Medina, Stanbury 67), the monster displays a significant potential to make anti-normative statements. Despite its exclusion from central structures and its marginalization, the freak remains an entity whose abnormality paradoxically places it in a central position. When institutionalized, the freak becomes the central object of display, due to the visibility of its difference. Consequently, its discourse, far from being whispered, is always shouted. This is also the case of the queer, whom society has comfortably normalized as monstrous.

### **A Problematic Difference: the Queer**

Discussing female difference with respect to a male referent is relatively devoid of conceptual complications. Conceiving of a difference within sameness, however, requires a higher degree of abstraction, and proves problematic. In the male/female binary, each of the two terms is conceived as unitary and homogeneous. This is what stands at the root of the critique launched by recent feminist theories, which wish to exit the binary, and entirely reconsider female experience.

The normative and exclusionary character of the “Man” and the “Woman” category represents the starting point for my discussion of queer sexuality and identity in visual arts.

The recent emergence of queer, gay and lesbian theories on the arena of contemporary Gender Studies illustrates the need for the reconfiguration of the traditional gender binary. This finds itself in the awkward position of accommodating a third term, which places the binary under the imminent threat of dissolution.

At his point, I should acknowledge Freud, as one the first theorists having attempted a scientific explanation of lesbian sexuality. In an essay entitled *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman* published in 1920, Freud analyses the case of a young woman who suddenly felt sexual attraction towards other women. Freud’s considerations are rather inconclusive, and far from settling the issue:

[...] it is not for psycho-analysis to solve the problem of homosexuality. It must rest content with disclosing the psychical mechanisms that resulted in determination of the object-choice, and with tracing the paths leading from them to the instinctual basis of the disposition. There its work ends, and it leaves the rest to biological research. (Freud *Collected Papers* vol. 2 230)

Recent theories are in agreement that becoming queer would rather be a matter of choice than of chance. Moreover, they insist on the highly problematic status of the queer. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler addresses this problematic nature of the queer, who finds herself at a loss when attempting a definition of what she is. Butler criticizes Julia

Kristeva's and Monique Wittig's attempts to define the lesbian as a third gender. Such an approach would, according to her, fall under the supremacy of the heterosexual binary. Moreover, she resists giving a definition of what lesbianism is, adding to the confusion which surrounds this matter:

Gender Trouble sought to refuse the notion that lesbian practice instantiates feminist theory, and set up a more troubled relation between the two terms. Lesbianism in this text does not represent a return to what is most important about being a woman; it does not consecrate femininity or signal a gynocentric world. (Butler X)

Such an approach is, despite its apparent inconclusiveness, very accurate. Confining the queer within the rigid limits of a definition would certainly fail to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon. It also impedes upon a proper understanding of queer sexuality and of its complicated relations to the gender category:

Because the lesbian stands outside the category 'woman', her experience of womanliness and its oppressive nature is not identical to that of the heterosexual feminist, who stands within the category 'woman', even if resistantly. Womanliness is not something the lesbian has the option of refusing or reconstructing for a better fit. It is, in our cultural understanding of what it means to be a lesbian, a fundamental impossibility for her. To be a not-woman is to be incapable of being fully a woman and of fitting within a binary sex/gender scheme. (Calhoun 34)

The queer body represents the site of the lesbian's all too often misunderstood identity. As visibly female, the lesbian body challenges the traditional male-female binary:

The lesbian body, [...], is particularly susceptible to appropriation by the mainstream because it is a hidden body a secret body, a taboo body. Such a concealed body can easily be appropriated by the media to sell everything from clothing to magazine subscriptions. Because of its taboo nature, showing the lesbian body can be an effective way to connect the product being sold with images of the forbidden or avant-garde. In this fashion, the lesbian body becomes a sign that can be manipulated in many different ways, not all of them benevolent. (Innes 57)

Innes's remarks grasp what I believe to be an extremely important aspect of queer identity: its ambiguity. Similar to that of the female body, the ambiguity of the queer body forces the destabilization of gender boundaries.

### **Representing the Queer**

The recent discourses of Gender Studies and Queer Studies have appropriated the feminist stance on *representation*. According to this, representation emerges as a violent process. It not only cripples the object/subject woman in order to make her fit its rigid frames, but also confines her to a frozen image. This image is bound to become a stereotype. Moreover, representation is seen as too limited to exhaust the infinite

instances of being a woman. Coextensively, representing the queer is bound to generate type images, but, at the same time, contributes to the visibility of this ambiguous gender category. The visual representation of queer bodies has a double effect: it shocks visually and it destabilizes ideologically. By itself, the queer body introduces the highest degree of subversion of traditional cultural models: it fits neither of the two categories devised by traditional Western thought and thus suspends them both.

Contemporary American visual arts abound in representations of gender in-betweenness, where the problematic body becomes the locus of ideological statements and culture subversion. For my analysis, I have chosen two contemporary American photographers, whose main concern is to visually chart gender transgressions: Molly Landreth and Del LaGrace Volcano

A Seattle-based photographer, Landreth has become famous for her innovative project, *Embodiment: A Portrait of Queer Life in America*, which has been turned into a national and international endeavor as a result of its novelty. For Del LaGrace Volcano, born Debra Diane Wood, investigating gender troubles has been a personal matter, as she herself made the transition from female to transgender. Her photographic work tries to capture the essence of gender transitions in depicting ambiguous bodies or bodies which have suffered mutilations, mutations or disability. I believe that these two instances of contemporary American photography visually support two descriptions of gender which come from the theoretical sphere: de Lauretis's theory of *gender-as-representation* in *Technologies of Gender* (1987) and Judith Butler's *gender-as-performance* in *Gender Trouble* (1990).

Landreth's photography collection *Embodiment: A Portrait of Queer Life in America* puts together various snapshots of anonymous queers across America, in an album which is meant as a documentary of queer life. To this purpose, she chooses to present and represent them in their natural environment, in domestic spaces such as their houses or backyards, many times in quite intimate situations and postures. Landreth's subjects seem to back de Lauretis's statement according to which

gender is the representation of a relation [...] ; thus gender assigns to one entity, say an individual, a position within a class, and therefore also a position vis-à-vis other preconstituted classes. (de Lauretis 4)

Most of them are depicted within a certain relationship: either with their partners, or with the viewer, or, many times, with both. These relationships are the ones which contribute to the construction of their queer gender. Their bodies are turned into cultural entities, into the bearers of gender ambiguity and the recipients of the viewers' gaze. But, unlike in classical representations of female bodies, the domineering, possessing, devouring gaze is subverted and eventually refused. The protagonists simply defy the gaze. Looking at these photographs makes one feel apprehensive, takes one out of one's comfort zone, pushes one at the limits of one's ability to digest image. And this does not occur as a result of any sort of vulgarity or visual excess, but rather as a result of the depiction of a relationship that our cultural background has not taught us. The viewer finds himself in the position of not knowing how to digest what he sees. Traditional



Western culture has normatively linked sex and gender in a continuum and has polarized them in comfortable, secured binaries: male/female, masculine/feminine. Landreth's photographs undo the binary, but also disrupt the sex-gender continuum. They represent the unrepresentable. There is a remarkable and, I would say, deliberate discrepancy between the homey, laid-back atmosphere, and the apprehension that the protagonists introduce in Landreth's depictions. Taken separately, there is nothing odd about them: normal people in very normal, even bland, environments. Put together, in a relationship, they all of a sudden become queer. And this is, I think, where the photographer's art lies. It is this relationship which destabilizes familiar points of reference, recognizable landmarks. The bed no longer welcomes male and female, but male and male, the kitchen no longer nurtures a traditional family, but a queer one, the living-room sofa no longer sits the all-American husband, beer in one hand, and the all-American housewife, but an odd couple of lesbians. The viewer's sight is challenged by the representation of this sort of relation, because he cannot decipher it on the basis of previous cultural input. And this creates anxiety, distrust, concern, but also curiosity. The queer body becomes visibly queer only by entering this relationship.

By way of contrast, Del LaGrace de Volcano's queer bodies are obviously queer by themselves. Because, to me, de Volcano's queer portraits document gender as performance. The *Drag Kings* collection, for instance, features adult men in weird costumes. The idea of carnival is purposefully insinuated, as a transgression of gender boundaries, of social norms, of cultural stereotypes. As a social practice, carnival obscenely emphasizes the bodily dimension in a celebration of what is natural and material. This occurs at the expense of the rational and spiritual, as iconic values of Western tradition. Carnival thus makes the connection with the primary sources of life, creating a flow of vital energy which temporarily liberates people from the artificial constraints of social norms. In this respect, carnival perfectly suits the anti-authoritarian claims of feminine discourses. As Lindley notes,

the history of carnival is that of its triumph over and suppression by the official culture, to which it stands as positive to negative, living to dead, relative to absolute, liberating to enslaving. (Lindley 18)

The carnivalesque is a discursive enactment of the logic of carnival, whose main purpose is to masquerade 'the old idols'. In this sense, Mihaela Irimia's discussion of the canon, in the context of the late postmodern culture, reveals the fact that postmodernism, as a critique of the Enlightenment, presupposes a violent liberation from all norms and canons, which eventually leads to the annihilation of the very foundations of truth (Irimia 58). In fact, I believe that this is a pattern that all newly emerged ideologies follow. Investigating the nature of what she calls *the stimulating difference*, Irimia insists on carnival's potential to foreground difference, as the core of the cultural reversal it enacts. As part of the low strata of culture, carnival performs a paradoxical operation. It both emphasizes the difference and erases it through the temporary abolition of all norms and canons. De Volcano's *Drag Kings* institute the carnival not as a form of entertainment, though, but as a form of serious subversion, a means of destabilizing stereotypical visual

representations of manhood. The *Fierce Femmes* collection does the same with classical representations of femininity. Carnival is accompanied by excess and grotesquery. Perversion becomes subversion. The viewer takes it for granted that he has entered a world of make-believe, where gender boundaries are no longer relevant. There is a visual superposition of iconic elements belonging to both genders in the same photograph. A lavish bra and a plastic penis co-exist within the same frame. Which makes the viewer strongly aware of the photographer's unorthodox intentions. The garish colours which feature in de Volcano's photos are consistent with the underlying ideology of the carnival. Everything is meant to shock and to mock. In *Genderqueer*, this intention becomes even more obvious. Bodies are fully exposed, unclothed, juxtaposed, masculine and feminine interweave to the extent to which they become interchangeable. Queerness is performed loudly, obviously, shamelessly, courageously. There is, however, something artificial in de Volcano's photographs. And I believe that this artificiality is as much a result of the viewer's culturally-biased perception as it is that of the artist's subversive intentions. Gender is primarily performed through body postures and attitudes, but also through clothing and accessories. The body becomes thus a site of ambiguity, a source of anxiety, a parchment whose solid contours disintegrate. There is only transgression, transition, in-betweenness.

But the collection which best renders Volcano's subversive intentions is definitely the one mockingly titled *Classics*. With a series of almost obscene photographs of naked bodies accessorized with all sorts of symbolical items, the photographer clearly mocks at traditional accounts of sexuality and gender generated by the Western episteme. *Penis Envy* features a technically female body, wearing an attached plastic penis and a cap. The white slender body, crouched in a defensive posture, is set against a black background which makes it stand out as an all too obvious statement. A direct reference to Freud's patriarchal account of feminine sexuality, the photograph is obviously a fierce critique. *The Three Graces* target both literary and visual tradition by foregrounding a queer trio of naked, shaved-headed bodies, whose genders remain a matter of inquiry. Far from being attractive in the classical sense of the word, Volcano's three graces introduce the challenge of classical beauty as one of the most powerful criteria in the valorisation of women. Another black and white photograph, *The Three Graces* depicts, in an obvious manner, the quality of the queer to be in permanent oscillation, in permanent transition. So does *Ceremony*, the only coloured photograph in the collection, an overt mockery of the institution of marriage and of the white wedding. The photograph features two embracing ambiguous bodies against a white background, each of them wearing leather costumes used in sado-masochistic role plays. The bridal veil that one of them is wearing represents the only direct allusion to the traditional patriarchal institution of marriage, but is, at the same time, the element which carries the subversion and entailing critique. Finally, the *Hermaphrodite Torso*, a black and white full-scale representation of a naked hermaphrodite headless body, is the visual epitome of that state of transition that Volcano's protagonists share and act out. The in-betweenness is turned thus into representation, as well as performance.

Hovering in between representing queerness and performing it, Molly Landreth and Del LaGrace de Volcano manage to pioneer the visual documenting of queer identity. In their photographs, the body becomes a cultural and political entity which allows for the inscription of the third gender. Consistent with the contemporary theories of gender, their visual representations break the boundaries of limiting binary thought and initiate the critique of traditional Western thought which conceives of the world in binary oppositions. In this respect, they also testify for a transition from a certain frame of mind to another.

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