

**READING BETWEEN THE LAWS:  
LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE  
FRENCH HOMOSEXUAL, 1942-1981**

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On August 4, 1942, the Vichy government under Marshal Philippe Pétain passed an ordinance declaring that the age of sexual consent for homosexuals would be twenty-one, while the age of consent for heterosexuals would remain at thirteen.<sup>1</sup> As the first legal penalization of sodomy in the history of the French Republic, this ordinance remained in the penal code for decades after the fall of the Vichy government and France's liberation in 1945. The law's restrictive nature over homosexual acts was further compounded by the subsequent legislation of July 30, 1960, which authorized the government and police to take "all measures necessary to fight against homosexuality."<sup>2</sup> These measures focused on prosecuting public acts of indecency and again marked a

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Gunther, *The Elastic Closet : A History of Homosexuality in France, 1942-Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Sidéris, "Folles, Swells, Effeminatees, and Homophiles in Saint-Germain-des-Prés of the 1950s: A New 'Precious' Society?" in *Homosexuality in French History and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Merrick and Michael Sibalis, 219-232 (New York: Haworth Press, 2001), 226.

blatant discrepancy between the treatment of heterosexual and homosexual participants. Homosexuals caught and prosecuted for sexual acts in public faced double the penalty of heterosexuals prosecuted for the same crime: six months to four years in prison and a fine ranging from 1,000 to 15,000 francs.<sup>3</sup> Although neither law went so far as to make sodomy a criminal act—as was the case in Great Britain and the United States—these restrictions are still unique within their French context, as they legally defined homosexual acts as separate and more punishable than similar heterosexual acts.<sup>4</sup> Lasting nearly forty years (1942-1981), this period of blatant legislative oppression of homosexuals imposed discretion and invisibility on the male homosexual community. Lacking acceptable outlets for expression, much of their activity was confined to sexual gratification and anonymous encounters.<sup>5</sup>

It is only within the last decade that history, sociology, and “queer theory” scholars have genuinely begun to delve into the complexities of the French homosexual by considering the intersections of national identity, self-definition, and lived physical space. Although there is reticence to explicitly pinpoint any single universal marker of “homosexual identity,” even within the narrowed scope of twentieth-century France, three scholarly frameworks are commonly used to discuss the French homosexual male: (1) how he is regarded in relationship to his unique French national context; (2) how homosexuality relates to the more abstract theories of postmodernism and structuralism; and (3) how the physical space of Paris has defined him.

To best understand the French homosexual, many scholars focus their attention on trying to articulate the relationship between sexual identity and French citizenship, recognizing immediately that these two personal identities must coexist in some way. Edna McCaffrey and

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<sup>3</sup> Gunther, 37.

<sup>4</sup> The nature of the French Republic is to never deviate from their shared French identity, thus it is significant that homosexuals became legislatively isolated, as it is a blaring distinction in the French legislative context.

<sup>5</sup> This essay places two immediate limiting factors on the discussion of French homosexuality. The first is that the history of the homosexual will be limited to post 1942, focusing on life under the law’s restrictions. The second is that this paper will focus only on male homosexuals due to a lack of literature and discussion of lesbian visibility during the chosen period.

Dennis Provencher focus most on the significance of French national identity, which has its roots in the French Revolution's rallying cry, "liberté, égalité, fraternité." McCaffrey notes that these values of liberty, equality, and brotherhood are so engrained in the French republic that French citizenship, by definition, emulates this continued spirit of equality among its citizens. For example, French legislation provides free and equal access to health care and education for all of its citizens. And although these rights are guaranteed to all French people simply by virtue of their nationality, McCaffrey argues that one negative of this political ideology is that it ignores or is indifferent to potential variations of need among French individuals.<sup>6</sup> In *Queer French*, Denis Provencher explains the implications of this ideology for French homosexuality. Because the French government focuses only on universal rights, it does not protect or embrace mobilization of specific group and identity politics.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, Provencher notes that French homosexuals in the modern context seem to resist community mobilization and identification with the familiar discourses of "queer" and "pride." Unlike in the United States, where these words embody empowerment and activism, they mean very little in France—French homosexuals live in a political system that values similarity over difference, and provides equal protections, not specific ones. For Provencher and other scholars, this distinction is critical for understanding the French homosexual. True, a man may be gay, but he does not identify with a "gay community," and this gay community does not receive specific political rights. Instead, he is first and foremost a French citizen, benefiting from the political protections of his citizenship only.

Focusing exclusively on the French homosexual's national identity, however, ignores the significant influence of the twentieth century's intellectual restructuring on the legitimization of homosexuality. For example, postmodernism and structuralism paved the way for theories

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<sup>6</sup> Edna McCaffrey, *The Gay Republic: Sexuality, Citizenship and Subversion in France* (Vermont: Ashgate, 2005), 34.

<sup>7</sup> Denis Provencher, *Queer French: Globalization, Language, and Sexual Citizenship in France* (Vermont: Ashgate, 2007), 5.

that recognize and embrace all aspects of identity as socially constructed and fluctuating. Although not engaging specifically in these theoretical discussions, Florence Tamagne alludes to identity politics when he traces the historical emergence of the word “homosexual” as a signifier for a person rather than a sexual act. Appearing in the medical discourse of the late 1890s and the psychoanalytic work of Sigmund Freud and other early psychotherapists, this is the first time homosexuality is defined as a state of being. Despite “medically” defining homosexuals as ill or psychologically deficient in comparison to the heterosexual norm, these psychoanalytic observations were the first to recognize homosexuality as originating in the mind of a person. Rather than existing only as external sexual acts and experimentation, homosexual inclinations were now internal. For Tamagne, this is significant for the eventual formation of the homosexual identity.<sup>8</sup> Once homosexuality becomes a legitimate condition of an individual, it is able to become an identity that can be embraced and harnessed. Following Tamagne’s lead, other scholars point to the emerging theories of postmodernism and structuralism as affording homosexuals further opportunity to self-define and mobilize around new types of rhetoric, which more generally sought to re-imagine identity and human purpose post World War II.

The scholar that pushed the limits of these emerging theories the most has been Michel Foucault, a French-homosexual philosopher, sociologist, and historian who, interestingly, in complete commitment to his identity theories, denied his own sexuality up until his death. Regarded as the father of queer theory, Foucault believed that homosexuality had the unique ability to push the boundaries of sexual identity and expression. Like most of his philosophy, Foucault viewed sexuality as a socially constructed system of power and hierarchy, in this instance as artificially dictated by heterosexual norms. Conversely, he viewed homosexuality as outside of, and free from, this hierarchy, precisely because it was not accepted as “normal.” Moreover, because homosexuality was not a “set” existence defined by the existing social schema—but was, instead, still in a state of becoming—it offered a criti-

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<sup>8</sup> Florence, Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe: Berlin, London, Paris, 1919-1939*, 2 vols. (New York: Algora, 2006), 151-163.

cal and necessary avenue for all human beings to resist the constructed sexual hierarchy that dominated, and artificially labeled, all sexualities. Thus, for Foucault, recognizing homosexuality as legitimate effectively re-imagines culture as an environment in which all desires can co-exist devoid of power structures.<sup>9</sup>

Although Foucault's three-volume work, *The History of Sexuality*, is a well-respected historical and theoretical discussion of sexuality and identity politics, his highly abstract representation of homosexuality becomes an act of reticence in itself. His continual deconstruction of identity leaves only indiscernible fragments that resist not just homosexual identification, but all identification. Thus, it is difficult to utilize Foucault's theories to better understand and explain the French homosexual identity.

Many scholars, however, have found the postmodernist theorist Roland Barthes—best known for his work on semiotics and signs—to be useful for bridging the gap between homosexual theory and lived experience. Rather than focus on deconstructing identity like Foucault, Barthes identifies the unstated signs that make up the physical spaces we live in and examines how these signs correspond with, and dictate how, we operate in those spaces. His theory suggests a symbiotic relationship between space and people, wherein each naturally mirrors the other. Like Foucault, this is also highly theoretical, but Barthes's arguments in "Semiology and the Urban" are particularly useful for our exploration of the French homosexual. In "Semiology and the Urban," he argues that the urban city is "felt as the place of exchange of social activities and...erotic activities in the broadest sense of the word. Better still, the city center is always felt as the space where subversive forces, forces of rupture, [and] forces act and meet."<sup>10</sup> For Barthes, urban space facilitates the needs of our internal erotic. Although not limited explicitly to sexual intimacy, the "urban" is the unique physical landscape that, by its very nature, mirrors our internal landscape of desires.

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<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Random House, 1980), 21-22.

<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, "Semiology and the Urban," in *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Urban Semiotics*, ed. Mark Gottdiener and Alexandros Ph Lagopoulos, 87-98 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 96

Expanding on Barthes's theoretical work on urban gratification, historians like Michael Sibalis seek to understand the French homosexual through his relationship with the Parisian urban. This framework, however, is also problematic, as it becomes a limited exploration of French homosexual identity merely in terms of the pursuit and fulfillment of sexual gratification within Paris. For example, Sibalis addresses both the historical and contemporary reality of the French homosexual by charting the development of his sexual expression and his emerging identity as it is linked to the changing ways he has utilized Parisian urban spaces. As Sibalis notes, public parks, quays along the Seine, and even street urinals have historically been spots for "cruising" and anonymous sexual encounters.<sup>11</sup> Along with these public spaces, private bars, backrooms, and saunas of the 1950s also emerged as known places for sexual gratification. Again, though, there is reticence for scholars to fully embrace this framework as definitive of French homosexuality because it borders on oversimplification. Not only does it ignore the French homosexual experience outside of Paris, but it also dangerously regresses towards defining sexual identity in terms of acts and not *being*, the perspective held before the breakthroughs of twentieth century psychoanalytical discourse.

Despite the fact that this historical framework may oversimplify French homosexuality by focusing too much on these sexual encounters, due to the laws, this *was* the homosexual experience between 1942 and 1981. However, by analyzing these same encounters through literature, the complexities of the French homosexual participating in these sex acts becomes more discernable to the reader. Literature is able to synthesize the historical, cultural, and personal in one common space as it attempts to emulate the complex reality of lived experience. Thus, to better understand the French homosexual's lived reality under the laws, this essay will analyze literature written about homosexual men in Paris during this time period. Focusing on American writer James Baldwin and French writer Jean Genet, two self-identified gay men who both lived and wrote in Paris during this time, this essay will also

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<sup>11</sup> Michael D. Sibalis, "Paris" in *Gay Urban Histories Since 1600*, ed. David Higgs, 10-37 (London: Routledge, 1999), 16

highlight the cultural differences between American and French views of sexuality. Put succinctly, Baldwin's presentation seems shaped by America's conservative tendency to "talk around sex," whereas Genet is most decidedly French in his direct verbalization of the sexual act itself. Although both authors focus on sexual gratification and fleeting encounters amidst the Parisian backdrop, each author's national and cultural perspective inevitably frames his depiction of these encounters, and his understanding of their French participants.

From an American perspective, expatriate writer James Baldwin is the most credible source from which to evaluate French homosexuality during the middle of the twentieth century. As a homosexual who spent most of his life in Paris after 1950, Baldwin's personal experiences inform his fiction's depiction of French homosexuality. His novel, *Giovanni's Room*, published in 1956, focuses explicitly on homosexuals in Paris through the internal struggles of its American protagonist, David. Following David's struggle in choosing between loving his female fiancée, Hella, and the young, virulent homosexual barman, Giovanni, this text offers an accessible commentary of French homosexuality in the 1950s. Moreover, as an American, David's perspective facilitates a comparison of American and French cultural views of sexuality.

When David first meets Giovanni at a fictional bar on Paris's Left Bank, Baldwin's description of the scene not only highlights the reality of the 1942 law being enforced, but also suggests the undertones of sexual gratification motivating the bar's homosexual patrons.<sup>12</sup> Although fictional, the bar is located in the sixth arrondissement, and represents the emerging homosexual establishments of the Saint-Germain-des-Prés area.<sup>13</sup> David's narration also suggests the very real presence of police raids during the period. He describes how Guillaume, the bar's owner, always seemed knowledgeable enough to successfully warn his favorite patrons which nights were best to "stay at home."<sup>14</sup> David's observation of the bar's patrons highlights two "types" of

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<sup>12</sup> James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (New York: Random House, 1956), 26-27.

<sup>13</sup> Sidéris, 220.

<sup>14</sup> Baldwin, 26.

homosexuals that were quite common in the contemporary Parisian homosexual community. For David (and Baldwin), both of these “types” play a specific role in the sexual encounter. Both Guillaume and Jacques, David’s friend, are described as older and well dressed, yet noticeably lacking the virility of youth. These two men play the role of the established, older pederast—the pursuer of younger males. Waiting and willing to receive this attention are the bar’s other patrons, whom David describes as the young, effeminate *folles* (birds). Dressed much like women, gossiping with each other in high-voices, they, too, play a role, hoping to obtain the approval and attention of men like Guillaume and Jacques.

Baldwin’s focus on pederasty—the sexual practice of an older male courting the younger in a symbiotic relationship of sex and education—in *Giovanni’s Room*, is historically and contemporarily representative of Parisian homosexual activity.<sup>15</sup> During the 1950s, the area of Saint-Germain-des-Prés emerged as the first area in Paris where homosexual males began to visibly congregate at specifically identified homosexual bars and restaurants, a change from previously “cruising” parks and the Seine. Most of these males were the younger, more effeminate *folles*, whose visible portrayal of their homosexuality mirrored the visibility of the bars they frequented. David’s condescending narration of them, however, reflects the opinion of Baldwin and an older generation of French homosexuals, who viewed these young gays with disdain for abandoning their masculine virility in favor of what they viewed as a performance of the inferior feminine. Retrospectively though, French scholar Georges Sideris credits these effeminate homosexuals, through these outlandish performative acts of visibility, as the first French homosexuals to successfully show marked resistance against the laws.<sup>16</sup>

Characteristic of his conservative American values, Baldwin never has David explicitly say that sex is the goal of these “performances” between the *folles* and the older men, even though the intention is clear

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<sup>15</sup> Dennis Altman, “Paris” in *The Christopher Street Reader*, ed. Michael Denney, Charles Ortleb, and Thomas Steele, 224-230 (New York: Coward-McCann Inc., 1983), 225.

<sup>16</sup> Sideris, 222.



to the reader. Baldwin's self-censorship suggests an unspoken sexual aspect to the French homosexual display that his American perspective does not fully condone. This hesitation is explicitly emphasized in a conversation between David and Jacques, which isolates a fundamental cultural difference between American and French opinions of sex's role in (homosexual) relationships. Steeped in his American, sexually conservative perspective, David attacks Jacques' sexual behavior, inquiring, "Is there really no other way for you [to love] but this? To kneel down forever before an army of boys for just five dirty minutes in the dark?" Jacques directly challenges David, however, justifying his sexual activity as meaningful, responding, "if you think of them as dirty, then they *will* be dirty—they will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his."<sup>17</sup> For Jacques, there is no shame in sex. His perspective reflects a more general French cultural view of the act itself, which unabashedly acknowledges the beauty of the physical.

Regarding French homosexuality and the arts, admiration of the physical is most clearly represented in Jean Genet's iconic twenty-five minute film *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950).<sup>18</sup> Set in an unnamed prison, the film is a visual ode to the beauty in the physical manifestation of male homosexual love. The film focuses on the sexual seduction between prisoners, a prison guard's voyeurism, and repetitive images of masturbation, coupled with the imagery of prison walls as both physical and symbolic barriers between male-to-male connections. These components represent the French homosexual reality from 1942-1981. Genet's artistic vision of the French homosexual contrasts Baldwin's, beginning with his focus on a sex that Baldwin could not even face. Genet's characters are empowered and uplifted through sex precisely because it is the unique physical manifestation of their sexual identity. Although the film is composed of separate, graphic vignettes of males pleasuring themselves or other males, its tone is anything but pornographic. Rather, the ultimate inability for these men to reach through

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<sup>17</sup> Baldwin, 56-57.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Genet, dir., *Un Chant d'Amour* (A Song of Love), DVD (Wea-des Moines Video, 2007). The original film was released in 1950.

the prison walls that separate them is a tragic rendering of futile pursuits of fulfillment and thwarted homosexual love. This must be seen as Genet's artistic resistance of the anti-sodomy laws, which wrongly punished and imprisoned men for merely desiring to embrace and love another, and further stifled and debased the beauty of the sexual act itself—contradicting French cultural values.

Just as with *Un Chant d'Amour*, Jean Genet's life and writings have done more to distinguish and uplift the French homosexual identity than any other man's in the last fifty years. The key homosexual author of his time, Genet's literature unequivocally pushed the French homosexual towards unashamed self-identification and representation between 1942-1981. Largely shaped by his own homosexual development under the laws, as well as his learned cultural embracing of sex, Genet's literary focus is always on the sexual. His fiction embraces the sex act by presenting male characters that unabashedly describe their sexual fantasies. Genet's focus on the sexual encounter is also an act of political resistance. Every time he writes a character that is unafraid to pursue and feel pleasure, Genet uplifts the homosexual, validating and honoring his desires.<sup>19</sup>

Despite this freedom within his literature, Genet's life as a homosexual in Paris under the laws required secrecy, repression, and watchfulness. As his biographer Edmund White notes, Genet himself was an avid frequenter of certain metro and train stations that were known for "cruising" and sexual encounters.<sup>20</sup> Characteristically, "cruising" is sex shrouded in anonymity, and transitory in its very nature. For both participants the connection is often forbidden from the start, and the circumstances for meeting explicitly suggest a mutual desire for sexual gratification. American photographer Duane Michal's famous photograph series *Chance Meeting* visually captures the spontaneity of

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<sup>19</sup> Jean Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 89.

<sup>20</sup> Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 387-389.

such an encounter between two men.<sup>21</sup> Set in an alleyway in broad daylight, the piece is divided into two columns of six photographic frames. It is a progressive series of two mid-aged men walking towards each other. Neither man stops the other as their bodies pass in the fourth frame, but the viewer can sense the shift in tone. Both men appear to be interested in each other. Each subsequent frame shows the two men alternating looks back at the other, never meeting eyes, with each ultimately hesitating in their mutual desire to go back and pursue the connection. Regardless of whether one was French or American, these photographs reflect a common reality for homosexual men between 1942-1981.

In France, this forced silencing of desire due solely to homosexuality gained some reprieve in 1981 when newly elected François Mitterrand and the Socialist Party repealed the restrictive laws of 1942 and 1960. With this new freedom to visibly congregate and express their homosexuality, French men in Paris began to carve out Le Marais, Paris's first neighborhood dedicated to the commercial development of gay-friendly businesses.<sup>22</sup> Despite mixed feelings within the French homosexual community, who feared the explicit development of a "gay ghetto," Le Marais has nevertheless become Paris's gay center. Within this homosexual urban space, which is not raided and legally restricted like Saint-Germain-des-Prés of the 1950s, Le Marais' inhabitants still act like the previous generation; pursuing the sexual encounter is still a priority.

American homosexual Edmund White and his French lover, Hubert Sorin, illuminate this lingering sexual reality present in Le Marais in their co-memoir *Our Paris: Sketches from Memory*. White, a well-known contemporary homosexual writer and cultural voice, describes a typical nightlife scene in Le Marais to highlight the focus on sexual gratification:

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<sup>21</sup> Duane Michals, *Chance Meeting*, photograph series, 1970, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, NY. <http://www.pacemacgill.com/duanemichals-29-4.html> (accessed May 22, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Michael D. Sibalís, "Urban Space and Homosexuality: The Example of the Marais, Paris' Gay Ghetto," *Urban Studies* 41, no. 9 (2004): 1745.

Wolf packs of guys in leather or jeans...stalk down the rue des Lombards. They are on their way from the Quetzal Bar on the rue des Mauvais Garçons (Bad Boys' Street), which quietly booms behind its new bossed and brushed chrome façade like a party in a submerged submarine, to the Banana Café in Les Halles with its go-go boys.<sup>23</sup>

The desire for casual encounters is accentuated in the subtle, sexual dynamic of the men themselves. Although the "types" look different than their 1950s counterparts, this scene still suggests the same sexual performances Baldwin described. The men in leather and jeans, who come from "Bad Boys' Street," stalk towards the Banana Café, in pursuit of its "go-go boys," the more effeminate, yet equally sexualized and willing participants. Other French homosexual contemporaries of White readily agree with his description of Le Marais here. For example, scholar Frédéric Martel acknowledges how heavily Le Marais nightlife revolves around bars, saunas, and backroom scenes, insinuating that sexual gratification is still a main pursuit for French homosexuals.<sup>24</sup>

Accompanying White's text is a corresponding illustration by White's lover, Hubert Sorin. Like White's observations, Sorin's illustration also suggests that Le Marais' homosexuals are concerned with more sullied pursuits.<sup>25</sup> His critique is framed through a drawing of Les Mots à la Bouche, "the local gay and lesbian bookshop" located at one end of rue Sainte-Croix de la Bretonnerie, a central Marais thoroughfare. The store has remained a frequented landmark of the homosexual community since its opening in 1980.<sup>26</sup> Amidst a background of innumerable shelves, labeled only by various sections such as body-art, musculation, bisexualité, and oral, Sorin draws two younger, more casually dressed

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<sup>23</sup> Edmund White, *Our Paris: Sketches from Memory*, illus. Hubert Sorin (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 60.

<sup>24</sup> Frédéric Martel, *The Pink and the Black: Homosexuals in France since 1968*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 204-205.

<sup>25</sup> White, *Our Paris*, 58.

<sup>26</sup> White, *Our Paris*, 58; Les Mots à la Bouche, "Notre Librairie: Historique [Our Bookstore: History]," Les Mots à la Bouche, <http://www.motsbouche.com/> (accessed May 1, 2009). Les Mots à la Bouche is a gay and lesbian specialty bookstore located in Paris.

male caricatures, presumably bookstore and Marais regulars. One male is looking at a drawing of a penis while the other is reading a text that says only “sex, sex, sex.” Sorin’s critique of Le Marais’ gay community is explicit—their homosexuality is preoccupied with “pornography,” the body, and other debased topics.

Although both White and Sorin seem to offer critical opinions of Le Marais, the fact that they do so within a shared literary space might symbolically represent a bridging of the American and French cultural perspectives from previous decades. Moreover, their critique arises from their personal experience as lovers, and homosexuals that have arguably moved beyond the laws and claimed their right to a monogamous, visible, and sustained relationship. Of course, just as with heterosexuals, monogamy is not for every gay man. Still, their dual critique here stems from the same place as both Baldwin and Genet’s previous writings. Regardless of his nationality, culture, or generation, each man writes with the ultimate desire to be uninhibited in his homosexual identity, where the only requirement is that he is free—free to live and free to love.

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