

## Una exploración al concepto de género fluido en algunos poemas de Emily Dickinson<sup>17</sup>

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### Resumen

Emily Dickinson juega un rol fundamental por su contribución a la poesía filosófica, metafísica y teleológica. Sin embargo, la riqueza de su pluma no sólo descansa en las dimensiones anteriormente mencionadas sino, también, desde una mirada que interpela al género como categoría analítica. Si bien resulta fuera de lugar caracterizar la poesía de Emily Dickinson con nomenclatura propia de nuestro período histórico y marco cultural, sin duda, muchos de sus poemas nos invitan a re-leerla a la luz de epistemologías contemporáneas. En el caso de la teoría filosófica feminista post-estructuralista, el género se ha convertido en el centro de discusión en diversas áreas, donde la literatura no se ha restado de dichos análisis.

A lo largo de este artículo proponemos una lectura a una selección de cuatro poemas de la autora tomados de "The poems of Emily Dickinson" desde una mirada interdisciplinaria para explorar el concepto de género fluido a través del corpus seleccionado.

**Palabras clave:** Literatura norteamericana; Emily Dickinson; literatura y género; género fluido

### An exploration of gender fluidity in some of Emily Dickinson's poems

#### Abstract

Emily Dickinson plays a significant role due to her philosophical, metaphysical, and teleological poetry contributions. Nonetheless, her belletristic writing has not only been recognized for the enrichment of the dimensions previously mentioned, but also for her insights that interpellate gender as an analytical category. Even though it might be out of place to characterize Emily Dickinson's poetry with terminology proper from our historical period and cultural framework, without a question, her pieces of work invite us to reread her poetry in the light of contemporary epistemologies. In the case of the philosophical feminist post-structuralist theory, gender has become the center of discussion in many fields, and literature has not been left behind in this topic. Throughout this paper we propose a review on a selection of four Emily Dickinson's poems from "The poems of Emily Dickinson", by means of an interdisciplinary approach, in order to explore the concept of gender fluidity throughout the selected corpus.

**Keywords:** North American literature; Emily Dickinson; gender and literature; gender fluidity

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## 1. Introduction

Many literary studies on Emily Dickinson's literature have been carried out and, also, about the role that she played in the world of North American Letters in the XIX century. In addition to the enigmatic features that have been attributed to her image, there is a special motivation that has led us to study Emily Dickinson's poetry. To get into Emily Dickinson's cosmovision, we need to explore her language and how her particular way to use images, such as nature, has created an erotic belief where deconstructing gender roles -and gender itself- has given us a holistic vision of her poetry. Above all, we need to understand that Emily Dickinson's poetry is not only important for its content and form, commonly associated with the invention of poetic temporal structures that mimic the structure of life (Vendler, 64), but also for its literary context of production. By the same token, some authors have defined the XIX century as a period where the extreme self-consciousness about the varieties of the roles that women played in that time gave as a consequence new ways of expression and literature (Reynolds, 181). In this sense, it becomes necessary to question ourselves: how difficult could have been for a woman to portray her inner world in a highly sophisticated and metaphoric way, to avoid any kind of judgment by society during the XIX century? Multiple answers might be drawn from this topic, all of them from different epistemological places, but what has motivated us to explore in Emily's Dickinson poetry is the subtleness and delicacy to depict the erotic experience(s) through symbols and images that allow the reader to imagine this suggestive reading from an extracorporeal possibility (laying emphasis on the senses), rather than a preconceived notion of eroticism.

As researchers, we want to be both critical and respectful with Emily Dickinson's poetry. In this sense, we based our analysis on several approaches, avoiding misreading her. Moreover, we aimed at portraying Emily Dickinson neither as a feminist nor a

proto-feminist. Rather, we read her as a promoter of new ways of translating an inner world where the relevance that eroticism plays is remarkable enough to explore it in depth. Our respect for the previous analyses and researchers of the Dickinsonian literary tradition is significant, and we would like to contribute to the ongoing discussion of Emily Dickinson's poetry. Having said that, we think that gender studies have become a knowledge source to review new perspectives in Emily Dickinson's poetry, laying special emphasis on the concept of *gender fluidity* that might be present in some of her poems under modern optics and insights.

The relevance of this paper relies on the never-ending challenge to interpret symbols that might have remained hidden in early studies due to the lack of gender perspective, proper of a society that could not see gender beyond corporeality, such as in the case of Emily Dickinson's context of literary production. In our case, we will take post-structural thinking to enrich our literary analyses along with the selection of poems written by Emily Dickinson.

## **2. Corpus and theoretical framework**

To support our study on deconstructing gender in Emily Dickinson's poetry, we have chosen four poems that were taken from "The poems of Emily Dickinson" corresponding to "The Harvard University Press", edited by Thomas H. Johnson, which are the following: "Forbidden Fruit a flavor has" (87); "So bashful when I spied her" (91); "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (260) and, finally, "I would not paint - a picture" (348).

To develop our literary study at the light of a gender perspective, we have decided to include some authors that have bestowed on both gender and historical context on Emily Dickinson's work, such as "Emily Dickinson and popular culture" written by Daniel Reynolds, who explores some patterns in Dickinson's work at the moment of writing. Moreover, one important author that becomes fundamental in the study of gender issues in Emily Dickinson's work is Suzanne Juhasz. We have chosen

from her ample repertory “Writing Doubly: Emily Dickinson and Female Experience” and “Amplitude of Queer Desire in Dickinson's Erotic Language”, which in both pieces she lays a special emphasis on the role that both womanhood and gender play as underlying forces, where hermeneutics has not fully achieved in-depth.

Besides the previous authors, we have decided to include “I'm Ceded: Sexual, Social and Gender Role Rebellion in the Poems of Emily Dickinson” by Maggie Glover, which had helped us to explore dimensions on Emily Dickinson's poetry that dealt with womanhood. In this case, Glover invites us to question ourselves the purpose of the genderless narrator in many of Emily Dickinson's poems to elucidate what kind of message the *persona poética* was aiming to deliver. Finally, “Emily Dickinson Thinking: Rearranging Seriality (...)” by Helen Vendler explains the creation of momentary poetic structures in the selection of poems that are to be analyzed.

Following with our theoretical support, in the last few decades post-structural thinking has brought into discussion how language has not only determined us but also has *created* us. Foucault proposes that “the subject is understood not as pre-existing, self-knowing, and continuous, but as subjectivated through her/his ongoing constitution in and by discourse” (as cited in Youdell, 35). Judith Butler, later on, will take Foucault's discursive framework, but now shifting the reflection on how this metalinguistic concept also shapes gendered identities by means of *discursive performativity*. As part of our proposal, we do believe that making literary revisions from different knowledge sources -such as philosophy, in this case- will enrich both insights and reflections for further literary studies, especially in the case of Emily Dickinson, where she is well-recognized by the power of metaphoric language in her writing.

Judith Butler has brought with her disruptive vision of gender new questions and subjects to be addressed by social sciences and humanities. In their<sup>20</sup> own words, “gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given time juncture in time” (16). In this sense, what Butler (15) is proposing is that gender as a social construction will serve political purposes that are shaped by the era where identities are taking place. Gender, once again, is no longer seen as a natural distinction given at birth, but rather, as a series of practices that end up giving form to our own self-perception as gendered subjects. Once we can conceive gender as a spectrum far from binarism, the figure of Emily Dickinson and her poetry might reveal different images that could have been there a long time ago, but maybe we were not quite ready to decode them as symbols related to the subversion of gender identities.

As a disclaimer, we acknowledge that gender fluidity has also been discussed and reflected under a decolonial perspective. Authors such as María Lugones (87) has widely provided theoretical evidence that aims to prove that along with the colonization process, the binary categories of women/men were created to serve political purposes. According to her -and other feminist researchers- with the arrival of colonizers, the structure of the European (therefore, *burgousse*) State forced indigenous people to mimic their social and political relations that did not function on the spectrum of choices that they had. We have not focused on the decolonial understanding of gender because this approach lays emphasis on an ancestral system of beliefs where gender plays a different role and functions on a different paradigm. Therefore, conceiving gender from the post-structural theory we are closer to make relations between language, gender, and social practices.

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<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler is a lesbian and non-binary person. They prefer the use of neutral pronouns, such as *their* and we respect that choice throughout the paper.

### 3. Critical proposal

We believe it is compulsory to define what will be understood as *gender fluidity* throughout this paper. Nowadays, modern societies tend to be more aware of some lexicon related to the identitarian processes that have been taking place during the past few decades. Nonetheless, there are still some key concepts that are not fully comprehended by many. Gender fluidity, in short, represents an umbrella term to describe possibilities for gender identity beyond the traditional binarism of man/woman (Parker, 166). Among gender fluid people, it is remarkable that they are not restricted by the culturally tied boundaries and expectations towards gender, or what should be to be either a man or woman or anyone in between (Gosling, 76). Accuracy is needed when we are dealing with gender issues since there are some misconceptions concerning identitarian distinctions regarding the LGBTIQ+ community. Gender fluidity is not necessarily tied neither with sexual orientation nor genitalia. On the contrary, it has to do with the identitarian flexibility that characterizes the people who construct their narratives on the spectrum of gender choices.

Our critical proposal is that, despite the existence of vast theoretical support related to the blurred lines that are often present in Emily Dickinson's poetry regarding gender, little attention has so far been given to the possibility of a *gender fluidity* dimension in some of her most remarkable poems. Gender fluidity appears as a means to privilege gender as a sensorial experience rather than a clear-cut distinction between female and male. Understanding gender as portrayed in some of Emily Dickinson's poems, allows us to explore her work beyond the limits of language itself. Having said this, under this contemporary approach some images arise from the *persona poética*, where now absences and ambiguities will bestow Emily Dickinson's work on both philosophical richness and complexity regarding the female experience where gender as a constraint will be challenged in a subtle, yet powerful way.

In the English language "all nouns naming living creatures are masculine or feminine according to the sex of the individual, and all other nouns are neuter" (Baugh

and Cable, 12). Although in conversation with some scholars they had suggested that the English language is somehow neutral, our proposal regarding the *persona poética* navigating gender fluidity among our corpus seeks for an exploratory chance of unveiling whether these mechanisms of playing with gender might have a purpose on its own. In other words, the lack of explicit references to a specific gender in our selected corpus led us to explore these absences as images of a rather complex erotic experience, where the navigation among the possibilities of gender as a spectrum - which represents a post-structural approach to this topic- might be an interesting revision to Emily Dickinson's poetry.

#### **4. *Forbidden Fruit a flavor has*: imagery and self-discovery from a non-binary spectrum**

The first poem to be analyzed from Emily Dickinson's collection is called "Forbidden Fruit a flavor has":

Forbidden Fruit a flavor has  
That lawful Orchards mocks—  
How luscious lies within the Pod  
The Pea that Duty locks— (Emily Dickinson, 1-4)

As it was stated from the beginning of this paper, gender will be seen as an experience where sexuality plays a fundamental role to explore a complex process of self-discovery. According to Maggie Glover (8), this poem can be interpreted as one of the most explicit ones that deal with sexuality in Emily Dickinson's poetry, where there is a clear reference to the female orgasm. Along with the four lines, we can observe a non-identified narrator which explores female sexuality from an outsider viewer that inhabits outside the binary spectrum (she/he). On the opposite, the *persona poética* seems to communicate through the imagery of food the experience of the orgasm "*Forbidden fruit a flavor has*" (1) from a consciousness platform; it is neither a woman

nor a man that is referring to the forbidden fruit but a non-identified *persona poética* that seems to inhabit in the collective belief of women being repressed to enjoy her sexuality as free as they want.

As Maggie Glover (8) suggests in her work, the idea of the food in the pea is a direct reference to a clitoral symbol. In terms of the grammatical composition, the use of the passive voice structure in this poem could lead us to think that the depersonalization of the message is purposeful. Suzanne Juhasz in her paper "Writing doubly: Emily Dickinson and Female Experience" suggests that the oppressed group (women) mediate their beliefs through what is permitted in the patriarchal society. In this case, the dominant group (male) mediates language, and women must speak through it (7).

In general terms, we can see the use of the consciousness plane as a place free of male domination or any kind of patriarchal intervention. Further, Suzanne Juhasz (7) introduces Julia Kristeva, who argues that the repressed unconscious is the only form of consciousness that is truly female since language itself represents the institutionalization of patriarchal thought and dominance, thus, the female orgasm is portrayed through images such as food, to explain that the forbidden fruit should be enjoyed as a means to experience corporeality through the conquer of body autonomy. At some point, we might suggest that by releasing their senses (orgasm), the *persona poética* begins a process of dispossession of any patriarchal tie. Therefore, the erotic experience positions pleasure not only as a mere feeling of rejoice but, also, as a tool to fully achieve the control of their own narrative and agency upon themselves through orgasm, as in this case.

Another interesting feature of this poem is the outsider role that the *persona poética* plays through it. Along with the four lines, we can perceive that their judgment towards this *forbidden fruit* is narrated from a certain distance, as if this experience that causes them both rejoice and guilt could only be thought in the mind of an *other*. In this sense, some relevant insights from Judith Butler (10) can be part of this analysis, as



well. The connection between gender, sexuality, and desire has come to our era to challenge how internalized and perpetuated through history are those things that constitute the basis of gendered identities, laying emphasis on how the normative heterosexualization of desire might be the cause and effect of gender binarism and its asymmetrical position in society (as cited in Butler, 10). In the case of this poem, the otherness from which the *persona poética* speaks throughout the poem can be analyzed at the light of the exclusion of the desire experience: who were not allowed to desire, then? Women throughout history have been penalized by their sexuality, but what if this distance that works as a shelter by the *persona poética* might be the window to explore sexuality in Emily Dickinson's poetry outside the binary spectrum?

### **5. *So bashful when I spied her: the erotic experience and the constant flow of the persona poética***

The second poem to be analyzed in Emily Dickinson's collection is called "So bashful when I spied her":

So bashful when I spied her!  
So pretty—so ashamed!  
So hidden in her leaflets  
Lest anybody find—

So breathless till  
I passed here—  
So helpless when I turned  
And bore her struggling, blushing,  
Her simple haunts beyond!

For whom I robbed the Dingle—  
For whom betrayed the Dell—  
Many, will doubtless ask me,  
But I shall never tell! (Emily Dickinson, 1-12)

In this poem, we find new concepts that deal with the erotic experience allowing us to explore sexuality in a broader scope: secrets, gender fluidity, and shyness as erotic features of personality. In the first four lines, we can appreciate how the *voyeur* experience generates an enigmatic, yet, satisfying atmosphere. In this sense, the relationship between prohibition and pleasure makes of this poem a sequence of intensity through words, generating an *in crescendo* throughout this piece while, at the same time, the erotic element within the poem unveils that the *persona poética* does not only increases their desire as verses go further but also their guilt by the act of it.

As Maggie Glover (8) points out, various lexical resources are used to portray images associated with specific symbols, such as in the case of the clitoral symbolism and orgasmic imagery, where a lover is searching a private yet mysterious object that aims to depict sexuality and nature, but most importantly, the exploration of both. Nevertheless, what caught our attention the most in this poem is the lack of a clear gender distinction in the *persona poética*. There are some scholars, such as Maggie Glover (8), who suggest that the *persona poética* might be a male who is keeping a secret. Although Glover's proposal makes a lot of sense to us, we think that Emily Dickinson plays with gender in a variety of ways, such as in this case, where we cannot identify whether the *persona poética* is a female or a male, both or neither. As part of our analysis, we propose that the *persona poética's* navigation through gender along the corpus let us understand the erotic experience beyond the binary clear-cut distinction between female/male. Rather, this navigation through gender can be read as a complex set of interactions with the one who is being desired and desire itself understood as a self-discovery process.

As can be appreciated in the last verses of this Emily Dickinson's poem, the enigmatic and secret encounter that the *persona poética* is talking about leads us to conclude that the erotic experience relies on the forbidden, and what remains hidden represents the ultimate stage of pleasure. As a final thought, challenging gender roles goes way further than just questioning what it is supposed to be whether a woman or man; it is, also, about taking the risk to explore forbidden areas, such as in this case,

where the secrecy and voyeur shape eroticism as a territory to conquer from the liberation of gender binarism.

### **6. *I'm Nobody! Who are you?: The growth of consciousness by means of the lack of gender notion***

The third Emily Dickinson's poem to be analyzed is called "I'm Nobody! Who are you?":

I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you — Nobody — too?  
Then there's a part of us!  
Don't tell! They'd advertise — you know!

How dreary — to be — Somebody!  
How public — like a Frog —  
To tell one's name — the livelong June —  
To and admiring Bog! (Emily Dickinson, 1-8)

This poem outlines a relevant statement on how gender can be seen from diverse perspectives. Although gender fluidity might be understood as a flow amongst genders, here we can perceive the absolute lack of gender notion in the *persona poética* as an epistemological possibility of exploration. The whole poem deals with the lack of definite gender and, consequently, with what seems to be a lack of identity.

Maggie Glover points out that the purpose of the lack of gender in this poem might be related with the growth of consciousness beyond corporality and that emerges from thought, and not from the way society sexualizes our bodies (10). Although the Glover's insights make a lot of sense, we would like to add that maybe this lack of identity serves the purpose of achieving freedom in its most broad sense. Considering the line where the *persona poética* says "How dreary — to be — Somebody!" (5), we can conclude that the experience of being someone can be considered as a burden, which is

completely related with the lines that appear below “How public — like a Frog” (6), where being seen and inhabit the public sphere feels like sorrow, and the only way of avoiding it is the dissociation of the soul from the body. No female, no male: just a voice that is part of the wholesome experience of the universe.

In the second and third verse, we can appreciate how the *persona poética* appears to experience identity with another. In this sense, the recognition of being nobody with someone else might lead us to think in the *persona poética* as an outsider, odd, or queer. In this sense, some of our reflections towards this poem are related to the lack of gender, and how *being nobody* lets us explore not only what possible identities could fit in with the *persona poética* but also how identity might end up being a prison when it is related to gendered identities. Therefore, it is not about being either a woman or man (or any of the possible identities among this binarism), but how gender as a social construction can be disregarded to equilibrate the existing power disputes since gender itself represents a way of subordination in the patriarchal society of XIX century.

Moreover, Judith Butler (23) suggests that since -as discussed previously- heterosexualization gave rise to the binary dichotomy historically held, certain kinds of identities are far beyond from being accepted. Therefore, when we mentioned that there was *a lack of identity* we were not other than introducing the discussion regarding the diverse gendered identity constructions. These identities are, indeed, a deviated manner of understanding gender as something not logically related to what has been imposed in the collective consciousness. As a result, it encompasses a vast number of fluctuations among the established possibilities. Consequently, the *others* or the *outsiders* are not merely isolated individuals in their particular spheres, but they, on the contrary, may represent a whole collective gender spectrum (as seen in the first two verses) living in a non-binary gender notion built up from social discerning and political impossibilities. Thus, the growth of consciousness and the understanding of gender as something beyond both bodies and binarism gives way to help broaden the limits already established in a patriarchal society concerning gender and its intelligibility.

As it has been discussed throughout this paper, the idea of introducing some philosophical concepts in re-reading Emily Dickinson's poetry is related to broadening the discussion about hidden figures and symbols in it. In this poem, particularly, it can be seen under a post-structuralist conception of gender the idea of the *persona poética* dreaming to inhabit the public sphere in their own queerness, but not in isolation, rather, with the help of the all the *nobodies* that can be either women, men, and all the possible identities that are in the middle of this binarism.

### **7. *I would not paint - a picture: Eroticism and duality in the fusion of the persona poética gender***

Finally, the fourth poem from Dickinson's collection that is going to be analyzed is called "I would not paint - a picture":

I would not paint — a picture —  
I'd rather be the One  
It's bright impossibility  
To dwell — delicious — on —  
And wonder how the fingers feel  
Whose rare — celestial — stir —  
Evokes so sweet a torment —  
Such sumptuous — Despair —

I would not talk, like Cornets —  
I'd rather be the One  
Raised softly to the Ceilings —  
And out, and easy on —  
Through Villages of Ether —  
Myself endued Balloon  
By but a lip of Metal —  
The pier to my Pontoon —

Nor would I be a Poet —  
It's finer — Own the Ear —  
Enamored — impotent — content —  
The License to revere,  
A privilege so awful

What would the Dower be,  
Had I the Art to stun myself  
With Bolts — of Melody!  
(Emily Dickinson, 1-24)

This poem by Emily Dickinson represents one of the richest pieces among our corpus in relation to gender as a rather complex set of practices and self-exploratory experiences. In this case, the *persona poética* deals with a fusion under some erotic terms, such as Suzanne Juhasz (31) in “Amplitude of Queer Desire in Dickinson's Erotic Language” has already proposed. Following her analysis, the real pleasure in this poem does not rely on either the poet or the reader but in both, simultaneously. In the first two verses, we can read that the *persona poética* eroticizes through images (a picture being painted, being *touched*) the experience of being observed, desired, and wanted. On the contrary, the idea of being from the creator side, the one who gives life to this painting, might not be as satisfying as being art itself. Nonetheless, the painter and the picture are embedded in a symbiotic relationship; there is no one without the other, they serve one and other mutually, as same as the *persona poética* with the poem itself.

As same as in the first verses, the *persona poética* along the poem proposes that pleasure and the erotic experience itself go beyond any kind of binary relationship but, rather, as a continuum where sensation leads to the *persona poética* to dismantle the distinctions between the dominant/dominated, poet/reader and so on; the fact of becoming one single body allows us to understand gender as a never-ending process of exploration. The constant repetition of the expression, as the *persona poética* declared “I'd rather be the one” (2, 10) position the *persona poética* on a plane where *oneness* represents a duality where the fusion of the two opposites -such as the poet/the reader- portrays the erotic experience at its highest; to get lost in the never-ending process of creation is, at the end, the ultimate stage of pleasure.

To conclude with this analyses, we could assume that challenging gender as a social construction through mechanisms like gender fluidity, the fusion of gender or the annulation of gender allows us to understand how the *persona poética*, at the light of

our post-modern revision of Emily Dickinson's poetry, might be expressing how gender itself functions as a constraint, where real freedom is achieved when gender is not there at all; it is in the possibilities of exploration and question where the power of decoding symbols relies: Is gender either a prison or the first moment of identitarian subversion in the case of Emily Dickinson's poetry?

## 8. Final reflections

After reviewing Emily Dickinson's corpus in-depth, we can conclude that the poet has enriched literature not only with her pieces of work but also with her particular way of challenging it; for Emily Dickinson, it seemed that literature was a territory where everything was allowed, even when it was not. That is to say, Emily Dickinson and her own poetic language represent a subversive act of literary creation, challenging gender in a society that did not allow women to express and live her sexuality as free as men did during that time. In this sense, literature understood as a safe place for writers and poets allows them to use words as weapons, where metaphors act as images, and images as messages to be in a never-ending decoding pursuit, for the case of readers and literature scholars. Further studies on Emily Dickinson's poetry should maintain exploring the underlying symbols and images that arise from the *persona poética*, where eroticism and sexuality is portrayed in a sophisticated, yet mighty way.

Gender fluidity along our corpus allowed us to present some refreshing insights on the study of Emily Dickinson's poetry. The idea of the *persona poética* being completely free of any culturally tied gender expectation as a means to prevail the erotic experience above all is some of the most remarkable imprints of Emily Dickinson's work. The subtleness along with the powerfulness that characterizes these four poems represent a challenging synergy that allowed us to understand Emily Dickinson's poetry beyond the realm of words.

To sum up, the arising of new disciplines of knowledge, such as gender studies, have brought with it new ways of interpreting our reality and history. To be able to propose refreshing insights in literature (or any other field) does not represent to invalidate historicity or making asynchronous relationships between an author and their art.

With the help of post-structural thinking, we were able along this paper to re-configure some cultural foundations and to explore some new concepts at the light of gender studies, such as the concept of gender fluidity. It is paramount for us to look at the past and read in any silence, in any absence that might be present in Emily Dickinson's work. What we see, and the way we see it, it will not be the same as some other researchers might have seen it. To decode poems, or any artistic work, we need diversity of perspectives because there might be a potential image, a potential *self* that is looking to be discovered.

Researching on literature is a way of challenging some of our internalized beliefs that we thought to be natural, and de-constructing them as part of a set of social and cultural practices that ends up shaping both the word and ourselves. Even though literature and history might not serve each other necessarily (or do they, actually?), the world of fiction has always allowed us to take a trip into the inner consciousness of poets and writers that made their lives a worthy story to be told.

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