# "This thing that I searched so hard for": normativity and transgression in transgender children's narratives

Joshua Franklin

Department of Anthropology and Perelman School of Medicine

University of Pennsylvania

Email: frjosh@mail.med.upenn.edu

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## Introduction

Over the past several years, transgender and gender variant young people have become sharply more visible, and public interest in childhood gender identity has surged. What explains this emergent phenomenon? Does it signal a broader process of increasing inclusion of transgender in activist communities where they have been historically marginalized? Sharp critiques have been made in relation to medical authority and the pathologization of transgender lives; what is the role of health professionals and medical institutions in the lives of the non-normatively gendered?

This essay draws from fieldwork conducted at a pediatric gender identity program at a large academic children's hospital in the northeastern United States. This clinic, one of several that have been established over the past several years, cares for transgender and gender variant children and adolescents; its multidisciplinary team includes pediatricians, pediatric endocrinologists, therapists, social workers and nurses. Since the establishment of the clinic in 2013, I have observed providers' clinical work as well as participated in ongoing mixed-methods

research at the clinic. In addition, I have followed 25 young people receiving care at the clinic, along with their families, through interviews as well as follow-up visits in families' homes.[1]

In what follows, I will draw on this work, and focus on several vignettes of encounters with trans youth and their families. By calling not calling these cases or histories, I want to emphasize that my goal is not to articulate a broad theory of childhood gender identity or a specific critique of medical notions of gender. Rather, I hope to begin from what I consider to be a precondition of ethnographic inquiry: accepting the perspective and experience of one's interlocutor as valid. As Afsaneh Najmabadi put it, "I had to learn how to listen in a way that would not feign a naïve belief in everything, yet would begin with (though not end on) suspension of disbelief" (Najmabadi 2014, 13). The trouble is that children, especially young children, are among those who are least likely to have their experiences or perspectives treated as valid. And in this case, the ethnographer risks not only being caught in the totalizing frame of biomedical authority, but also the idiosyncratic but equally all-encompassing viewpoint of the parents. What would it mean to understand a child's experience in its own terms?

Concepts of gender identity and gender variance, to sustain a sense of normativity and order, are entangled with other cultural norms, especially those of race and class. An emerging body of work in transgender studies shows that different ways of "imagining" children's gender identities entail a set of exclusions and foreclosures while they produce social and political visibility (Valentine 2007). Yet it is impossible to appreciate the ways in which that normativity is produced without seriously considering what it is that the child is thinking, feeling, and

[1] All names used are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been changed or omitted when possible.

meaning—disentangled from its relationship to parents' narratives and expectations. In this essay, I argue that taking seriously the difficulty of appreciating children's points of view reveals something important about the meaning of emergent revolutions in gender taking place today.

**"Very special and out of the ordinary"**

Two hours of unremarkable countryside separated Jimmy's house from the city, where the pediatric gender identity program is located. I exited the highway and drove up into the gently rolling hills, passing a gas station and a baseball field. "Trump" signs were scattered among homes, and I remembered the "Bernie 2016" t-shirt Jimmy's stepmother had worn to clinic the first day I met her. As I pulled up to the house, Jimmy's father stood in the driveway, grinning and waving. We walked into the kitchen, and I discovered on the kitchen table that despite my polite protests, Jimmy and his stepmother had prepared a snack (sushi, which, I later learned, was Jimmy's favorite food).

Jimmy is a 13-year-old transgender boy, thin with blond hair and soft, wide eyes that radiate boyish curiosity. Jimmy lives with his father, Keith, who has lived in the same town since he moved there at age 4 and his stepmother, Marie (Jimmy's mother died when Jimmy was young), who moved from a small city nearby. I greeted Jimmy and asked what he had been doing over the summer, and he replied, "nothing much." His stepmother chimed in, "he went to trans camp!" Jimmy rolled his eyes, and I looked at him inquisitively. "I don't know, it's just that she tells *everybody*."

As soon as our conversation began, it was clear that while Jimmy's parents, especially his stepmother, were eager to tell me about his experience as a transgender boy, Jimmy felt

strongly that his experience as a transgender boy was no big deal. What Jimmy did want to talk about was his best friend Mike. He took his wallet from his pocket, and pulled apart its Velcro, showing me a half-crumpled photo from their trip together to the Washington Monument.

Jimmy's parents stressed the normalcy of their lives as well, but in a different way. Marie reflected on her certainty about their gender identity: "With him, he's always dressed like a boy, and girls can get away with that. Being the other way—boys don't ever dress like girls, so we're fortunate… I didn't know Jimmy when he was Jennifer, and I can't even imagine him, can't even wrap my head around it." They were emphatic that there was never any uncertainty on that point.

What does it mean to call attention to the exceptional in Jimmy's life, or to insist on seeing it as ordinary? Marie invoked a story of parental love: "We have a lot of people who are like, oh you guys are so amazing, but we're not, we're just parents. I think a lot of people think it's very special and out of the ordinary, but why wouldn't you assist your kid? Would you want them to be tortured their whole life, living in the wrong body? It's a no-brainer to us, we don't give a shit what anybody thinks." For her, this was ordinary parenting:

> We're not pushing or encouraging him—this little guy has said he's a boy since he could talk. There's no doubt in our mind that he's 100% trans. We're here to make it easy, and to be honest, he hasn't really had a lot of problems. He was bullied once, but the kid apologized. He really hasn't had the horrible experiences we've heard about, and we're in a hillbilly area here. The school's been accepting, and his friends are amazing. The same friends from when he was little—sleepovers, vacations—his friends are amazing. It's a non-issue with them.

We were really worried when he went into middle school, which was last year, because I know that's when kids begin to bully, and he had one minor experience, and that was it, the kid apologized for a few days and wrote him a letter.

Keith began to tell me about how some of the context has changed since Jimmy was younger. "When he was young, and his mom and I would take him to conferences… That was 2009, and we were the only parents there."

But this was too much for Jimmy. "Yeah, could *I* tell what happened? You're like, *he* went to trans camp, *he* got bullied…"

Marie said, "Well, you weren't answering, so I felt like I had to speak up."

"Oh, I just felt like I had to say that. I don't really feel like it was that important."

Keith asked, "What would you say is relevant in your experience?"

"Of what?"

"Of going to school and being trans versus not."

Jimmy: "It's fine. Most people don't know."

At this point, Marie jumped back in: "I think they do."

"Nope."

"Really?"

"Nope."

"I think they do, you're in a small school, and I think most people don't care and they don't say anything, but I think most people know. You've had some kids come and ask you, you

don't think something like that would go through a small school quickly? I just think kids are smarter now and they're like it's not a big deal. Why do you think people don't know?"

"Because people are still asking me."

"Asking you what?"

"Are you trans?"

"Well then they know, honey!"

I wondered whether I was pressing an irrelevant conversation on Jimmy. Perhaps he was insisting on a kind of normalcy to avoid a painful conversation. What kind of narrative was I imposing on Jimmy by interpellating him as the subject of a study about transgender and gender nonconforming youth? Given his parents' narrative of certainty and ordinary parenting, wasn't it inevitable that Jimmy would find his experience unremarkable?

Jimmy left the room, and for a minute his parents voiced some of their worries about Jimmy growing older. Jimmy's best friend Mike had signed up for football, and Jimmy wanted to play, too. But his parents were nervous—his dad concerned because Jimmy shared his slender frame and his stepmother because Jimmy had a female body. "I told him about soccer," Marie said, "and he said soccer is for pussies. I said my [biological] son played soccer, and he was a great athlete! I think he's hearing that in school." I was struck by this misogynistic language, and wondered about the cost to Jimmy of these subtle aspects of normative masculinity.

Jimmy's parents also worried about Jimmy dating when he was older. Marie described an innocent intimacy with the girls in his class: "He's a player, but they're just friends with him, I think they like the feminine side of him. Or the talkative, he'll talk on the phone for an hour. What guy's going to do that? He's got all the ladies chatting with him." Jimmy re-entered the

room, and realized that we had been talking about him. I asked him if it was true, and he smiled and nodded: “Yeah.”

There is much that could be drawn from this encounter, but what is particularly significant is the fact that both Jimmy and his parents insist on a kind of ordinariness, but in distinctly different ways. Keith and Marie relate to Jimmy and his gender by calling upon tropes of parental responsibility. They do this through reference to normative markers of childhood—sports, the awkwardness of early romantic experiments, summer camp, and best friends. They relate to Jimmy’s experience of gender through familiar expectations of childhood and parenthood. Jimmy also emphasizes these experiences, but his stance seems to be one of refusal or disavowal.

To call something ordinary, normal, or unworthy of attention is a gesture that does several kinds of relational work. It may be destigmatizing and simultaneously a way of evading anxiety-provoking questions. But the point is not to expose Jimmy’s so-called ordinary life as exceptional. If we ignore Jimmy’s claim to normalcy, or interpret it as a child’s inability to appreciate the nuance of his situation, we run the risk of misunderstanding what is at stake for him in his insistent claim that he be the author of his story but that there is hardly any story to tell.

As I was about to leave, Marie paused, as if she had been debating whether to say this for some time, and said, “Well I have something big that happened.” She looked at Jimmy: “The thing you got.” “What about it?” Jimmy asked. She began to explain that she thought it was important, and Jimmy became exasperated. “Well then talk about it! If it’s a big deal to you, then fine!”

"It's not a big deal to me, but it was a super, super big deal to you." Marie looked back at me. "So you're familiar with trans stuff, right? He got a packer, and he's thrilled about it. I was like, at first, no way." Jimmy started to disagree, but she spoke over his protests. "I was like, are you old enough? Is it cleanly? I just needed to do some research. Is it safe, having female…? Just any kind of bacterial thing. And he really, really rallied for it and got it and is being responsible and we're letting him know it has to be cleaned and all kinds of things." If Marie had concerns beyond those of an ordinary parent—cleanliness, safety, responsibility—she didn't let on. Jimmy framed this as a non-event, and she framed it as the responsible parent meeting the persistent demand of the child. Marie stressed that the desire to wear a packer came from Jimmy, and even came as a surprise to her: "And believe it or not—I would just be horrified—he loves it, he likes wearing it, he feels better about himself."

Jimmy didn't offer a reaction to any of that; he wanted to talk about Mike. "Mike was jealous that it would be bigger than his!" he said. His parents began to laugh, and Jimmy brought the conversation back to the ordinary: "Yeah, me and Mike are bros."

**The Transgender Child**

There is a significant anthropological literature dealing with transgender adults (Aizura 2010; Boellstorf 2004; Bolin 1988; Herdt 1996; Kulick 1998; Najmabadi 2014; Roen 2001), but only recently have anthropologists begun to examine the lives of transgender children. This literature has mainly focused on a theoretical critique of biomedical discourse and an analysis of the narratives of the parents of transgender children. A review of this work demonstrates the

extent to which children's own voices are not yet included, yet represent a potentially transformative point in relation to shifting norms of gender in the 21st century.

Focusing on clinical discourse, Claudia Castañeda (2015) explores the attention to children in transgender medicine through a close Foucauldian reading of clinical guidelines (notably, the WPATH Standards of Care). What Castañeda's analysis of clinical guidelines illuminates is the foundational role that development plays in this paradigm. As she puts it, "the child as a proto-adult is constituted as a mutable body, available for adult re-configuration, as it traverses a developmental trajectory from immaturity to maturity." This results in a discourse where the suffering of transgender youth is natural (i.e., developmental), and medical intervention is therefore necessary (Sadjadi 2013). Other authors explore the ways that parents understand and respond to their children's gender identities (Meadow 2011; Rahilly 2015). This work shows that parents must work to understand and articulate their children's gender variance. But what is left unaddressed is the degree to which young people's experiences diverge from established developmental trajectories and hence do not resonate with the expectations of parents and clinicians. This question is important in practice, and not merely in principle, if we accept that young people are experiencing and using gender in significantly new or different ways than older generations.

The first issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, "Keywords," contains three separate entries on youth: adolescence, child, and childhood. All three point to the ambivalence of youth in relation to identity and normativity and problematize the notion of development as a universal framework for understanding youth. Adolescence, per Gabrielle Owen, "functions simultaneously as a site of discovery and disavowal," but, "trans embodiment suggests also the

possibility of reconstruction, revision and remaking outside the developmental narrative" (2014). Likewise, Claudia Castañeda is concerned here with the ambivalence of discourses of childhood gender variance as social control: "Because of the child's broader social subordination (ageism), the medical treatment of transgender children more likely constitutes a new site of bodily subjection *to* normalizing gender regimes than a site of freedom. Still, it is always possible for transgender childhood to become a site of possibility…" (2014). Referring to the proliferation of creative and affirming categories used to speak about gender diversity, Tey Meadow asks, "Do these words even demarcate a form of personhood, or do they simply rebrand deviance while implying that the vast majority of children are safely gender normative?" (2014) These authors all suggest that childhood might be a transformational site for gender ideologies.

Tey Meadow brings the other actors in this struggle over normativity and the meaning of gender into focus. "A central paradox animates all of these efforts to define the transgender child. While most adults understand gender development teleologically, they still struggle with whether and how to distinguish childhood self-knowledge from adult identity" (2014). In other words, it is the parents who are most proximately invested in inscribing children within a recognizable developmental trajectory. Or as Andrew Solomon put it, following Winnicott, "In the subconscious fantasies that make conception look so alluring, it is often ourselves that we would like to see live forever, not someone with a personality of his own" (2012, 1). Adults see themselves reflected even in children who resist such identifications.

All this points to the necessity of actively listening to the child. Adam Phillips, in his critique of the "obsession" of psychoanalysis with absence and lack as crucial elements of

childhood, writes, “What children supposedly suffer from is not being what they think of as adults; and adulthood becomes the afterlife for children, which means a growing acquaintance with the unappeasable nature of desire” (1988, 16). Developmental narratives are paradoxically able to center the adult by explicitly naming the child. Moreover, the figure of the transgender child might ironically suggest a political project grounded in precisely the sort of reproductive morality that sustains diverse projects of control (Edelman 2004).

Towle and Morgan (2002) show the risks of applying a concept of gender universally and ahistorically while asymmetrically invoking notions of culture and immanence to advance a project of gender rooted in Western ideology. In work with transgender children, we must confront the challenge of engaging with children’s own experiences of gender without inscribing them in a framework of medical knowledge, parental expectation, or transgender activism. What is at stake in centering parents’ experiences by putting children on a developmental trajectory is an essentially normative project with a potentially limitless series of implicit entanglements, including those of race and class.

The desire for normativity invokes a liberal value of inclusion, and parents often compare the struggles that transgender people face to other forms of social marginalization. One father compared the recent visibility of transgender youth to the perceived appearance of black Americans to white Americans in the 1960s. A white mother of a transgender adolescent described her experience negotiating with her child’s school to provide access to necessary facilities like bathrooms as a loss of white privilege. Biomedical discourse constructs gender identity as a biopsychological entity (Schwartz 2012). Gender identity, as such a developmental

construct, might obscure the ways in which gender variance is related to marginalization differently in different contexts.

At the same time, a desire for transgression can also be part of a liberal discourse. Dan Irving uses the idea of "normalized transgressions" to refer to the way in which medical discourse serves to link transgender people with neoliberal institutions, asking "Whose interests are ultimately served by the formation of dutiful, self-sufficient, hardworking transsexual subjectivities?" (2013, 27). Moreover, for US adolescents, transgression and its expression in terms of identity is developmentally normative. Winnicott described this as one of the fundamental needs of adolescence: "The need to prod society repeatedly so that society's antagonism is made manifest, and can be met with antagonism" (2006, 123). In other words, the need for difference and separation is not necessarily less a part of the reproduction of normative gender than the desire for inclusion and belonging. The following two stories demonstrate the way that children's own worlds might productively reorient questions about gender and identity away from a polarized field of normativity and transgression, and towards an always unfinished intersubjective project of recognition.

**"I got curious one day and tried it on"**

Jack is a bright 15-year-old, and he lives in the same urban neighborhood where his father grew up. Despite his protests about summer reading, Jack excels in school, and exudes an ease in relating to adults that he readily agrees he does not have with many of his classmates. He loves making fantasy art, and has made some of his closest friends on roleplaying forums online. I was sitting with Jack and his family at their kitchen table. The last

time I had seen Jack was about a year earlier, and they were planning to start talking to surgeons to learn about options for top surgery. At that point, Jack seemed interested but not particularly urgent to undergo surgery—as he pointed out, he was only 14. By this time, they had been able to schedule his mastectomy, which was something of a surprise, given Jack's age. But Jack was looking forward to it; he said he was happy he was going to be able to undergo surgery. He didn't seem to feel that surgery would dramatically change his life, but he did say that he would be disappointed and frustrated if it weren't able to happen for some reason: "I've been promised it—that's the key point, that I've been promised it." Repeating this promise from his surgeon, Jack emphasized the symbolic importance of this social contract enabled by the medical establishment.

Jack's mom, on the other hand, seemed more unreservedly thrilled. She said that the surgery would be a very good thing, because it would mean Jack wouldn't have to bind[2] anymore, which, she explained, was the "worst thing."

"Do you really think that's the worst part?" asked Jack's dad, skeptically.

"I think the fact that she keeps saying that is the worst part. I mean, the binding *is* the worst part, but you say that whenever anything comes up," Jack explained.

Jack's mom became defensive: "Well it's hard to watch him. I know—I got curious one day and tried it on!" She couldn't imagine how Jack could bear this experience on a daily basis. "Just imagine," she said to me, "when he's asked to perform calisthenics every day at his

[2] Binding refers to compressing the chest, often using specially designed garments. For a more detailed description of this and other terminology, especially relating to medical interventions for transgender individuals, see Erickson-Schroth (2014).

school!" She was a little flustered—"it's Crossfit, not calisthenics!" corrected Jack, laughing. At this point in the conversation, Jack didn't try to further correct his mother.

Jack simultaneously agreed with his mother about binding and contradicted her statements suggesting that she had misunderstood something crucial about his experience. Jack's mother attempted to use her own body as the basis for understanding her son, but failed, at least in part. Jack's mom also reflected on whether it was appropriate for her to buy a "packer" for Jack: "I wanted to surprise Jack and got him a packer. And I walked in there, and I'm a little reserved myself. And I'm like, really, I shouldn't buy it, he should pick it out himself, shouldn't he? I wouldn't want someone picking out mine, if you can pick it out, you might as well!" I was struck by the way Jack's mother imagines buying and using a phallic object herself, using her speculative experience of her body as a good-enough approximation of her son's reality.

There are many rhetorical strategies that allow parents to manage this gap of experience. Many parents refer to a transcendent love for one's children, affirming their parental authority and responsibility. Others lean on biomedical expertise, often referring to research literature, their providers' training, or the institutional capital of a prestigious medical institution. Both strategies (among others) manage the stigma associated with gender variance and the suspicion that parents of trans and gender nonconforming youth continue to face. But Jack's mother's sometimes frustrated attempts to understand her transgender son suggest that however useful these strategies are in specific social contexts, such as negotiating with school administrators or talking to neighbors and family members, there is still a need to reckon with the uncertainty of gender in more personal terms.

We often think about the intergenerational dynamics of gender in terms of what children learn—overtly and implicitly—from their parents. What happened in this family is an intriguing reversal: the mother is trying desperately to access something of the child's embodied experience, but she fails to fully grasp it. It is this aspect of Jack's mother's comment that I want to highlight. If the materiality of the body is of great importance to what we understand gender to be (Butler 2011; Prosser 1998; Salamon 2010), Jack shows us that the body not only exceeds the physical limits of the human organism, but also crosses relational spaces as it is negotiated intersubjectively.

**On top of the world**

Carl is a junior in high school and a transgender boy. When I first met him in the Gender and Sexuality Development Clinic, I asked him to tell me a little about himself. "I don't know," he replied, "I… hmm… I really like art. I draw a lot." Carl is quiet and thoughtful: "Sometimes I like to think about what I'm going to say a little bit before I say it." Nevertheless, he was eager to tell me about his plans for art school, and he was obviously passionate about art. But he said little about his gender, and I was curious about how he understood his gender identity. I learned that Carl had seen a therapist for anxiety and depression since middle school, and eventually told her that he was having some "issues about gender," in his words. The therapist seemed uncomfortable and unwilling to discuss it; as Carl's mom explained, "she was convinced it was a fad and a phase."

Carl's encounter with a skeptical therapist spoke to his struggle to define himself and to be recognized, themes which are shown powerfully in a self-portrait. After our meeting, Carl's

mother emailed me an image of a self-portrait that Carl had shown at a local art show. Foregrounded against a collection of black and white patterns—scales, tubes, rings, waves, spirals and other geometrical shapes—appears the planet Earth in familiar blue and green, curiously modified by a thin, golden, planetary ring. Literally 'on top of the world' is a naked child with wavy brown hair and glasses, arms wrapped around knees, and seated on what appears to be the coast of Greenland.

When I see this imagine, what strikes me is its theme of isolation. On top of the world, perhaps, but exposed and frightened. The pose of the body invokes shelter and comfort, but the incompleteness of the rest of the scene is filled with abstract patterns and textures. The patterns and the gold ring have a de-realizing effect; they throw a bleak scene of solitude into a space of playfulness and creativity.

Carl's gender identity was clarified after he attended a workshop event for transgender people, where he found a community. "Meeting other people who were trans, it kinda made it more real for me," he told me. "It's not something that I'm just going through in my own head, but like, it's something that other people can relate to. Which was a really good feeling." As Carl's mom put it, "Carl came home so pumped from this conference, it was like, 'Oh my God, I've found my people!'" But the practice of art also seems to shore up Carl's own unfinished work of self-authorship and perhaps represents a comforting gesture. As he explained, "when I was really depressed in middle school, I sorta didn't do as much art, and I wasn't really feeling like doing anything. Then the more I found out stuff about myself, the more I was able to draw again and make things that I felt good about." The mutual entanglement of recognition and

self-recognition, of relationship and self-authorship, speaks to the limits of any one dimension of selfhood.

**Conclusion**

I want to end with a reflection on what taking seriously the child's point of view might offer an anthropology of gender and sexuality. Jack's mother's attempt to draw on her embodied experience to come to understand Jack's gender identity shows the extent to which young people can transform adult culture. Carl's mother explained, "So this is a long process, as you know. As a parent… and you kinda start out, I don't know, at the basement floor, trying to find out what's going on. And you know, it's been a long process of reading and figuring things out." Another father remarked, "If you look at the transgender spectrum, it's not anything like I thought it was. I understand the concept that some people are born in the wrong body, and I get that. But the fact that some people don't identify as male or female or identify as both or switch back and forth easily… that had never occurred to me. So, I'm still learning." Lawrence Hirschfeld argues that attending to children's experiences helps illuminate the way certain cultural practices are sustained (2002). But of equal importance, children's points of view might reveal something about the dynamics of cultural change that is not prefigured by an existing political paradigm.

If I have not dwelled on critiques of medicalization or pathologization, it is largely because they have been well made and widely accepted by clinicians and scholars. Likewise, although I have not focused on the ways in which transphobic violence and marginalization affect gender variant young people, this was undoubtedly the case for many of the families I

interviewed, and this fact points to the urgency of attending to the lived realities of those people.

While my goal in this essay has been to listen to the voices of transgender and gender variant young people, much of what I have presented is admittedly speculative. Yet there are some conclusions that can be drawn. While categories are limited in relation to identity, as Jimmy demonstrates, children's works of art, engagements with parents and other relationships, and narratives of personal experience and identity are rich sites of self-authorship that creatively refigure established lines of normativity and transgression. What Jimmy, Carl, and Jack illustrate is that the importance of clinical discourses and parent narratives about gender variance needs to be understood as it is experienced relationally by transgender children themselves. This, in turn, expands our theorizing of the body and of gender identity in a social world in flux.

Gayle Salamon has suggested that, "epistemological uncertainty can have great use, both ethically and politically, in the lives of the non-normatively gendered" (2010, 1). Sam, an adolescent who I interviewed early in my research, told me that when they first started to search for a word to describe their gender, they "really wanted to find the word that fit absolutely perfectly." Sam initially settled on the label 'genderfluid,' but then started to encounter other nonbinary people in art communities on the internet, and then, they explained, "I realized that it wasn't so important to me to have this one word that described perfectly who I was." Sam continued:

> I feel that agender fits best, because, you know, what is gender? I don't know—I don't appear to have one. Everyone else seems to have this idea, but I don't. And

admitting that, coming to that conclusion, was very profoundly relaxing. I could finally let my guard down and take a deep breath. This thing that I searched so hard for, I could finally conclude that it just wasn't there.

By accepting the child as imagined by the parent, we box children into the very normative structures that we might hope to critique. Ethnographic listening here must reflect an engagement with the child's point of view. Sam's insightful words attest to the creativity of gender variant young people outside the limits of normative development.

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