

# Introduction: Thirty Years after *Cultural Capital*

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## 1.

The year 2023 marks the thirtieth anniversary of John Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, a landmark contribution to literary studies and the history and sociology of the discipline. Responding to the ongoing crisis in the humanities (which seems never to have passed) and to the "canon wars" of literary studies in the 1980s and 1990s, *Cultural Capital* shifted the debate about literary canons and aesthetic value away from the language of inclusion and exclusion, "the question of who is in or out of the canon" (Guillory 1993: xiii), in order to describe the institution from which the idea of the canon emerged. This institution is the school, and its function is to regulate access to what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called "cultural capital." Although Guillory does not define the term at the outset of his book, he does so later, in his essay "Bourdieu's Refusal." "Cultural capital," he writes,

is a form of symbolic capital certifiable by objective mechanisms, most importantly by the credentializing function of the school. In *The Wizard of Oz*, for example, we know that the Scarecrow has more than proven his intelligence and that he has acquired considerable symbolic capital based on that personal embodied quality. He only lacks, as the Wizard says, a diploma. It is the curious property of the diploma to certify his intelligence to those who may not be familiar with the Scarecrow's accomplishments. (Guillory 1997: 381)

In Guillory's argument, as in Bourdieu's work, the school is the site of social reproduction. Its role is to regulate access to literacy, to certain practices of reading and writing, through its curricula and syllabi. But the school does not merely furnish students with the capacity to read and write. It unequally distributes access to both linguistic capital, "the means by which one attains to a

socially credentialed and therefore valued speech,” and symbolic capital, “a kind of knowledge-capital whose possession can be displayed upon request and which thereby entitles its possessor to the cultural and material rewards of the well-educated person,” Guillory writes. To understand the institutional fact of literacy means asking: “Who reads? What do they read? How do they read? In what social and institutional circumstances? Who writes? In what social and institutional circumstances? For whom?” (Guillory 1993: 18).

For Guillory, the canon wars have proceeded by equating the selection of literary texts in the classroom with the political negotiations that take place in institutions of representative democracy. The equation misunderstands how the school mediates any putative contest of values. It results in bad criticism because literary texts are reduced to repositories of either dominant or subversive ideologies based on the identities of their authors or their characters. It results in bad sociology because it forgets the historical dimensions of literacy, assuming that people of all social identities had equal access to the school and to the means of reading and writing. “The critique of the canon has always constructed the history of canon formation as a conspiracy of judgment, a secret and exclusive ballot by which literary works are chosen for canonization because their authors belong to the same social group as the judges themselves, or because these works express the values of the dominant group,” Guillory argues. And it results in bad politics because canonical critique fails to understand the limitations of voluntaristic social activity within the institution of the school. Its response to injustice and inequality is to create new countercanons or new programs. But, as Guillory observes, “the poverty of this historical reconstruction determines the limits of the response to it—the notion that dominated groups must choose their own canonical works by a kind of pseudo-election or ‘consensus’” (28).

What emerges from Guillory’s Bourdieusian framework is a brilliant account not only of the process of canon formation but also of the professional anxieties that attend arguments about canonicity and representation. The canon debate responds to (even as it masks), Guillory argues, literature’s diminished place in an educational system in which an emergent techno-managerial class—or New Class, or professional managerial class, as Barbara and John Ehrenreich termed it—no longer requires the cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979). The first chapter of *Cultural Capital*, “Canonical and Non-canonical: The Current Debate,” considers how and why debates about the canon have routinely misrecognized this situation in ways that trouble attempts at cur-

ricular reform. Drawing on the assumptions of liberal pluralism, the critique of the canon that Guillory describes proceeded in two phases, each of which understood representation in the canon to be commensurate with political representation. On the one hand, the author becomes “the representative of a social identity” (Guillory 1993: 10) and democratic representation becomes the “political effect of the canon” (8). Canon formation thus appears as a process of exclusion equivalent to the exclusion of minorities from social and political institutions. On the other hand, literary works were understood as repositories of cultural values. To choose a poem or novel for one’s syllabus, on this account, is to endorse the value that the poem or novel putatively expresses. Canonical texts, because they seem to endorse “the hegemonic or ideological values of dominant social groups” (19), are thereby opposed to those of minority groups, which become in turn “transgressive, subversive, antihegemonic” (20). Both phases confuse the syllabus, as an instrument of pedagogy, with the canon as an imaginary totality, forgetting that “every construction of a syllabus *institutes* once again the process of canon formation” (31). Likewise, claims that new syllabi or curricular revision might somehow represent minority culture or antihegemonic values ignore the fact that their institutional location is the university, which is not itself a representative place. Changing one’s syllabus doesn’t do away with the canon form, nor does it solve the problems of access that determine who writes and who reads, historically or in the present.

The first chapter concludes with a long history of the forms of the literary canon, from the invention of literature as a restricted category of texts in the eighteenth century to its redefinition as a discourse of value in the canon wars. Guillory outlines the various levels of analysis for the case studies to come: “Within the history of canon formation we will always be able to discern the arrangement and rearrangement of (1) an institutional practice, or pedagogy; (2) a body of preserved and disseminated writings, or canon; and (3) a produced linguistic knowledge, or *Hochsprache*” (71). As this history attests, the story of canon formation involves repeated attempts to stabilize the idea of literature and to mask its historicity as a category by supplying transhistorical definitions of literariness—as poetic diction, as difficulty and paradox, or as rhetoric. Under these terms, the historical conditions that govern literary production and reception tend to disappear, as do the systemic effects of institutions of education. Because all “judgments with canonical force are institutionally located” (29), however, we can only understand a literary work’s canonization in the context of its historical moment

and the institutions of its production and dissemination. “There can be,” Guillory writes, “no *general* theory of canon formation that would predict or account for the canonization of any particular work” (85).

The central chapters of the book are three case studies that show this logic in action. Each addresses changes in the form of the canon in moments of crisis and the emergence of a curriculum symptomatic of these crises: the institutionalization of a vernacular canon amid the rise of bourgeois civil society; the New Critical canon reformation amid the rise of mass culture; and the creation of a syllabus of “theory” (governed by a professional priesthood of master theorists) amid the reorganization of intellectual labor along bureaucratic lines. The case studies move from the eighteenth century to the present, studying three levels of the educational system: the primary school, the undergraduate classroom, and the graduate seminar. In each case study, literature emerges as a vehicle for the unification of culture in a modern and secular world, absent the unifying institutional force and ideology of the church.

The first case study, “Mute Inglorious Miltons: Gray, Wordsworth, and the Vernacular Canon,” considers the entrance of a vernacular English canon into the educational system in the eighteenth century, when the category of literature, Guillory suggests, emerged precisely to “accommodate vernacular works in the schools” (87). Why, in this context, did Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” become the “perfect poem for introducing schoolchildren to the study of English literature” (86), an anthology favorite for two centuries or more? Guillory argues that the poem was specially configured to function both as “property”—a commodity that required vernacular literacy to access—and as linguistic capital: a mark of the literacy produced by training in the school. By imitating the compositional method of the commonplace book, decontextualizing and distilling literary *sententiae*, Gray’s poem adapted the stylistic norms of classical rhetoric to vernacular English poetry, offering eighteenth-century readers access to a form of linguistic capital they had hitherto been denied: “The cultural entitlement that for Gray is defined by classical literacy, by his immense learning, is thus acquired by his readers at a *discount*, at the cost only of acquiring the vernacular literacy requisite to reading the poem” (121). The “Elegy” thus extended the hierarchizing effects of classical education into an emergent civil society without requiring the knowledge of Latin and Greek that remained the privilege of the aristocracy and clergy.

The second case study, “Ideology and Canonical Form: The New Critical

Canon,” turns to T. S. Eliot and his successors in the American university system at the moment when literature became identified with New Critical standards of difficulty: ambiguity, irony, wit, and, above all, paradox. In his essays on poetry and drama, Eliot attempted to adjust the ideological meaning of literary tradition by offering a series of revisionary judgments about relative literary merit, as when he elevated John Dryden over John Milton. These judgments favored minor over major writers for the simple reason that minor writers demonstrated greater fidelity to tradition, or orthodoxy, and to the limitations it placed on them. The figure of a valorized minority not only shored up the terms of Eliot’s own poetic career but also reflected literature’s marginality within a fractured and fractious mass culture. In their fidelity to tradition, orthodox minor writers helped Eliot to imagine the canon as the “ground of a *total* culture” (154), one that would inhere not in positive statements of belief but in a “literary sensibility” accessible by means of sensitive appreciation.

Rather than any individual work, then, “it was the form of the canon in its totality which became the vehicle of ‘ideology’ in critical discourse, since that totality could be made to signify either a certain perceived disorder of culture or (after the appropriate ‘revaluations’) an alternative, more ‘ideal’ order” (135). The New Critics installed Eliot’s project in the university not as a principle of evaluation but as a principle of interpretation through the practice of close reading, which extended the sensibility Eliot attributed to the minor writers back to the established literary curriculum. They made the difficulty, paradox, irony, and ambiguity that Eliot valued in these writers into the defining characteristic of all literary language. Difficulty at once isolated literature from other modes of cultural expression and marked it as distinctive of the cultural capital acquired through a university education.

The third case study, “Literature after Theory: The Lesson of Paul de Man,” explores the rise of theory as “an interim, imaginary solution to the new conditions of intellectual labor” (181). More than the writing of any other theorist, de Man’s work exemplifies the “rhetoricism” of literary theory—that is, the equation of literature with rhetoric, where rhetoric means figurative language or trope rather than persuasion or eloquence. This rhetoricism defends literature and its professors from their own cultural marginality in two ways: first, by extending the remit of the literary critic beyond the bounds of the literature syllabus to all language; second, by reconstructing criticism “as a *technical* practice” operative within an ideology of parascientific rigor (181). Deconstruction reinforces its sta-

tus as technique in part by distinguishing its process of interpretation from the mere identification of themes, yet it produces its own “covert thematic” nonetheless, Guillory argues, by giving to each of its major tropes (metaphor, metonymy, etc.) a constant meaning, fixed in place as an essential and necessary condition of human language and activity. Deconstruction thus retains its investment in literariness, which is now defined in terms of rhetorical complexity, much as paradox defined literariness for the New Critics. The indeterminacy that a de Manian reading always discovers in the literary text comes to represent the “whole of literature” (221, 230), even as the equation of literature with rhetoric removes the justification for a traditional literary syllabus. In its place stands the theory syllabus of the graduate seminar, which routinizes the charisma of the master theorist (since this syllabus can have no rationale other than his preferences) at the same time as it reconstitutes traditional literary education as the reproduction of technical proficiency.

The final chapter of *Cultural Capital* turns to aesthetic judgment, the problem that motivates the entire book. One reason for the importance of Guillory’s argument is his conviction that aesthetic judgment is not just a salutary activity but an unavoidable one, “as though human beings could ever refrain from judging the things they make,” he writes (xiv). Because it is unavoidable, and because its pangs and pleasures are inextricably bound up in both the economic processes of cultural production and the psychic processes of cultural consumption, judgment presents itself as “a privileged site for reimagining the relation between the cultural and the economic in social life.” “If literary critics are not yet in a position to recognize the inevitability of the social practice of judgment,” he writes, “that is a measure of how far the critique of the canon still is from developing a sociology of judgment. The theory of cultural capital elaborated in this book is an attempt to construct just such a sociology” (xiv).

The final chapter thus contests the accounts of both left-liberal critics (represented by Barbara Herrnstein Smith) and Marxist ones (such as Tony Bennett, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and Frank Lentricchia), who conceive of aesthetic judgment in terms of aesthetic value and thus insist on the whole practice of judgment as suspect or compromised. But to discover that aesthetic value indexes inequalities of class does not do away with aesthetic experience: “It is as though the critique of political economy had congratulated itself for having exposed the intrinsic worthlessness of paper money,” Guillory writes (324). Instead, he recovers a long history of aesthetics prior to the concept of value. What this history

reveals is that the eighteenth-century rise of aesthetic discourse and the “work of art” was coincident with the rise of political economy and the commodity form such that the distinction between commodities and artworks was initially one of degree rather than kind. It was this indeterminacy that prompted the development of a theory of taste and a concomitant theory of the autonomy of the artwork as encouraging the virtuous contemplation of beauty over and above utility. “It was the apparent continuum of production, then, which required the exercise of taste, or a faculty of ‘discrimination’ in the realm of consumption,” Guillory writes. “Production and consumption proved to be the recto and verso of civil society, and a claim for civil society’s autonomy in the sphere of the economic required a similar claim on behalf of cultural production. This claim took the form characteristically of a defense of the faculty of taste that was not ‘legislated,’ but which nevertheless obeyed an inexplicit law, a ‘je ne sais quoi’” (308).

What would judgment signify in a world where cultural capital was distributed equally—that is, in a culture of universal access to all levels of the educational system? This is the thought experiment with which Guillory ends his book, fusing Marx and Bourdieu to imagine the universalization of cultural production, a world in which autonomy is no longer the privilege of the dominant class. Instead of indexing differences in class or education, “the cultural capital embodied in cultural products would then be judged (and also contested) on aesthetic grounds, as the products already are, but not on the basis of their inaccessibility, the restriction of access guaranteed by the educational system.” This would result in a tremendous broadening of “the field of aesthetic judgment,” Guillory writes. “What we call canon formation would then become a much larger part of social life, because not restricted to the institutions of the materially advantaged” (339).

Building the affirmative case for judgment, aesthetic or otherwise, is *Cultural Capital*’s most courageous act—and it is worth recalling that in Guillory’s account, the aesthetic is always mingled with the economic, the political, the moral, the hedonistic. Canonical critique has largely disavowed the aesthetic, and by extension aimed to “neutralize pleasure on behalf of more socially acceptable—or as the case may be, more socially transgressive—agendas,” he writes in a subsequent essay, “It Must Be Abstract” (Guillory 2006: 66). The end result is a patchwork of canons and countercanons that reflect the social identities of many but have changed the class status of none. By contrast, *Cultural Capital* ends with a utopian thought experiment that imagines the full socialization of education, the liberation of aesthetic judgment from the restrictions of the school, and the creation

of an integrated curriculum whose objects are neither “lifeless monuments” nor “proofs of class distinction” (Guillory 1993: 340). In the meantime, the derogation of judgment within the field of literary studies, in spite of promising instances of resistance and rejuvenation, can only underwrite a tragic disciplinary incoherence.

## 2.

Despite its tremendous sophistication and breadth of thought, it may well be true that *Cultural Capital* ranks “among the best-known and least-influential works of modern theory,” as Michael Clune (2021: 13) has recently written. The term *cultural capital* has become almost ubiquitous in discussions of the literary curriculum and the role it plays in higher education. Yet Guillory’s work has been largely absent in recent debates about the state of the profession and the discipline of literary studies. It could be argued that his method of structural functionalism, whereby artworks must be read as the singular products of complex and overlapping institutional dynamics, has underwritten the subfield of literary sociology, with its focus on creative writing programs, prize culture, and publishing houses. Yet engagement with the core argument of *Cultural Capital*, about the sociology of judgment and the historical category of literature, has largely occurred within the resurgent scholarship on aesthetics, from, for instance, Isobel Armstrong’s *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000), Sianne Ngai’s *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2015), Timothy Aubry’s *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures* (2018), and Michael Clune’s *A Defense of Judgment* (2021).

This special issue of *Genre* seeks to bring Guillory’s theory of canon formation back into contemporary debates about the future of literary studies, the politics of cultural representation, and the state of the humanities in crisis. The most recent iteration of the “canon wars,” as represented by debates about free speech, “cancel culture,” and decolonizing the neoliberal university, cannot be disentangled from the post-2008 (and now, post-2021) gutting of humanities divisions, the widening gap between public and private institutions of learning, or the changes wrought by new mediascapes. The arguments of *Cultural Capital* are necessary once again—as they always have been—to understanding the politics and function of literature and literary criticism in the present. What did the book predict? What has changed? What has been missed, forgotten, or misread?

The contributors to this issue have approached these questions from a broad and fascinating range of historical, national, and methodological perspectives. In



“Elegizing Cultural Capital,” Simon During assesses the influence Guillory’s book had on the then-fledgling subfield of literary sociology. For During, Guillory’s influence cuts in two directions, one positive and salutary, the other bleak. Guillory provides the helpfully Bourdieusian terms and frameworks that have underpinned genuinely provocative and illuminating studies of the literary seminar, the creative writing program, literary prizes, and the publishing industry. Yet the analysis of institutional structures, During argues, often has gone hand in hand with the evacuation of literary analysis and fine-grained historical appreciation, which have been replaced either by description or allegoresis, making *Cultural Capital* itself symptomatic of the crisis of literary study and its objects. Against Guillory’s thought experiment in the end, During reads Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* to propose that aristocratic institutions of education and the habituses they instill are both necessary for the cultural intelligibility of the canon and prophetic of its social marginalization. Stendhal, he claims, “predicts canonical literature’s tragic fate in a liberal, democratic, capitalist society.” He concludes that while this is depressing, it is not a reason “to stop teaching the canon to those engaged by it.”

Amanda Anderson’s “The Politics and Psychology of the Literary Field: Revising *Cultural Capital*” draws out a largely unappreciated aspect of Guillory’s method: psychoanalysis. For Anderson, psychoanalysis brings to Guillory’s structuralist and sociological claims a rich humanist intrigue, making visible the psychic investments of literary critics, professors of English, students of literature, and even administrators in what Guillory (1993: 38) describes as the “ego ideal” of the profession. These investments help to account for the “mistaken sense of political relevance” claimed for “opening” the canon to “philosophical works, to works by minorities, and now to popular and mass cultural works” (265). It also helps to account for the desire of scholars to cultivate a sense of anti-institutionality while ensconced in secure and increasingly privileged positions of employment, a conceptual bind (and blindness) that Anderson links to Guillory’s discussion of paradox in his chapter on the New Critics. At the same time, Anderson notes, Guillory’s stringent sociological method tends to leave out the experiential or lived dimensions of literary study, dimensions that are often combined with ideology critique in the work of scholars like Saidiya Hartman and Lauren Berlant. This affirmative turn offers Anderson some hope, as the humanities “are always combining ethos and method.” The ego-ideal that Guillory unmask is for Anderson an important resource for the transformation and preservation of the field.

The next three essays elaborate the insights and limits of *Cultural Capital* when applied to non-US contexts of higher education. Ignacio Sánchez Prado's "*Cultural Capital: Reflections from a Latin Americanist*" celebrates the introduction of Bourdieu to US literary studies, which, as Sánchez Prado points out, has been more resistant to his influence than Mexican and Latin American scholars. Yet Sánchez Prado questions the absence of other national literatures and comparative literature departments in Guillory's account of literature's cultural capital, claiming that "as a Latin Americanist, the only possible approach I have to *Cultural Capital* is to provincialize it." In Latin America, the question of the canon "has a double dimension: the criteria of representation for the continent's culture, and the historical struggle of a cosmopolitan (semi)peripheral region to assert its universal cultural citizenship," he writes. The linguistic and cultural tension between Latin American and Spain, the imperial relationship between Latin American and the United States, and the rise of "area" studies in the American academies all pressurize the notion of cultural capital in distinctive ways and toward distinctive ends in Latin American literary and cultural studies. Indeed, Latin American literary studies is the ideal place to articulate a strong argument for cultural capital, Sánchez Prado suggests, because it has never put into circulation a fiction of autonomy or even sought to assert the partial or privileged autonomy of the classroom against the politics that would seem to take place outside of it; literature continues to be a domain of political struggle in institutional sites well beyond the school. The highest praise he has for Guillory is that "every field and subfield of the literary humanities should have its *Cultural Capital*."

In "John Guillory, Meet Kwasi Wiredu: A 1990s Guide to the Future English Department," Jeanne-Marie Jackson considers the arguments of *Cultural Capital* from the perspective of African philosophy and the problem of decolonizing the university. Focusing on the Ghanaian decolonial philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, Jackson argues that one might place the political emphasis of literary studies on decolonizing concepts rather than decolonizing syllabi or curricula, which she takes to be a superficial approach to a profound problem. Jackson points out how Wiredu, who wrote around the same time as Guillory, married his own critique of the politics of representation to a version of decolonization aimed specifically at the genealogy of concepts. We ought to decolonize African thought, Wiredu argued, to level the epistemological playing field and discern what concepts and values ought to be espoused. For Jackson, such a shift would stress epistemology over aesthetics in the social practice of judgment. Wiredu's

project, she writes, “facilitates located concepts’ and traditions’ mutual interrogation, so that a ‘decolonized’ thinker is one who can make an informed choice as to what analytic lenses or worldviews can or should be defended.” Even as literary studies continues to open up possible texts and traditions for study, Jackson notes, the bottom has fallen out of a hiring market organized around periodizing categories and national literatures. Turning back to Wiredu and Guillory together might help us not only think more clearly about the politics of literary study but also construct a version of the field that is concept-based and responsive to the pressures of our shifting institutional fortunes.

Shamil Jeppie’s “Reading Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* in South Africa” opens with the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall protests at the University of Cape Town as an example of the ambivalent relationship between symbolic politics—represented here by a student splattering feces all over the statue of Cecil Rhodes—and demands for institutional transformation in postapartheid South Africa’s educational system. Jeppie suggests that the nearly seamless appropriation of the symbols of apartheid, as, for instance, in the highly publicized Rhodes Must Fall campaigns at the University of Oxford, occludes the specific context from which demands for decolonization emerged and perpetuates “the use of apartheid racial terminology (Black, White, Coloured, Asian, etc.)” in the interest of the “transformation” of the global university. The problem Jeppie identifies is that local canonical critique has borrowed US discourses of racial identity, which, in the South African context, have “almost completely silenced class, class inequality, and class struggle.” Instead of foregrounding Bourdieu, he suggests that a more effective theorization of the politics of reading and writing would have foregrounded Gramsci, “whose work crisscrosses literature as cultural production and practical political mobilization”—a convergence more familiar to students and teachers at the University of Cape Town than those who work at the US or UK universities around which most debates concerning the politics of literature take place.

Perhaps the most polemical of the essays, Mark Chiang’s “Refusing Race: Cultural Capital and Cultural Studies,” takes issue with Guillory’s point of departure, Bourdieu’s field analysis, which Chiang reads as increasingly hostile to cultural studies. Reading Guillory’s 1997 essay “Bourdieu’s Refusal” alongside Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant’s 1999 essay “On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason,” Chiang argues that both thinkers posit a strange reversal of political values whereby well-intentioned social actions intended to address racial and

gendered inequalities of representation only prop up structures of market domination, while sociological determinism resists the market's reach. This reversal, Chiang contends, only works within Bourdieu's fairly programmatic division of the globe from the nation-state, the universal from the particular, and the institution of the school from its outside. Chiang argues that the "globalization of race" allows for the emergence of a transnational, intersectional, heteronomous, and relatively unmediated political discourse that Bourdieusian sociology forbids by virtue of its emphasis on the nation-state and its institutions as necessarily local sites of mediation. Cultural studies, in particular, provides an entrance to that project. "One limitation of racial politics is that it does not necessarily impact the structure of economic relations, but at the same time," Chiang writes, "purely class or economic struggles do not necessarily alter noneconomic modes of class domination in the social and cultural sphere, nor the symbolic violence of social hierarchies such as race or gender."

We conclude with Mark McGurl's "Social Capital: Epic Fantasy and the Magic School," which begins by suggesting that cultural capital may no longer be the most important analytic category for understanding the school's reproduction of class. Instead, McGurl argues, it may have been superseded by social capital, which Bourdieu (1986: 21) defined as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or, in other words, to membership in a group." For McGurl, the shift from cultural to social capital entails a corresponding shift in the objects of literary sociological analysis from apparently High Cultural art forms, like John Donne's poetry, to mass cultural ones, like fantasy novels. Reading across a variety of young adult novels that take the school "as a stage for the drama of social recognition," McGurl argues that social capital helps us see "the symbolic currency of group affiliation and real capital outlay" made on behalf of well-connected, multicultural heroes and heroines. The fantasy, of course, is that they can redeem the value of a humanistic education, represent all with their hybridized, high-achieving, sometimes transspecies professional-managerial identities, and "make their people proud."

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