Desiring researchers: Reflecting on sexuality and fieldwork from Senegal

Loes Oudenhuijsen

My PhD research on sexually dissident women in Senegal involves participant observation in bars. Bars are particularly gendered and sexualised spaces where sex workers come to look for clients, men come to look for sex, and queer women express their sexuality relatively freely. Navigating such a space as a researcher is both challenging and informative regarding social and sexual dynamics in urban Senegal. Through a reflection on personal experiences of unwanted sexual attention and sexual harassment from interlocutors, this article attempts to further our theoretical discussions on the productive and unproductive aspects of sexuality in our fieldwork.

“I have slept with all the girls from Sikessé,” said Nogaye with a penetrating gaze as we were having a beer in a bar. I went to this bar with Ousmane, a man I had met the day before in another bar where I had been to observe and meet sex workers. Ousmane took a seat next to me and occasionally put his arm around my shoulder. When he kissed me on the cheek and I looked at him with a combination of confusion and anger, he said: “we have to pretend we’re a couple. If not, people will think that Nogaye and you are together. It’s not safe.” Nogaye looked at us jealously and a couple of minutes later she asked me to join her on the other side of the bar so she could smoke a cigarette. I joined her, happy to leave Ousmane. When we reached the toilets, Nogaye pulled me towards her and kissed me.

This happened in January 2020, in Sikessé, a middle-sized town in Senegal, where I conducted fieldwork for my doctoral research. I study how societal debates on gender and sexuality are fought through the lives and bodies of women who, in one way or another, transgress the sexual norm. In particular, I focus on three groups of women who, despite clear differences in the way they transgress the sexual norm, have become the object of anxiety in Senegal because they challenge the moral fabric of heteronormative society. The women I work with are queer women, sex workers, and self-identified feminists. In this article, I draw on personal experience of fieldwork in urban Senegal on sexually dissident women to show how doing research in bars, where sex is ubiquitous, informed my understanding of sexual dynamics in Senegal. My research is ethnographic and draws heavily on participant observation to allow me to build relationships of trust with women, so that they feel comfortable to share aspects of their intimate lives with me. More than in any of the other locations where I conducted my fieldwork – on the football field, in people's homes, at activist demonstrations, and in workshops – my presence in bars required a skilful navigation and dodging of flirts, inappropriate remarks, and bold invitations to sex to establish my position as a researcher. I failed hopelessly in some cases. Reflecting on these experiences has helped me to forge a better understanding of power dynamics and shifting positionality in the context I studied and operated in as a queer researcher. If we incorporate such experiences in academic analysis and writing, we will produce better ethnographers and better ethnography (Hanson and Richards 2019).

When Nogaye kissed me, I pushed her away. What followed was a confused and indignant response: "I thought this was what you wanted?" Nogaye said, somewhat irritated. I had not seen this coming and I was confused about the signals I had apparently given off: had I invited this kiss by accepting the invitation to hang out with her this night and by following her to the toilets? Flirts and signals aside, I was confused that this had happened because same-sex sexuality is criminalised in Senegal, and Ousmane had warned me not to appear

too close to Nogaye because people might think we were a couple. Was Nogaye not afraid of this? It was one of the reasons why I tacitly accepted Ousmane's repeated flirts and sexual advances, another one being that I was in need of data and thus wanted to have a good relationship with the people in the bar. I gave the incident some more thought in the following days, and I wondered about the statement Nogaye had made, that she had slept with every woman in the city. What did her kiss and her subsequent insistence on us hooking up mean: was it just a bold attempt to seduce me, or was there more to it? Reflecting on the question "why and how did people talk to me?" (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman 2017, 378) has helped me to understand the dynamics of sexuality in my fieldwork and the way same-sex relations, networks, and their gendered dynamics are constructed in present-day Senegal. Drawing on academic work on the productive capacities of sexuality in the field (Bolton 1992; Fields 2016) and recent studies on sexual harassment and the harmful consequences of its negation in academic writing, in this article I reflect upon the effects of unwanted sexual attention during fieldwork and how this may impact our research process and outcomes in the field we study.

REFLECTING ON SEX AND FIELDWORK

Reflexivity on the impact of a researcher's identities (race, class, gender, age, etc.) on the research process, a common subsection in research methodologies, often omits the impact of sexuality between researchers and interlocutors (Hanson and Richards 2019). Methodology sections rarely mention flirting, attraction, romantic relationships, or other expressions of sexuality, as factors that built or broke relationships (Clair 2016; Mphaphuli and Griffin 2019). There are some notable exceptions of scholars who break the silence surrounding the anthropologist's sexuality and their encounters in the field, showing where sexuality and epistemology intersect (Browne et al. 2010; Fields 2016; Kulick and Willson 1995; Lewin and Leap 1996; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999; Meadow 2018; Newton 1996). This

work notwithstanding, the asexual researcher persists today as an idea and ideology.

In other studies, our attention is drawn to the dangers associated with the silence that still largely marks sexuality in the field. This silence increases the risk of sexual harassment happening, because it prevents proper preparation for researchers through a reflection on their multiple and shifting positionalities in relation to research participants, and on the possible risks and vulnerabilities that come with such relations. It furthermore leaves researchers who have experienced harassment with feelings of guilt and shame (Diprose, Thomas, and Rushton 2013; Hanson and Richards 2017; Johansson 2015; Kloß 2016; Schneider et al. 2020). These authors call for frank discussions on the risk and vulnerability that are inherent to the construction of interpersonal relationships during fieldwork. Given the messiness and unpredictability of fieldwork relations, it is ethically and epistemologically imperative to speak about sexuality in fieldwork as it has most likely impacted our fieldwork, both in our interactions with interlocutors and in the knowledge we produce.

A lacuna in the recent attention for sexual harassment is that it largely focuses on cross-sex dynamics; women's same-sex relationships and sexual harassment among women are particularly absent from this discussion. One reason may be that in portraying an image of ourselves as professional researchers, with a certain distance to our fieldwork subjects, our own gender and sexual dissidence are brushed aside in the analysis, particularly when we work with queer populations. Reflecting on my own experience of unwanted sexual advances from another woman, of being part of the messiness of fieldwork that involves our own gendered and sexual subjectivities in the field (Meadow 2018), has helped me to go beyond an understanding of harassment as being about gendered power differences and the objectification of women by men only.

SEXUALISED SPACES, ASCRIBED IDENTITIES

Despite attempts to position oneself professionally as a researcher, the field ascribes gendered and sexual identities to you (Cupples 2002). The combination of my research topic with the context of, occasionally, doing fieldwork in bars, has led to many sexual advances, both from women and men. In particular, when men approached me, many would quickly let me know that they were interested in me sexually. They thought I was available for sex: why else would a woman go to a bar alone? Explaining that I was there for research on issues of sexuality and marriage did little to help: “research on sexuality? You will only find out what sexuality is like here if you have sex with us!”, was a typical response.

After a few nights of conducting research in bars, I realised that unwanted sexual attention would be a feature of this study and that I would have to find a way to deal with and prepare for such attention. I learned over time and with experience. The boundaries between what are experienced as acceptable and harmless flirts, remarks and sexual attention on the one hand, and unwanted attention or harassment on the other, are vague, and they can shift over time. Reflecting on what situations turned unpleasant and why, has given me particularly useful insights into the social and sexual dynamics in those bars, as well as in wider Senegalese society.

In Senegal, many bars are hidden from the public eye: 95% of the population identifies as Muslim (CIA 2017), and most Senegalese would not publicly admit to drinking alcohol. Social norms with regards to going out and to drinking and smoking are far more permissive for men than for women. Bars are particularly gendered and sexualised spaces. The presence of men greatly outnumbers that of women, and women are particularly objectified in bars, which, for many, are a place for hooking up. Moreover, the bars I frequented were particularly known for being frequented by sex workers. Depending on the type of bar, women either sit alone at a table with their drink, which would

clearly indicate their position as a sex worker or, alternatively, they share a table with their friends. In the latter case, the friends share beers and roast meat, and proposals for sex by acquaintances, friends of friends, or the occasional new visitor to the bar are part of some evenings, but not of all.

Nightlife stands in stark contrast with life during the day, and all sorts of taboos are broken in bars and clubs. Nightlife is the domain of *kooba*, a collective name in Wolof for those who frequent bars and night clubs, specifically, queer persons, sex workers, thieves, and aggressors (Oudenhuijsen 2021). In addition to being a code name for all those who transgress sexual and social norms through their acts and attitudes in nightlife, and a discreet way of speaking about this network of non-normative relationships, *kooba* refers to a certain intelligence required to navigate this environment. So, when Nogaye said that she had slept with all the girls in her city, she was conveying her social status in this milieu. Nogaye had built her status and personhood by gaining intimate knowledge of the women in this *kooba* world. Her status is based on her centrality in this network of queer women and she had always made this clear in the way she took care of her relationships, spoiling girlfriends with gifts, new clothes, and good food and drinks. This way of acquiring status must be understood within a context of stigma: *actes contre nature* (acts against the order of nature, i.e. homosexual conduct) are criminalised in Senegal. Young adults, and particularly women, are under pressure from family and society to marry, and public attention for homosexuality and the supposed degradation of morality has been on the rise for well over a decade (Coly 2019). These constraints limit unmarried queer women's options to build status in society. The focus of many of them is on the queer milieu, where their visibility and centrality in the network enhances their status. Nogaye thus takes a certain pride in having kissed all girls from Sikessé: it builds her status in the *kooba* milieu, where society is otherwise hostile to masculine-presenting women.

INEVITABLY INTIMATE

To be accepted as a researcher in this milieu, required substantial effort from my side to build a good relationship with Nogaye and her entourage. Ethnographic field research in general demands that researchers develop close relationships with interlocutors. Opening up about my own sexuality has been one of the ways through which I have been perceived as nonthreatening and approachable by queer interlocutors (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman 2017), and it has thus been very useful in building rapport with women. For queer women, my queerness gave them the confidence that their stories were safe with me, and for some the possibility of something sexually intimate happening between us, drew them to me. When I first met my interlocutor Fama in the privacy of her home in 2017, she had assured me, "I do not live the lesbian life." We had been introduced to each other at a queer party a couple of days before, so I had assumed that when contacting her privately, she could tell me more about her life as a queer woman. Explaining to her the reason I was in Senegal, she continued: "not here in Senegal, it is too risky. Maybe if one day I leave Senegal, I could live it. But here, no, never… sometimes girls approach me and tell me that they like the way I dress, that they love me. But I always tell them that I don't live it." I was puzzled by her denial of "living the lesbian life," but she later told me that it had been a way of protecting herself. Since she did not know me yet, she was not sure if it was safe to talk to me about her same-sex desires. When we met again about a week later, she started to test my susceptibility to flirts. She switched to Wolof – we spoke French together – and asked me out of the blue: "*kaay fóon ma*" (come, kiss me). I pretended not to understand the Wolof and ignored the question, which had come to be my usual awkward response to flirts or unwanted sexual attention. Later that afternoon, as she was preparing something for us to eat, she checked that I was a 'woman' and she was a 'man,' something that would make a relationship between the two of us possible, and desirable according to the gender logics that many in the community of same-sex desiring women in Senegal express.

When upon a later visit I asked her how much had been true of her earlier statement that she did not "live the lesbian life," she said that she could not trust me at first, and that only later had she believed that I, too, "lived the lesbian life" and thus would not divulge her secret. My initial meetings with Fama reveal how she was positioning me both as a researcher and as a person, in which my sexuality played an important role in the construction of our relationship. Had I not been queer, I doubt she would have opened up to me. But when she had established that I was also queer, she was quick to make known her own intentions for our relationship. In this exploration of the possibilities for our relationship, not only sexuality but also gender (checking whether I was a 'man' or a 'woman') and race (she expressed her wish to marry a woman in the Netherlands multiple times) informed her interest.

In my interactions with Nogaye, the "asymmetry of purpose" (Mphaphuli and Griffin 2019, 38) between us was even more obvious. Whenever I met Nogaye, she would try to steer our relationship in a romantic direction. I, in turn, attempted to establish the relationship as one between researcher and interlocutor. We both made use of the other's desire to get to know each other, and in a way we nourished each other's desires: I often responded ambiguously to her flirts in order to get information, and her flirtations were also insightful to me for my research. Playing along with the behaviour of our interlocutors, to a certain extent, is not uncommon, as we try to establish and maintain relationships. And thus our conversations oscillated between my inquiries into Nogaye's experiences as a queer woman in Sikessé and her explorations of the opportunity to start a romantic relationship with me.

Nogaye had been married to a French *vieux* (an old man) who spent most of his time outside of Senegal, which left her free to invite her (girl)friends to her apartment and spoil them with the money that her husband sent her. When he passed away after six years of marriage, she had lavishly spent the money he had left her on holiday trips to

North Africa with friends. Some of these friends had now obtained asylum in the US, Canada, and France, on the grounds of persecution for their sexual orientation. Nogaye "had been too lazy" at the time to ask for asylum, but now she imagined herself leaving for Europe, "to be able to live my life quietly with my wife," she said, smiling mischievously. Her friends who had obtained asylum had drawn on their condemnation for *actes contre nature* (homosexual conduct) a few years back, when they had been caught as a group by the police for the possession of marijuana, while being sexually intimate with their girlfriends. Nogaye was subsequently portrayed in local media as the "leader of a lesbian gang," and she was sentenced to eight months in prison. This story was well-known in Sikessé, and in the milieu of *kooba* she was regularly referred to as Nogaye *góor* (man), a humorous allusion to Nogaye's masculine appearance and the way she provides for her girlfriends in the way that men would provide for their girlfriend according to gender norms. She told me this story as we were having a beer at La Cabane. "Everybody knows about my [lesbian] life," she said as we moved to the interior of the bar on her request. "But I worry about you, because that woman over there, she does nothing but gossip!"

Nogaye was right to point out that others may interpret our sitting together as evidence that we were a couple. As a somewhat known *lesbienne*, given her prison history, I feel that she sometimes deliberately destabilised me when she displayed her sexual interest in me in ways I thought were visible to others (such as the kiss in the bar). She played into the dynamics of secrecy that characterise the queer milieu in Senegal, but which affect people differently. She had less to conceal than I, she thought, hence her remark that she worried about others gossiping about me. Even though as a *tubaab* (European, white foreigner) I am permitted much more sexual "looseness" or deviance in general, my need to remain a credible researcher compromised this permissiveness. In general, the different levels of secrecy that queer persons have to maintain gives a certain power to people like Nogaye who have little left to lose. This added

another layer of complexity to my sexual subjectivity in the field, which I would not have experienced as a heterosexual researcher. As queer researchers, we must be careful of relating to interlocutors through our sexuality, because of the potential risks it can entail for interlocutors and for ourself. In a context of rising homophobia and controversy on gender, feminism, and reproductive rights in Senegal, with the West supposedly at the origin of this so-called moral degeneration of Senegalese society, these risks are to be taken seriously. Being careful to whom I disclose my research topic, I can say that, in general, relating to women through a shared sexuality, and going along to a certain extent with the advances from Nogaye, Ousmane, and others, has opened many doors for me throughout my fieldwork, as well as having contributed to my understanding of same-sex relationships in Senegal. Our interactions around shared, or different, identity markers inform the intersubjective construction of knowledge in the field (Karimi 2019). Or as Dubisch (1995) put it, reflecting on our sexual 'self' in the field, is also how the 'other' is constructed.

DESIRING LESBIANS

By thinking through Nogaye's sexual advances and by contextualising them with the conversations I had with her and her friends, I had learned a great deal about her life. Her status as a much-desired *lesbienne* who had allegedly slept with all the girls in Sikessé, was informed by her financial situation during her marriage. This had changed after her husband had died and Nogaye had spent all that she inherited, which had left her with little means to provide for (girl) friends. When she expressed the desire to hook up with me, this could be understood as an attempt to re-establish her position in the queer milieu. Social status is conferred, among other things, on one's position in a network, as well as on appearance. It is important who you are seen with, and in what context. Nogaye was no longer able to provide for her (girl)friends the way she used to do. What was left was to show that she was still capable of attracting girlfriends. One's ability to date beautiful young women, which is considered both precious and

costly, is part of a youngster's social status as *nàndite* (Prothmann 2018). Prothmann defines *nàndite* as "an urban citizen capable of projecting an image of success." *Nàndite*, defined in the dictionary as comprehension, resembles *kooba* in the sense that both terms refer to an understanding of what the general public does not understand. For Nogaye, being seen with a new girlfriend – and all the assumptions about economic wealth and travel options that come with being with a white person – was thus part of her attempt to re-establish herself as a successful *lesbienne*, as a *nàndite* or *kooba*. Dating me would resolve the issue that she could no longer provide for her girlfriends, as it was assumed that I would take on this role as an affluent European. Nogaye made clear to me that she had a preference for "correct" women, which she defined as women who knew how to speak French correctly and who had been to school. Having told me about her marriage to a white man, I understood that she was positioning me as a good candidate, and herself as an experienced partner in interracial relationships. A relationship with me could furthermore possibly compensate for the fact that she had not, like some of her friends who had been resettled to other countries, pursued the path of seeking asylum after they had been released from prison. Race, class, and gender intersected here and they destabilised the homonormative ideals of masculine providerhood that Nogaye often held when speaking about her relationships with women.

When I returned to Sikessé after a year of absence, I went out with one of my interlocutors, Aminata, and her friends. Just before midnight we arrived at La Cabane, the bar where we had first met each other in February 2020, and where I was first confronted with the uninhibited sexualisation of women. As I greeted her friends who were already seated around a table, I heard someone shout "Loes Clarita!" I recognised Nogaye's voice. I had not noticed her in the crowd and I hardly recognised her. She was wearing a *djellaba* and a headscarf, a sharp contrast with the shorts, shirts, and caps she had worn when I had first met her. Aminata told me that Nogaye got married last year. I apologised to Nogaye for not recognising her, and I commented that

she had changed. "Yes, sometimes you have to change. I was married, you know. To see what that would bring me. But I found out that I really do not like men. I divorced last week, so now I am free!" During her ten months of marriage, she had hardly visited any bars. She had preferred to drink in the privacy of her friends' homes. Bars are not just a place where friends meet; they are also places from where a lot of gossip emerges and spreads. Even though it was hardly a secret that Nogaye dated women, she knew that, upon her marriage, she would be policed to see if she really had "changed her life" and had left same-sex love and (excessive) drinking and smoking behind. Having just divorced last week, this was her first trip to the bar in a long time. Whether or not she had indeed left behind same-sex love during her year of marriage I do not know. I did experience, however, that she was eager to get back into this life.

"I want to fuck you right away," she said as I had taken a seat next to her. I laughed and told her she had not changed a bit. Hoping to move on to discuss her marriage, divorce, and everything that had happened in the past year – I was, after all, still hoping to engage with her as a researcher – she put her hand on my thigh, and repeated: "I want to make love to you." Annoyed now, I removed her hand and said that I thought I had been clear that I was not interested in her sexually. "What's wrong with you? I'm telling you I want to make love to you, and you don't even respond! Never has a girl refused me, you're really weird!" she said, rather irritated. I felt intimidated by her, and I knew that she would not hesitate to try to seduce me as long as I showed interest in her – an interest that was scholarly for me, but sexual or romantic for her. Constructing relationships and trust with people often involved continuous negotiations about the terms of that relationship, and it would be naïve to state that other interlocutors were necessarily always interested in my academic project. Here, with Nogaye, however, I had to draw a line. I felt intimidated and it felt unethical to respond to or even ignore any longer, her sexual remarks just to keep her as an interlocutor. I decided to leave her, return to Aminata and her friends, and decline Nogaye's invitation to spend the next day with her at home.

Her insistence on us hooking up shows how power can never be simply assumed to be always and only held by researchers, despite large inequalities, mostly economically and in terms of mobility (Grenz 2005; Johansson 2015). From the moment we had gotten to know each other, when Ousmane had introduced me to Nogaye as his "new lesbian friend" that she should meet (and saying nothing about me being a researcher), our interactions had been sexually charged. Nogaye had noticed that although I did not accept her invitations to sleep with her, neither did I push her away. She must have realised that I did not want to lose her as an interlocutor, a situation that had given her some power over our relationship. Grenz argues that in research on sexual practices, the interactions with interlocutors "provided space to discursively reproduce sexual identity on both levels, through the actual content of their stories as through our interaction" (Grenz 2005, 2111). Indeed, through her attempts to seduce me, Nogaye also expressed how she dealt with heteronormativity and expectations of cross-sex marriage in Senegal, as well as how she viewed ideal same-sex relationships and her active role in attracting girlfriends.

THE ETHICS OF SEXUALITY IN THE FIELD

The title of this article, desiring researchers, is ambiguous. As a researcher, I desire data and information and, given the topic of my research, rather intimate information about people's sexual lives. In turn, the people I engage with have their own desires to engage with me. In some cases, these desires may be sexual or romantic. Such romantic desires may be reciprocal. Here in my experiences with Nogaye, they were not, and our desires for the other diverged too much. Sexuality is messy and unpredictable, and it occurs as a continuum of expressions: from being conducive to the construction of relationships to sexual harassment and intimidation, and everything in between. It is therefore a challenge to recognise, indicate, and act when situations become unpleasant. Awareness within academia of this reality of sexuality is imperative, however, both for researchers and their institutions, to prepare for and respond to sexual harassment

and advances in the field. My experiences as a queer woman in Senegal working with queer women furthermore show how our sexual subjectivities in the field are more complex than heteronormative ideas about the sexualisation (and victimisation) of women by men would assume, and may include concerns about safety and secrecy, as I opened up to many interlocutors about my own sexuality. Such experiences demand a questioning of our standards of what a good ethnographer and good ethnography are, which still privilege the idea of the solitary researcher who handles danger and intimacy as necessary *rites de passage* to become a full-fledged anthropologist, and whose analysis obscures the ways in which our bodies inform our research practices and theorisations. We cannot change our fieldwork sites or the way we are confronted with heteropatriarchy during fieldwork, but if we acknowledge that it is inherent to worlds that we inhabit – both at home and in the field – this will simultaneously further our analyses about sexual politics and social dynamics in our field sites, as well as prepare us for the risks and vulnerabilities that we face in the field.

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About the author

Loes Oudenhuijsen holds a BSc in International Development Studies from Wageningen University, and an MA in African Studies (research)

from Leiden University. She currently works as a PhD candidate on her own project, titled ‘Islam, everyday ethics, and its gendered contestations: ‘wicked’ women in Senegal from 1950 to the present’. In addition to her work at the African Studies Centre at of Leiden University, Loes has been involved in the Voice4Thought Foundation, an open platform foundation that engages with researchers, artists, activists, bloggers, and institutions to co-create new forms of knowledge and reflection.

Notes

[1] All quotes have been translated from French or Wolof to English by the author.

[2] For safety reasons, I have altered the name of the city, in addition to using pseudonyms for all my interlocutors.

[3] Young queer women in Senegal speak about jump and sexy to distinguish gender identifications, with jump referring to masculine-presenting women, and sexy to feminine-presenting women. Romantic relationships typically unfold between a jump and a sexy, and many of my interlocutors found the idea of two jump dating very strange and inappropriate, often finding that highly uninteresting sexually and sometimes even referring to that as male homosexuality, which many perceived to be bad.

[4] Not the real name of the bar.

[5] Among other things, on 23 May 2021, a large demonstration “Non à l’homosexualité” (No to homosexuality) had been organised in Dakar. A couple of weeks later, a conference on gender-based violence, organised at a high school in the city of Tivaouane, was disrupted by students who protested the propaganda of LGBT ideology, as they called it, that the term “gender” implied.

[6] I employ the term my interlocutors use to describe themselves and their (girl)friends. Whether they speak to me in Wolof or in French, they call themselves lesbienne. This was often accompanied by “je vis ça” (I live that). The emphasis on practice points at the discrepancy in understandings of sexuality between Senegal (and many other regions in the world) and the West. Terms circulate globally via human rights discourse and media, yet they hold different meanings to different people. Therefore, the Senegalese lesbienne cannot be equated with the English “lesbian” or “lesbian woman.”

Throughout the article, I employ the terms used by my interlocutors to describe their experiences and expressions of gender and sexuality.

[7] In his research, Prothmann writes about young men who acquire the status of being nàndite through dating beautiful young women. This is in line with heteronormative perceptions of dating in Senegal, but similar dynamics hold true for same-sex relationships.

[8] Luz Clarita was a Mexican telenovela (soap opera) broadcasted on local television in Senegal in the late 1990s.

[9] A long, loose-fitting dress worn a lot by men and women in the Maghreb region of North Africa. In Senegal, men and women often wear it when they are around the house, or they wear it over their short and shirt to cover their bodies appropriately when they leave the house to go to the boutique or to the market, for example.

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