AHR Forum
The Senses in History

In the Realm of the Senses: An Introduction

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"The scandalous idea that the senses have a history is, as Karl Marx once remarked, one of the touchstones of our historicity."[1] So wrote the eminent American literary critic Fredric Jameson in 1981. In the years since, we may not have come closer to reading that history in Marxist terms, as Jameson hoped we would, but the scandal has long since dissipated. Instead, exploring the infinite variety of sensual experience has become a staple of contemporary historical analysis, as it has of cultural studies and the social sciences at large. "Sense," we have come increasingly to appreciate, refers not only to the natural corporeal endowments that provide access to the world, but also to the meanings we attribute to the results. Other languages—German, for example, in the case of *Sinn*—have keywords that illustrate the same duality, while still others, including French and Italian, add the meaning of directional orientation as well to *sens* or *senso*. It is, of course, their complex interaction over time that allows us to understand that neither the sense *of* the senses nor the sense *produced by* the senses is invariant; nor is the direction in which the influence flows a one-way street. Indeed, we have come to acknowledge the mediation of the two in such a way that it has become increasingly difficult to isolate one entirely from the other. Meaning comes to a great extent through the senses, while the senses filter the world through the prior cultural meanings in which we are immersed. It is not for nothing that the Greeks could employ "common sense" (*koina aisthētika*, which in Latin became *sensus communis*) as a synonym both for *doxa*, or common opinion, and for the faculty that allows the different senses to subsume a singular object under universal categories.[2]

[1] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), 229. In the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx argued that the senses were alienated under capitalism—like property, they were "had" by individuals rather than communally shared—and would be emancipated when it passed. For a recent account and critique of Marx's position, see David Howes, "HYPERESTHESIA, or, The Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism," in Howes, ed., *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (Oxford, 2005), 281–303. This reader contains a helpful bibliography of recent work on the cultural study of the senses. It is part of the Berg Press series "Sensory Formations," also edited by Howes, which has readers on the five primary senses as well as on "the sixth sense."

[2] For the history of the term, see John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham, N.C., 1990). For a recent study of its origins in Aristotle, see Pavel Gregoric, *Aristotle on the Common Sense* (Oxford, 2007).

To the extent that all humans come into the world lacking the orientations and behavioral inclinations provided other animals by innate instinct, we need something that has come to be called "culture" to compensate for our inherent insufficiency. It is the genius—if at times also curse—of the species that we have invented and continue to invent myriad responses to that demand, a welter of historically variable contrivances to make up for our lack of hardwired patterns of behavior. Precisely what the mix of nature and nurture that produces these outcomes may be is, of course, a source of perennial and endless dispute. In the case of the senses, disentangling what is provided by nature and enhanced—or blunted—by culture is especially challenging. It may well be the case that the relative slowness in developing histories of the senses is due not only to the "scandalous" nature of the attempt, but also to its genuine difficulty, especially if we acknowledge that the evidence for change is often elusive, contradictory, and dubiously representative.[3] But for reasons that are doubtless themselves historical, we have become more and more willing to face the challenge.

Precisely which factors account for the burgeoning of historical studies of the senses can itself be only conjectured. Various "turns"—cultural, bodily, even linguistic—opened up new and hitherto unexplored territories of the past that enabled a closer examination of previously ignored phenomena.[4] The relentless pressure toward greater inclusivity in the study of everyday life, a growing respect for the dignity of *petit histoire*, and the rescuing of "low" subjects of whatever kind all conspired to alert us to the importance of historical changes in sensual experience. Quickening interest in the senses in ancillary disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, and literary criticism, also spilled over into historical studies.[5] A generation schooled in Michel Foucault's archaeological and genealogical investigations of the disciplining and self-fashioning of the body found added inspiration in the recovery of earlier studies of the corporeal dimension of the "civilizing process" by historical sociologists such as Norbert Elias.[6]

[3] For a sober analysis of the difficulties by one of the most accomplished students of the history of the senses, see Alain Corbin, "Charting the Cultural History of the Senses," in Howes, *The Empire of the Senses*, 128–139.

[4] The relevance of the linguistic turn for a new interest in the senses may seem less obvious than the other two. It has, however, opened up the question of the embedded sensual metaphors in language, alerted us to the importance of material and sensual vehicles for conveying meaning, and opened up questions of the translatability—or lack thereof—between conventional spoken and written languages and the "languages" of images, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. The historical development of accents, with all of their powerful cultural implications, shows the importance of sound in understanding language. See, for example, the essays in Joy Damousi and Desley Deacon, eds., *Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity: Essays on the History of Sound* (Canberra, 2007). There has, to be sure, been resistance against the assimilation of the senses to a linguistic model, for example in Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (New York, 2009).

[5] See, for example, the journal *The Senses and Society*, founded in 2006. The institutionalization of visual culture studies, which is more advanced than that devoted to the other senses, is traced in Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005). It might be noted that of the seventeen interviews she conducts with leading figures in the field, which are appended to the book, only one of those subjects teaches in a history department.

[6] See, for example, the essays in Jan Goldstein, ed., *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994). Foucault's now-familiar argument about the entanglement of power and the gaze exemplified by Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon has not, however, gone unchallenged. See Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800–1910* (Chicago, 2008). For a selection of responses to Elias, see Steven Loyal and Stephen Quilley, *The Sociology of Norbert Elias* (Cambridge, 2004).

In the contemporary art scene, what has been called the "de-aestheticization of the aesthetic" also focused attention on the dialectic of sublimation and desublimation of the body in artistic practice and the intersection of "high" art and its larger cultural context. It called into question the time-honored division of the arts according to their dominant sensual register, which had been so powerful a shibboleth from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing to Clement Greenberg.[7] The urgency of ecological and environmental questions and grudging awareness of the destructive role that humans play in the biosphere have had an impact as well. Even philosophy, so often hostile to the base claims of the body and intent on privileging the mind, has begun to take increasing notice, a change irreverently registered in Jacques Derrida's now-infamous question in his book on Hegel and Genet, *Glas*: "how can ontology take possession of a fart?"[8] The same curiosity also now often animates religious studies, which get well beyond time-honored anxieties about the alleged "sins of the flesh."[9]

If the senses can be situated at the unstable crossroads of nature and culture, they are also exemplary sites for the exploration of other perennial oppositions, such as subjective agency and objective determination, art and science, and activity and passivity, just to name a few.[10] They function not only as portals of vital information about the world, opening us to stimuli from without, but also as guardians of our integrity, protecting us from external dangers and threats. More than the sources of knowledge, orientation, and meaning, they serve as well as the avenues of pleasure and pain, whose thresholds may well vary on both the individual and the cultural level. At the same time that they humble us by comparison with animals whose sight is keener, hearing sharper, or smell more discriminating, they elevate us by demonstrating that we are the only species deliberately able to develop and amplify the potentials given to us by nature. Temporally fixing us in the here and now, where we are subject to relentless, if variable, stimulation, they nonetheless can function to awaken memories, involuntary as well as voluntary. Understood experientially, they have qualities that require all the resources of language to communicate their power, and even then often remain ineffably personal. Who, after all, would settle for a description of a rose's scent rather than the real thing? Understood scientifically, they reveal only some of their secrets to the objective researcher seeking answers in the common physiology of the species. Integrating experiential and scientific perspectives has never been an easy task; no *tertium comparationis* has yet been found that can translate the Song of Songs into neuroscience or cognitive psychology.

It is, however, the senses understood historically that are our concern here. A number of fundamental questions have generally guided the research done by his-

[7] The issue of the relationship between "Art" and the separate arts is explored by Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, Calif., 1996). He reminds us that "art forces a sense to touch itself, to be this sense that it is. But in this way, it does not become simply what we call a 'sense,' for example, sight or hearing: by leaving behind the integration of the 'lived,' it also becomes something else, another instance of unity, which exposes another world, not a 'visual' or 'sonorous' but a 'pictorial' or 'musical' one" (21).

[8] Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris, 1974), 69.

[9] See, for example, Birgit Meyer, ed., *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (Basingstoke, 2009).

[10] Our language nicely captures the ambivalence of activity vs. passivity in the dual meanings of the verbs "to smell," "to look," "to taste," and "to feel." Only hearing lacks a comparable verb, at once active and passive. Instead, it complements "I hear" or "I listen" with "I sound."

torians of the senses. How has the general sensorium been discursively differentiated in various contexts? Have all cultures posited the same five senses, or have others been included? If, as some scientists have claimed, there are no fewer than seventeen ways in which animals actually sense the world, have some beyond the canonical five been attributed to humans as well?[11] When have putative sixth senses such as balance, desire, or even speech been added to the mix? How has the role of proprioception, the kinesthetic sense, been understood? Is there a primal "inner touch" that tells us we are sentient creatures, and if so, does it have a history?[12] Can perception be "extrasensory," or rather, to put it in historical terms, what attempts have been made to identify ESP, and how have they been received?

Have all cultures ranked the senses hierarchically in the ways that most commentators in the West have done since the Greeks, with the distancing senses of vision and hearing supposedly "nobler" than the other, more proximate three? Have some cultures developed different hierarchies, perhaps experiential as well as discursive, that have been transformed historically? Are the differentiation and uneven development of the senses, however many we may posit, legislated by nature or the product of historical forces? When, if ever, does the prevalent "ocularcentrism" of so many cultures cede pride of place to other senses?[13] Can one locate "audiocentric" or "tactocentric" cultures, let alone "gastrocentric" or "olfactocentric" ones? Has the process of differentiation and ranking ever been reversed so that intersensorial de-differentiation occurred instead? Is synesthesia, the harmonious integration of the senses, a genuine paradise lost or merely a fantasy of poetic imagination?

How has culture developed technologies to extend and enhance the senses, creating an "exosomatic" array of devices that compensate for the limits of our creaturely nature? In addition to obvious examples, such as the armor and anesthesia that protect our vulnerable touch, the telescopes and microscopes that extend our visual range, and the listening devices that detect sound frequencies our ears cannot register or microphones that magnify the volume of our voices, what other prosthetic devices have transformed our natural capacities? How has the relationship between temporality and sensuality been historically affected with the invention of devices—extending as far back as written language itself—to sustain, transmit, and reproduce sensual experiences, ranging from the fixing chemicals of the perfumer to the digital cameras and sound recorders that have so transformed the visual and aural sensescapes of the modern world? Have some senses been affected more than others by these technological extensions, allowing, for example, a more explicit distinction between nature and culture, such as that indicated by the now-familiar contrast between "vision and visuality"?[14] What about those techniques and inventions designed

[11] Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle, *Deciphering the Senses: The Expanding World of Human Perception* (New York, 1984). Examples include the echolocation of bats, magnetoception of migrating birds, and electroception of sharks.

[12] For a suggestive attempt by a philosopher to trace its fortunes, see Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York, 2009).

[13] Hearing is often the favored alternative. See, for example, the papers at the 9th Blankensee Colloquium on "Hearing Modern History: Auditory Cultures in the 19th and 20th Century," http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/fmi/arbeitsbereiche/ab_nolte/aktuelles/cfp_blankensee.html.

[14] This distinction became popular with the publication of Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle, 1988), but it can be traced as far back as Thomas Carlyle in 1841. See Nicholas Mirzoeff, "On Visuality," *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (April, 2006): 53–79.

to dull the senses, even suspend their effects temporarily, ranging from the ascetic practices of fakirs able to walk on hot coals to the miracles of modern medical anesthesia? Can there be a disentanglement of sense data from the actual human sensorium, leading to an independent realm of impersonal sensual experience in what has recently been called "the culture of diagram"?[15]

How has the loss or impairment of the senses been understood, lamented, and alleviated historically? Is, for example, the British novelist David Lodge right in saying that "deafness is comic, as blindness is tragic"?[16] Is the rubric of "disability studies" the best category to use in interpreting reactions to sensual deprivation or modification?[17] Might the loss of one sense have enhanced the acuity of another, thus paradoxically producing a new "enability"?[18] What of the claims for a separate, but in no way inferior, "deaf culture" that has generated an extensive literature of its own, some of it historical?[19] How do we understand the relationship, if any, between the deliberate elimination of collective sensual experiences, say the allegedly "foul" smells of traditional life eradicated in the name of hygiene, and physiological conditions such as the personal loss of smell that scientists call anosmia? Have there been radical impairments—or, perhaps better put, deskillings—of the senses in certain cultures, as Theodor W. Adorno provocatively argued was the case with the "regression of listening" in modern audiences of music?[20] Is the artificial stimulation, manipulation, maybe even derangement of the senses also an issue worth studying in a late capitalism that operates through the relentless instigation of new consumer demand?

How can we plausibly periodize and narrate changes in the sensorium in different contexts? Do the periods that we posit easily map on to others familiar to us from political, economic, technological, or social history, or do they follow their own internal development? As the field of sensory history has matured, have grosser, bolder generalizations about entire epochs faded in plausibility? What is the relationship between hegemonic cultural assumptions about the senses—call them, if you will, a period's sensory *mentalité*—and the actual material and corporeal practices of the era, which may vary according to social, economic, and gender differences? Even attempts to delineate more modestly circumscribed "scopic or auditory regimes" have had to face criticisms that they fail to account for evidence that undermines

[15] John Bender and Michael Marrinan, *The Culture of Diagram* (Stanford, Calif., 2010). They argue that diagrams are visual "things to work with" that transcend the experience of actual eyes looking directly at the world or representing it in mimetic terms. Beginning with the eighteenth century and the French *Encyclopédie*, they show that diagrams find their way into many different modern scientific, artistic, and technological practices.

[16] David Lodge, *Deaf Sentence* (London, 2008), 13.

[17] For one exploration of the relationship between disability studies and visuality, see *Disability-Visuality*, Special Issue, *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 2 (August 2006).

[18] Helen Keller was admired for her extraordinary olfactory sensitivity; she knew when a storm was coming by the change of smells. See Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York, 1991), 44.

[19] For many examples, see the publications of Gallaudet University Press, such as John Vickrey Van Cleve, ed., *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship* (Washington, D.C., 1999); Van Cleve, ed., *The Deaf History Reader* (Washington, D.C., 2007); and Benjamin Fraser, ed., *Deaf History and Culture in Spain: A Reader of Primary Sources* (Washington, D.C., 2010).

[20] Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in Adorno, *Essays on Music*, selected, with introduction, commentary, and notes, by Richard Leppert, new translations by Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley, Calif., 2002), 288–317.

their putative homogeneity.[21] Similarly, grand narratives in which one dominant sense is replaced by another in an epochal shift have been increasingly called into question. If, for example, Sigmund Freud was right in arguing in a famous footnote in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that with the adoption of an erect posture, hominids left behind the priority of olfactory stimulation in favor of visual ones, why, one wonders, did the same replacement have to occur again with the onset of the modern age?[22]

As a result of such questions and qualms, popular general accounts such as Diane Ackerman's 1991 *A Natural History of the Senses*—impressionistic, rhapsodic, mixing science, folklore, and personal experiences—have been superseded by more sober and systematic treatises, including Robert Jütte's 2005 *A History of the Senses*.[23] Many of the global claims about the distribution of the senses in specific cultures and periods by the pioneers of media studies such as Marshall McLuhan or Walter Ong now seem dated, as does the work of historians like Lucien Febvre and Robert Mandrou. In addition, a flood of specific studies of each particular sense, often with a support network of journals, conferences, and university courses, has created burgeoning, if still often inchoate, discursive traditions. Although unevenly apportioned, with some senses getting the lion's share of attention, and sometimes hermetically closed to the work done outside their area narrowly defined, the history of the senses, it is now fair to say, has become far less of a scandal than a vigorous mainstream enterprise with a bright future ahead of it.

WITH THIS FUTURE IN MIND, the contributors to the following *AHR* Forum were invited to reflect on the state of the field with regard to each of the five traditional senses. Without a precise template to follow, each author chose a different approach, which may well reflect the current status of the historical accounts of their specific senses. Some are clearly more extensively developed than others. Some posit narratives of changes in the field; others offer snapshots of where we are today. Each shows us how much has recently been accomplished, or at least points the way to finding out, but also demonstrates how much still needs to be done.

Rather than organizing the forum according to the conventional hierarchy of the senses, with all its accumulated baggage, we have shuffled the cards and will begin arbitrarily with Sophia Rosenfeld's "On Being Heard: A Case for Paying Attention to the Historical Ear." While acknowledging the challenge of overcoming the relative paucity of sources, she traces the robust development of the history of sound, listening, and aural attention, while endorsing the usefulness of the general concepts of "regimes of audition" and "acoustic communities." Although warning against

[21] The term "scopic regime" was introduced by the French film critic Christian Metz and then given more general currency in Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," first published in Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, 3–27. Its auditory counterpart is developed in Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of Our Ears*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (New York, 2008).

[22] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York, 1961), 46–47. For one example of the claim that modernity meant the triumph of the visual, see Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 432.

[23] Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*; Robert Jütte, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace* (Malden, Mass., 2005).

technological determinism, she foregrounds the importance of new communicative devices that enhance the range and acuity of the ear. She even tentatively promotes the possibility of a "grand narrative for the ear," at least in Western societies. In her telling, the conventional wisdom that hearing has declined in importance is unpersuasive, especially if one acknowledges the links that exist between the right to hear and be heard and modern democratic politics, demonstrated by the new public soundscape established during the French Revolution. Sensitive to the metaphoric mobilization of ideas such as *le bon sens* and "common sense," Rosenfeld concludes by pondering the emergence of a version of prudent, discriminating judgment, still connected to the ability to listen and the right to be heard, that can challenge the more monologic notion of rational deliberation located entirely in the mind.

Moving from hearing to smell, Mark S. R. Jenner's "Follow Your Nose? Smell, Smelling, and Their Histories" tries to counter the widespread impression that this allegedly most "primitive" or "infantile" of the senses has been neglected by historians. He also resists the conventional metanarrative that posits a general "deodorization" of the modern smellscape, one that often claims both that foul odors are less prevalent than before and that the cultural role of smelling has itself diminished. Questioning the often condescending assumption that earlier or less "developed" societies tolerated stench more than their modern successors, he points to the unexpected consequences of the invention of the water closet in producing the infamous "Great Stink of London" in 1858. Jenner also challenges the implicit assumption that the increase in importance of one sense must necessarily reduce that of another, and warns us against equating changes in scientific understanding of a sense such as smell, what is called "osmology," with experiential transformations. Attending to the history of smell, he tells us, is also valuable in undermining simple binary oppositions between boundaried individuals and their englobing environment, the basis of Cartesian subject/object dualisms. Instead, it helps situate us in a more fluid, immersive context, where such stark oppositions are understood as themselves contingent rather than necessary.

The sense that is often credited—or damned—for abetting that dualism is, of course, sight, which is the focus of Jessica Riskin's "The Divine Optician." Rather than canvassing the current state of visual culture studies and the historiography of visuality—a daunting challenge in light of the exponential increase in work in this field over the past few decades—Riskin focuses her attention on a critical episode in the history of the scientific/religious debate over the implications of the eye, one that retains relevance in a contemporary context in which claims of "intelligent design" still manage to inform religious criticism of evolutionary theory.[24] Demonstrating how discussions of the physiology of the eye gained a certain autonomy in relation to the experience of sight, she traces the ways in which a largely mechanical understanding of the eye as a visual instrument was mobilized for theological pur-

[24] One indication of the quickening of interest is the recent proliferation of scholarly journals devoted entirely to the field, e.g., *Journal of Visual Culture*; *Visual Studies*; *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*; *Early Popular Visual Culture*; *Visual Culture and Gender*; *See: A Journal of Visual Culture*; *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*; *Visual Culture in Britain*; *Visual Anthropology*; *Visual Anthropology Review*; *Modernity: Critiques of Visual Culture*; *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Cultures of the Islamic World*; *Visual Resources*; *Octopus: A Visual Studies Journal*; and *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture*, just to name a few in English.

poses. Even apparent flaws such as blind spots could be refashioned as evidence for divine providence. Unexpectedly, Riskin also shows that Charles Darwin himself retained certain assumptions about the alleged mechanical perfection of the eye, which were conclusively debunked only with the work of Hermann von Helmholtz, who understood the role of the brain and the moving body in producing visual experience.

If for all of its imperfections the eye has often been accounted the most acute and perceptive of our sense organs, the least trustworthy sense, so, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson tells us, has been taste, which defies easy generalization and reliable communicability. It has, however, gained multiple meanings, some with rich metaphorical resonances; thus her plural title "The Senses of Taste." Prominent among these are the intellectualized and aestheticized versions, which developed as a means of characterizing judgments, both cultural and individual, of value. Here sublimation moved beyond direct pleasure and pain, while retaining some attenuated connection with the body. Ferguson also traces the rationalization of taste (or at least the food that it encourages us to ingest) in both culinary and scientific terms, through cookbooks and nutritional guides. The larger cultural implications of eating, which vary from society to society and epoch to epoch, also invite historical investigation. What have come to be called the "foodways" of different cultures change over time, especially in a world in which no culture can keep its boundaries secure.

Finally, "The Portal of Touch," which Elizabeth Harvey tells us has been understood both as the most and the least important of the five senses, has served a multitude of vital functions: as a sentient border with our environment and a vehicle of knowing our internal condition, as a fundamental source of intersubjective sociability—the tact in tactility—and the conveyor of the most extreme pleasures and pains, the most passionate of feelings (a word that itself captures the close connection). Located primarily in the skin, the most extensive of our sense organs and the most superficial, touch is the site of culturally variable prohibitions as well as permissions. Against those senses that distance us from our world, touch immerses us in it, for to touch is simultaneously to be touched. However much a boundary, it is always a permeable membrane between self and other. To explore its implications, at least at one particular moment in history, Harvey turns to the seventeenth-century painting *The Allegory of Touch*, executed by Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Breughel the Elder. Focusing attention on the crucial role of the hand as an organ of touch that bridges mind and body, she shows how it oscillates in the image with a more diffuse somatic theme expressed in the protective armor that shields the body from harm.[25]

With their disparate approaches and inevitable exclusion of vast areas of ongoing research, the essays in this *AHR* Forum are only a foretaste of work still to be done, opening our eyes to questions that may never be fully resolved, letting us sniff the fragrances of new, yet uncannily familiar worlds, and making us prick up our ears to the sounds of a possible paradigm shift. In so doing, they may well get us in touch

[25] For more on the historical importance of the hand, see Mariacarla Gadebusch Bondio, ed., *Die Hand: Elemente einer Medizin- und Kulturgeschichte* (Berlin, 2010).

with what can justly be called "the sensory turn," as historians, at long last, come to their senses.

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