

Jan Conn's Encounters in Brazil: An-Other Writing¹

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Resumo: Este artigo explora alguns poemas sobre o Brasil escritos pela canadense Jan Conn, poemas estes que são uma releitura da relação entre o Eu e o Outro nas Américas. Levando em conta o fato de que, por não possuírem tradições culturais ou histórias similares, o Brasil não é automaticamente considerado um Outro canadense (e vice-versa), procuro explorar a idéia (já discutida por críticos como Besner e Almeida) de que são justamente as diferenças entre os dois países que possibilitam descobertas surpreendentes. Uma destas descobertas acontece no choque entre práticas tradicionais de representação e a "realidade" do Outro na experiência da viagem. É nesse choque que o papel do sujeito (Eu) como construtor ou escritor do Outro começa a ser questionado e destabilizado. Assim, neste trabalho, procuro demonstrar de que forma esta destabilização acontece na obra de Jan Conn.

Abstract: This paper approaches some of Jan Conn's poems on Brazil as a re-reading of the relationship between Self and Other in the Americas. Aware of the fact that, because of their different historical and cultural traditions, Brazil is not automatically considered a Canadian Other (and vice-versa), I try to work with the idea (already discussed by critics such as Besner and Almeida) that it is exactly their differences that enable some surprising discoveries. One of these discoveries is linked to the shock between traditional representational practices and the actuality of the experience of the Other. Through this shock, the role of the Self as the constructor or writer of the Other is questioned and destabilized. This paper is an attempt to demonstrate how this destabilization takes place in Conn's work.

Unexpected re-discoveries

Different travel experiences should be placed in particular material conditions that are usually not the same for every traveler. The evident argument that immigrants face their destination differently from tourists is just an example of how these differences may take place. Writers such as Caren Kaplan

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caution the critic or the theorist who tends to look at travel and displacement only in a celebratory way. According to Kaplan, in the book *Questions of travel*, the celebratory tone of viewing travel as enabling a series of encounters which helps the construction of one's identity may hide the material conditions for travel which, for the author, are essential, since not everybody can choose to travel or to stay at home. For Kaplan,

[j]ust as the solid association between national spaces and identities becomes loosened and, in some cases, dissolves, the attribution of identity for subjects in modernity is uneven, increasingly differentiated, and, quite often, contradictory. To make this assertion, however, is not to claim a celebratory hybridity in a world culture of heterogeneity. To put it bluntly, few of us can live without a passport or an identity card of some sort (1996: 9).

Analyzing the continuities and discontinuities of the production of difference between modernity and postmodernity, Kaplan argues that travel still constitutes one of the “generators” of difference. In a re-reading of Kaplan's ideas, Sandra R. G. Almeida argues that Kaplan “sees the traveler as an agent and trope of modernity, literally and figuratively traversing boundaries but also participating in creating these same boundaries” (2001: 48). However, even taking into consideration the particularly located experience of each traveler, one cannot help seeing cultural encounters (enabled by the literal or the metaphorical act of traveling) as one of the great concerns of political, philosophical and literary discourses today.

In the intersection between traveling and encountering, questions related to representation of alterity are inevitable. Thinking specifically about the American continent, it is interesting to perceive that, even after more than five hundred years of its “discovery”, writers continue to address the relationship between travel and the production of Otherness. In some of the narratives produced in the Americas, there is a re-discovery of Self and Other in the crossing of frontiers inside the Americas themselves. It is in this crossing that the distant borders of Brazil and Canada are brought together by

travelers/writers who transversally move North and South.

The metaphorical intersection of Brazilian and Canadian borders has been the subject of much debate in literary and critical circles both North and South the Americas. Some Brazilian and Canadian critics, such as Sandra R. G. Almeida and Neil Besner, have already argued that, despite the irreconcilable differences that position both countries in a very particular post-colonial reality, both Brazil and Canada share interesting positions in the Americas as countries who have faced colonization, and still have to deal with its legacies. According to Besner,

[g]iven the sharp differences in their geopolitical positioning at one level and those of the realities of their citizens' everyday lives at another, one might be forgiven for assuming that contemporary Brazil and Canada, as colonies, nations, or postcolonial cultures, continue to inhabit quite separate worlds and worldviews (2001: 11).

However, for Besner, despite their differences, there is already a valid dialogue going on between both countries, and "it is precisely those differences that such a dialogue might want to listen to, learn from, and develop" (2003: 1). In a similar line of thought, Almeida argues that even if their national characteristics constitute both Brazil and Canada as different cultural entities that should not be generalized, "Canadian" and "Brazilian" are adjectives that "run the risk of being used in a rather simplistic and standardized form. What should be emphasized is the complexity of such notions and the multifaceted issues that derive from an investigation of the contemporary tendencies in the literature and critical discourses produced in these specific countries" (2001: 56).

Besner's and Almeida's notions of a dialogue that is open to difference and resonance between varied cultural traditions seem to echo Gareth Griffiths' argument about new post-colonial approaches today. In the article "The Post-colonial Project", Griffiths argues that one of the current challenges to post-colonial studies is its ability to understand the different experiences of post-colonial societies, without unifying these

experiences under academic theorization, which, for the author, could be seen as a new form of colonization (1996: 175). According to the author, it is through a comparative approach between local traditions and different colonial legacies that a better understanding of contemporary modes of representation will emerge:

How are modern post-colonial texts and the societies they seek to represent, despite their many differences, illuminated by their shared experience in colonization and later? Such shared experience does not imply a historically seamless process without radical differences. The comparison across a range of periods and of the societies on which European colonization impacted can lead, however, to new insights about the modes of representation that developed in post-colonial societies (1996: 176).

Although Griffiths' argumentation is specifically related to the institutionalization of post-colonial literatures in English, Griffiths' urge for a comparative approach between different post-colonial societies could be extended to the approximation of the experiences of countries such as Brazil and Canada, for example. Even if both countries do not share the same colonial histories, or if Brazil is not automatically seen as a Canadian Other (and vice-versa), bringing together the cultural representations and productions of two countries which are still negotiating their identity narratives may enable some unexpected recognitions.

One of the greatest contributions of narratives that create an unexpected intersection between two apparently distant cultures is that, in this intersection, there is a shock between tradition and experience. Thus, the textual or imaginary existence of the Other is challenged by the actuality of the travel experience, leading to a collision between past knowledge and the baffling or "alien" Other. Paradoxically, this challenge created by the actuality of the Other, enables redefinitions of concepts such as home and Self. It is exactly through this idea of *an-other* "re-creation" or "re-definition" involved in the intersection of cultures so different such as

Canada and Brazil that one can read Jan Conn's writing on the Brazilian Other. Although she has many poems on Brazil, the focus of this paper is on two of them, since they are representational of her writing on the topic.

Jan Conn's Brazil – Angled Encounters

Jan Conn is an awarded Canadian biologist whose scientific research focuses on the transmission of pathogens by mosquitoes, particularly the ones that transmit malaria. Despite her scientific career, she has also written five books of poetry, most recently *Beauties on Mad River* (2000), a collection of fifteen years of Conn's writing. Because of her research and field work, Conn has traveled to and lived in many places in Central and South America, including Brazil, where she lived for a few years in the North region. The fact that she is a scientist who travels from North to South of the Americas immediately positions Conn at a very particular location in her relationship with the surroundings. Indeed, when reading her poetry, one cannot help seeing the presence of a keen observer's eye guiding her writing. However, to summarize her work as only observations and notes about another culture would be too simplistic. Her poetry goes much beyond that, and the portrayal of the relationships between Self and Other does not only put different cultures in dialogue, but also brings back memories of her childhood, family, and home.

Conn is a writer very much concerned with representation as well, and the descriptions of her surroundings are usually more than a mere report on landscape. Indeed, it seems that the portrayal of landscape plays a very important role in her poetry, being a metaphor for what could be called her "interior landscapes", or her own interpretation of how "outside" and "inside" are always interfering in each other. This relationship with her surroundings seems to be represented in the poem "Private Fears", a poem that deals with personal life and her mother's death. Conn begins the poem saying:

Sitting on the long wooden dock
 with a book, beer, small yellow dish of black olives
 outside your house
 which from a distance is luminous and grey,
 I watch a pair of sting rays undulating,
 flying underwater,
 and a green filefish
 hanging motionless,
 perpendicular to the water surface.

I wish I could be that perpendicular, at times,
 to the earth.
 I am all angled – elbows, scarred knees,
 restless (1990: 90).

Presenting a contrast between the position of a fish in relation to the water and her own position in relation to the earth, Conn seems to be aware of her “restlessness.” Opposite to the fish, which, to be able to seem perpendicular to the water surface, has to keep so still that it looks almost motionless, Conn sees herself as having an angled position in relation to the earth: she is restless. She cannot keep her elbows and knees as still as the fish, forming angles of encounters and interactions with her surroundings that even leave marks on her “scarred knees.”

This “angled” relationship with her outside can also be a way of reading Conn’s poems on other cultures, particularly Brazil. In writing on foreign landscapes and habits, Conn seems restless as well. In other words, she does not “keep still” in order to “take the best picture” of her Other, but she places herself as experiencing the Otherness of her surroundings, not as a mere observer, but aware of her own interference in the landscape. This idea of “keeping still” for a portrait was used by James Clifford in his introduction to *Writing Culture*. According to him, cultures “do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship”(10). Particularly concerned with ethnographical practices in the anthropological discourse, Clifford argues that the production of an ethnographical text is always a discourse, and not a transparent representation of the

reality of others (2). For him, one should face the representation of cultures as a dialogical process in which the relationship between Self and Other is constantly being negotiated (14). Thus, the restlessness Conn describes in her poem could be seen as a way she found, or better, we found, to interpret her presence in, and her negotiation with, her surroundings.

Conn's poem "Belém," published in *South of the Tudo Bem Café* (1990), could be seen as a representation of this constant return to the Self in its relationship with the Other. She begins the first part of the poem saying:

I didn't come here to lose myself
Or to find myself, as I might have done at the age
of seventeen. I came to Belém
to examine the white marble
Teatro da Paz, to wander among the
shrimp-boats crowded in the harbour,
to eat moqueca and empãdinhas de camarão,
to meet the ghosts of Alfred Russel Wallace
and Henry Bates strolling along Avenida Castilhos Franca (88).

When rescuing the ghosts of nineteenth-century British scientific explorers who had been in that same city much before her, Conn seems to be rescuing her own role as a mere observer, experimenting with the landscape and the "exotic" cultural practices she had previously studied about. The "I" in the poem tries to be completely detached from the surroundings, arguing it is not going to be found or lost in that place. However, after the end of the first verse, the perspective of the poem is changed. Instead of looking outside, her "inside" (her memories) is brought into light, and she recalls a time when she was in Central America, "along the black of a highway" (88), and being "examined:"

I didn't meet your brother who died
on that road eleven years ago
but I remember the heat and the cars
slowing down to examine us as we walked,
as if they could read a bit of his death
on our faces (88).

The examining “I” is caught in the recollection of being examined, and the contrast between the two actions puts her relationship with the surroundings into perspective: observer and observed – Self and Other – can also be the same one. In the second part of this poem, Conn describes a woman climbing the hundred steps of the *Basilica de Nazaré* on her knees while praying. After examining the woman and speculating a little about her faith, she says: “I have just spent my last cruzados / on a pair of blue and green feathered / earrings. I would have nothing to offer in exchange / were I to ascend those steps” (89). The apparent detachment of the Self who observes the woman praying also leads the reader to observe the Self’s material act of buying a pair of exotic earrings. The acts of observing and buying seem to show a certain “control” of the Self over the landscape and its surroundings. However, the Self is left unbalanced, emptied, and the realization that it would have nothing to offer if it climbed the steps of the *Basilica* leaves the reader with a feeling of ambiguity at the end of the poem (one could ask if the meaning of “nothing” in the poem is referring only to money, for instance). Even if in a first moment the “I” in the poem seems to desire *experimenting* instead of *experiencing* the Other, the pseudo-objective eye of the traveler as explorer/describer gets caught in interior images that bring back the subjectivity of the Self in relation to its experience of the Other.

It is interesting to notice that, in the renegotiation of boundaries between Self and Other in Conn’s experience of Brazil, these boundaries are destabilized but, at the same time, never really erased. Conn’s “angled encounters” with the Other’s culture allow her to experience the Other, but she does not necessarily possess the truth about her Other as if she had found out the ultimate “version” of it. It seems, though, that she is aware of her position as a “re-discoverer” of the new land and its culture, and as such, she can write about them. However, her writing constitutes a dialogue between Self and Other which more than enabling the rediscovery of the Other enables the Self to recognize and rediscover itself. This rediscovery becomes clearer in the poems that constitute *Amazonia*, published in the

magazine *EnRoute*². In these poems, there is an insistence on the duality between “inside” and “outside” images which, despite their irreconcilable nature, are constantly influencing each other.

The poem that opens this collection is curiously named “Belém” as well, but this time the poem does not only talk about Pará’s capital city. This is a long poem talking about different places in the North region, such as Belém, Manaus, Santarém, etc. When reading it, one may have the impression of following Conn to the different places, cultural sites, streets, parks and rivers she visits and writes about. Also, her descriptions of the landscape are so detailed that we feel as if we were actually there, participating in her explorations. Nevertheless, it is interesting to perceive that, through the whole poem, Conn continuously speculates about her position as the writer of the Other, and her presence is, at the same time, molding and being molded by the Other, bringing into perspective the recognition of the constant negotiation between Self and Other involved in the nature of writing about cultures, discussed by Clifford.

Her speculations about her “angled encounters” with her Other are presented since the first verses of the poem:

The first aphrodisiac I tried was from
the Ver-O-Peso market – not
eye of dolphin or the powdered genitalia
of the giant river otter –
but some herbal drink, bitter and nauseating.
I was feverish, my face
bland as a cloud.

Nothing came of it.

Later the same week
on a dare I ascended all the worn stone steps
of the Basílica de Nazaré, my head tilted
to one side, whimsical, but something
took my breath away.
Something shone in the peacock sky
and my breath was stolen (59).

² *EnRoute* is a magazine produced by the Air Canada Airlines, which for three years has published the winning texts of the CBC Literary Awards. Conn’s poems were published at the *EnRoute* of August, 2004, as the winner text.

Conn's choice of starting her poem with the description of her participation in two cultural practices to which she cannot really attribute any particular meaning or control seems to be an attempt to start the poem destabilizing the Self in relation to the kind of unbalanced experiences involved in the act of traveling. Despite *experimenting* the Other through the traveler's drives of trying an exotic aphrodisiac from the local public market or of ascending all the steps of the *Basilica* "on a dare," there is no complete comprehension of what happened. The Self does not come out of this *experimentation* with any particular explanation for its Other. In the poem, the image of the traveler drinking the aphrodisiac and expecting that something would happen, but realizing that, despite being feverish, "[n]othing came of it" is opposed to the image of the traveler ascending the church steps, feeling whimsical, but "having her breath stolen." With these images, Conn destabilizes the traveler's expectations in relation to her/his Other, since the unexpected encounter between them usually brings some kind of recognition the traveler cannot really predict.

This instability or unbalance that occurs in travel has already been debated by Brian Musgrove. In the article "Travel and Unsettlement: Freud on Vacation," he argues that the experience of traveling is always an unsettling one, since the traveler, after leaving home, is never completely sure of where he/she is. For him,

[L]andscape and traveller are sites of indeterminacy, so that travel is not the simple inscription of an established meaning over a neutralized, identityless other. The travelling subject, wavering between two worlds, is by no means the self-assured colonist; rather, that subject is poised to split and unravel (39).

Thus, instead of looking at the experience of travel as only an act of possessing the Other, which tends to deal with relations of domination and subordination, one should pay more attention to the destabilizations that occur in travel as a way to better understand the exchanges that happen during this process. Although Musgrove is talking specifically about colonial travel writing, his debate on the ambiguous and unsettling experience

of travel also echoes some of Conn's poetical recognitions.

Another unsettling experience is portrayed by Conn when she describes her "ghostly" encounter with her mother. After describing the night outside, the wind, the traffic and the noise, Conn writes:

My mother sent me here from her deep dark places,
 sent me because she couldn't endure,
 old ghost, her story over in 1976, but
 I won't follow, I tip my straw hat
 to her, watch her dust
 settle in the mango trees (59).

The experience of travel does not eliminate, for Conn, the presence of her past. On the contrary, her present experience seems to be informed by past memories (maternal memories) that, in a way, even "sent her" to this different place. However, instead of turning to the past and "getting stuck" into it, not being able to locate herself in the present anymore, Conn decides to "tip her hat to her mom" and let her "mom's dust" rest in the trees around her. With this image, her past is not totally gone, but it is actually mingling with the reality around her. It is through this juxtaposition of inside and outside, past and present images, that she starts to create an-other image of herself as a writer of the new landscape.

The duality between past and present in the poem does not only involve Conn's own past, but also Brazilian history and tradition. There are some moments in the poem when Conn describes herself thinking about some cultural artifacts or some historical moments of the country. Despite apparently being a discussion of her Other's culture, these descriptions also involve a certain recognition of her own role as a writer of the Other. In some of the verses in her poem, Conn describes herself picking up a notebook, strolling along the Tapajós River, and thinking about the sculpture of a king vulture which used to stand atop the Vitória Theater, now demolished. While strolling along the river and thinking about the sculpture, she notices

alongside a large white egret enthroned
 on a floating island of water plants,
 the creamy blooms nodding and bowing
 as they must have done
 when the last Brazilian Emperor Dom Pedro II
 sat for his portrait here in 1854 (60).

After describing what she saw, she ends this sequence of verses wondering once more about the sculpture of the king vulture: “Now the vulture resides on a black wooden table / at the Centro Cultural João Fona, / holding on, with pinched scaly feet, / to a small bronze replica of the world, / where, for all I know, Dom Pedro still rules” (60). Conn’s juxtaposition of the images of the egret now “enthroned” and the vulture which used to “reign” (at least over the *Vitória* Theater) but is now holding a small replica of the world seems to be dealing with the transference of power in the country. The vulture could be read as a metaphor for D. Pedro’s power, which now only rules the small replica of the world on which the vulture has his feet pinched on.

Nevertheless, these verses may also enable a different reading, more related to the art of representation. The focus on these verses is on the changing position of the vulture sculpture, which used to occupy an outstanding position in the region, but now “resides on a black wooden table,” at a museum. This image is contrasted with the position of another bird, the egret, which is “enthroned on a floating island of water plants.” If we consider that both birds are representations of an interpreted reality, we may also consider that Conn’s portrayal of a myriad of representations, in which she includes her own, is a way to play with the notion of herself as an interpreter of her surroundings. In the same way that, in the poem, the only world the vulture can keep holding on to is a small replica of it, the world the egret is enthroned is on Conn’s own replica of the world, whose meaning is not fixed, but which will be constructed and reconstructed by different readings of it. Thus, with the production of images that could be said to replicate each other, Conn seems to be destabilizing her own writing.

Another moment of recognition of her role as one more

“explorer” or “writer” of her Other can be seen in a sequence of verses in which Conn seems to ponder about the continuities and discontinuities involved in being a traveler in Brazil. The verses begin with the Portuguese, and end with her own presence there:

Under the hot sapphire sky
 at the cool hem of the Atlantic,
 in 1616 the Portuguese arrived, in the name of their
 crown,
 wearing leather and metal,
 swords and helmets, and founded Belém. They arrived
 and kept on arriving...

Margaret Mee travelled here when I was four,
 her small feet firmly planted
 in the footprints of Richard Spruce and Adolpho
 Ducke.

Now I stand overlooking the glinting water,
 slick and moon-shot,
 same night wind at my back, same moon (60).

Looking at the landscape around her, Conn recognizes that these surroundings also have a history that should be accounted for. She was not the first one to arrive in this new land, and her own history is informed by the history of the ones who arrived there before her. But even when she argues that now she is looking at the water, feeling the same wind, and the same moon the previous travelers also felt, one may ask if this is indeed the same landscape. With colonization and the Portuguese foundation of Belém (made, in Conn’s words, with swords and helmets, and the conquest of the people that used to live in the land), another image of the landscape starts to be imposed on it. However, the Portuguese were not the only ones to arrive there. The scientific explorers, represented in the poem by the names of Margaret Mee and Richard Spruce, for example, can also be seen as creators of images about this new land, and it is in this group that Conn probably would include herself. But, is her position as a traveler the same one? She is probably having a similar kind of relationship of “exploring” or “discovering”

something about the environment to use for herself. Every instance she describes in the poem, such as observing an alligator in Manaus, or a *jibóia* in the Emílio Goeldi Museum, or visiting the São José Prison, “teaches” her something, not only about her Other, but especially about herself. The kind of relationship she has with the new land is, at the same time, continuous to the Portuguese and the other explorers, for example, but also very different from it. In the poem, Conn seems to recognize her need for the Other, but because of a self-awareness of being “angled” in relation to them, her representations do not search for the truth about the Other anymore. Instead of a need to possess it, she seems to desire exactly the opposite, a need to release it. In fact, this is actually one of the last images of the poem.

In the very last verses, Conn describes Santarém’s landscape saying:

Mid-afternoon in Santarém
 the equatorial blue sky has come to rest
 on the twin towers of the Igreja Matriz; and now
 their upturned faces have seen enough
 so they close, gently but with a slight twist,
 like blue morning glories
 after the ecstasy of morning has passed.

Beyond them, the Tapajós slips its moorings
 casts off the shoreline, gives itself up
 to the east-bound current. I too, give myself up,
 but it’s not this current,
 not this river...(61).

If we once more consider the idea of Conn’s use of outside images (her surroundings), to talk about her “inside” (herself), one could read the image of the twin towers closing themselves after “seeing enough” as Conn’s own Self, which, “after the ecstasy of morning has passed,” after her own ecstasy in experiencing the Other, also gently closes herself, leaving the morning (the Other) to its own glory. At the same time, the Tapajós River frees itself from its moorings (the gaze of its traveler), and gives itself up to the current. Conn as the traveler

and the writer of the Other also gives herself up, but not to this river or current. She needs her Other, but she does not necessarily surrender to it. Once again, the boundaries between Self and Other are recreated.

Generally in Conn's poems, one may perceive that the representation of her surroundings is usually related to a rediscovery of the Self. Particularly in her writing on other cultures, there is a constant destabilization of the positions of the Self in relation to its Other. However, this is not a simple destabilization of identities in travel as a way to celebrate heterogeneity, as Kaplan would argue from some travel narratives in modernity. Despite being destabilized, the borders between Self and Other are usually recreated, and it actually seems that the writing of the Other, in Conn's poems, is only one step for the writing of the Self. However, this does not necessarily mean that this writing is not at all interested in the Other. According to Clifford, "[i]t has become clear that every version of an 'other,' wherever found, is also the construction of a 'self' ... Cultural *poesis* – and politics – is the constant reconstitution of selves and others through specific exclusions, conventions, and discursive practices" (23-24). The awareness of these practices is what leads writers such as Conn to question and destabilize her position in relation to another culture's differences, but at the same time, to recreate some negotiations between herself and those same differences.

Moreover, despite interpreting these "angled" encounters as a simple "use" of difference in the rediscovery of the Self, one may think, as the Brazilian critic Silviano Santiago, that to look at the Other is a way of escaping from the "authority" of the Self. According to him,

[the] reading of the other, ... besides being an imprisonment of the writer in the national and cosmopolitan literary tradition from which he/she extracts meaning, is also the most powerful way the writer finds to escape the traps of the authoritarian and singular subject, a mere post-modern pancake, which has served as a bait to irresponsible and afflictive tastes.³

³ My translation: "[a] leitura do outro, ... além de ser uma forma de enclausuramento do escritor na tradição literária nacional e cosmopolita de que extrai sentido, é também o

Conn's reading of the Brazilian Other enables her to free "her Self" and to rediscover her position as a traveler who explores, observes, interprets, and writes. This rediscovery is full of questionings and interpretations that lead to a better understanding of her role in the creation of cultural representations.

Despite the fact that Conn is crossing frontiers between two countries which do not share the same traditions, it is exactly because of this unexpected intersection that the experience of the Other leads to an-other reading (and writing) of cultural representation. This crossing of boundaries, particularly in the Americas, helps writers to defy notions of representation imposed on them since colonization. In Conn's poems, North and South relearn how to write about the American Other, and if we once more follow her descriptions of the Brazilian north, we may see that:

In the park outside the Teatro Amazonas / we navigate around
entwined couples, / and ice cream vendors. / The marble busts
of European composers / and opera singers stare at us, wide-
eyed, / having nothing left to tell us ("Manaus", 1990: 53).

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