

The Architecture of Patriarchy: Houses, Women and Slaves in the Eighteenth-Century South African Countryside

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I

This paper originated in my attempt to understand the materiality of colonialism at the Cape of Good Hope.¹ How did material things—buildings, farmlands, street grids, personal possessions, domestic utensils, food—contribute to the mapping out of the colony? What were the relationships between such systems of signification and the discourses of colonial power? This route of inquiry led me to the question of the eighteenth-century Cape gable; ornate plaster work standing above the front doors, side wings and back facades of rural manor houses. These gables are sometimes dated or datable, and they are usually attributable, in that the land on which they stand was often freehold and taxed, leaving clear traces in the transfer documentation and census roll. Their prominence in the colonial landscape—often framed by other buildings and avenues of trees, and designed to be seen by all approaching—indicates that, *par excellence*, they were artifacts signifying colonial possession and domination.²

Re-evaluating the Cape Gable in this way is also a political project. The mythology of the eighteenth-century Cape has contributed in a major way to the naturalization of white domination and colonial control, and the image of the benign patriarch sitting at ease beneath the oaks, in front of his whitewashed facade, smoking his long clay pipe in satisfaction and contemplating the securing of civilization against the barbaric chaos of Africa, permeates popular history.

However, this project has proved more difficult than expected. The buildings themselves are generally accessible as artifacts, while documentary sources are for the most part easily consulted. What have proved intractable are the connections, the webs of consanguinity and conjugality that tie eighteenth-century gabled buildings together into a tight set. The documents seem to conspire in hiding these connections, presenting the architecture as the product of a set of largely unrelated men, and the farms on which the buildings stand as acquired by thoroughly modern commercial transactions. This difficulty in excavating the ties that bound such buildings together led to a growing realization that systems of colonial signification cannot properly be understood—and, I want to argue in the case of the eighteenth-century Cape, cannot be understood at all—without recognizing the centrality of gender relations.

Specifically, I have come to the following interpretation. The ebullient gables that fronted symmetrically planned houses, set in regimented vineyards and wheat fields, were indeed part of the signification of the colonial countryside, and the title deeds that described these properties were an integral part of this same materiality. But, rather than being the product of an earthy, homespun vernacular and the simple operation of the market, this architecture was the mark of a small elite group of slave-owning families. The connections between these families were mapped by consanguinal and conjugal relationships between women of established European descent who, as a gendered segment within a burgeoning gentry class, facilitated capital accumulation and carried the identity of difference from the transgressive miscegenation that was an inevitable consequence of the expanding colonial frontier. The gables themselves can be read as a metaphor of fecundity contained within the discipline of order; a metaphor that finds verbal expression in the contemporary image of the colonial garden. The rest of this paper will be an attempt to justify these propositions.³

II

The basis of my study is the 41 surviving (or recently standing) gabled buildings with traceable histories of ownership that can be firmly dated to before 1795.⁴ Almost all of these were manor houses on wheat and wine farms, and all of them depended on slave labor.⁵ At face value, there are few family connections in this set, with 33 different family names associated with 41 estates. Similarly, the histories of most of the individual farms show frequent changes in title holders' family names through time, and transfers that often specify a purchase price, even when the change of ownership is part of the settlement of a deceased estate.

However, a deeper exploration of family ties shows that all the names of title holders can be connected to seven families or to a notional eighth family. Just over half of the men associated with dated gables were connected either with the De Villiers family (tracing its descent to three brothers who arrived together at the Cape in the late seventeenth-century), or with the Van der Merwe family (originating with Willem Schalk Van Der Merwe, who arrived at the Cape from the Netherlands in 1661, nine years after the Cape colony was founded). Five other families link together almost all the remaining estates. The only farms that cannot be associated with one of these seven families can be related to one another, suggesting an "eighth family" for which critical connections have been lost. De Villiers and Pama, in contrast, list more than 2000 names in their *Genealogies of Old South African Families*; clearly, gabled buildings were associated with a very small segment of the colonial population (Pama 1981).⁶

Close analysis also shows that, contrary to first appearances, there were close connections between the members of this small elite; just over 80% of the male title holders were married into their own or into one of the other six families.

Marriage and descent, of course, are critical to the movement and accumulation of wealth in an affluent class. Thus this web of conjugal and consanguinal links protected the interests of the rural, slave holding elite of the Cape countryside by keeping economic capital circulating among a small group—a fraction of the complete colonial population. The juristic

structure for this marriage and inheritance pattern came from the application of Roman Dutch partible inheritance at the Cape of Good Hope. The effect of this legal practice, coupled with the tradition of cousin marriage, was constantly to fragment estates between widows and children, and between the children of successive marriages, and then to reconsolidate capital in new conjugal estates.

In order to capture something of the dynamics of this elite class in daily life, I have looked at the biographies of the estates themselves. These show discernible regularities and, in particular, a few distinct patterns of descent. Only one estate had a history of ownership that approximated to primogeniture. A few other farms had histories with a strong male line. However, in each case women played crucial roles in the farm's history; a daughter providing the link between grandfather and grandson, a granddaughter reestablishing the male line, a connection through cousins, marriage between cousins with a great-grandfather in common. In other cases this "qualified patriarchy" crystallizes in a recurrent form, in which a male title holder transferred ownership of the estate to the husband of either his daughter or his niece.

Such "male histories" were, however, in the minority; more often, male title holders played a nominal role in histories which had women as their central players. Many of the estate biographies map out a "shadow lineage" of women, standing behind the formality of male legal ownership. The power that women could have within the ranks of the Cape farming elite is epitomized in the life of Sibella Pasman, and voiced in part through her will.⁷ Baptized in 1693, she was first married in 1714. In the same year her mother bought the farm Nooitgedacht, transferring the property into her son-in-law's name four years later. In 1722, after her first husband had died, Sibella married Jacobus Cloete, a member of a family with which she already had connections. Sibella was widowed for the second time in 1757 and died sometime after May 1777 when, at the age of about 85, she signed a codicil to her second will.

During this last quarter of her life, Sibella Pasman clearly had great influence, exercised through patronage. She had inherited Nooitgedacht (and thus her mother's investment) and had transferred the estate to her son Hendrik Cloete in 1761; by now Hendrik was in his late thirties, had been married for 8 years, and already had four children. His mother clearly continued to exercise considerable influence over the farm's affairs. Sibella's will makes it clear that she lived in the main house, and also favored particular heirs. Lest she be forgotten, she directed that her daughter should have her gold chain, and that a grandson should get "one pair single gold shirt buttons to wear in memory of me."

Sibella Pasman's son Hendrik Cloete had built the gable at Nooitgedacht in 1774, and was later to build a gable at Groot Constantia. Eight more of Sibella Pasman's male relatives had held titles to houses when gables were built, or were to hold such titles. Three female relatives were married to men who were, or would be, title holders to estates when gables were built. In sum, Sibella Pasman had direct family connections with more than a quarter of the dated eighteenth-century gabled buildings that survive today.

III

There is, then, a correlation between gabled houses and the eighteenth-century rural elite, as well as evidence that women played a central role in structuring the relations between members of this class. Such a correlation implies that gables were a material signification of this elite; attributable artifacts that do indeed connect the surviving remnants of a material world with the surviving remnants of a documentary corpus. But such a correlation does not, in itself, show how such material artifacts worked in the discourse of colonial domination—what the gables meant in the intersecting relations of class and gender.

In looking for such meaning, one thing at least seems certain—it is not lying waiting to be discovered in some contemporary document that sets out an interpretation of the artifact for the archaeologist. In Pierre Bourdieu's phrase, the "social alchemy" which gives social relations replicability through their "objectification" as a world of material things depends on the "collective work of euphemization;" that is, on not acknowledging in analytical language what is being said through poetics, including material objects (1977:195–196).⁸ If symbolic discourse were to be reducible to everyday language in contemporary documents, the symbolic would lose its particular power of representing the complex, polyvalent relations of class and gender.⁹

This concept of "collective euphemization" can provide a starting point for interpretation, for it allows graphic and verbal metaphors in other media that formed part of the same symbolic system to be brought into play. Together, these linked representations of class and gender relations constitute "habitus;" a "book," which is "read with the body," a "world of objects," "in which each thing speaks metaphorically of all the others." The result is "an endless circle of mutually reflecting metaphors" (Bourdieu 1977:72, 91).¹⁰

Bourdieu insists that, in seeking to understand the practices that are the habitus, economic calculation must be extended to include the symbolic. The inheritance of a family includes economic capital, but also all the networks of relationships that have been built up and maintained through the years: "a heritage of commitments and debts of honor, a capital of rights and duties built up in the course of successive generations..." (Bourdieu 1977:178). By seeing eighteenth-century gabled buildings as part of the "symbolic capital" of the narrow group of interconnected families that built and maintained them, and at the same time as part of a wider habitus that has left behind other symbolic traces in verbal and graphic euphemisms and metaphors, we can begin to move from correlation to interpretation.

A particularly useful graphic image, that contains both a gabled building and a series of studied oppositions that imply a supporting scaffold of symbolic capital, is a small vignette that is part of Robert Jacob Gordon's "Great Map."¹¹ Gordon made five journeys into the Cape interior between 1777 and 1795 (when he shot himself after surrendering the Cape to the British). His map plotted his route, marked and named mountains and rivers, and illustrated scenes he had encountered; like all maps, its making was an act of possession.¹² The small vignettes—of a Bushman camp, pastoralist and farming villages and colonial farming—were ethnographic summaries rather than "likenesses," and are therefore the more useful, in that they reveal their author's perception of the structure of social relations.

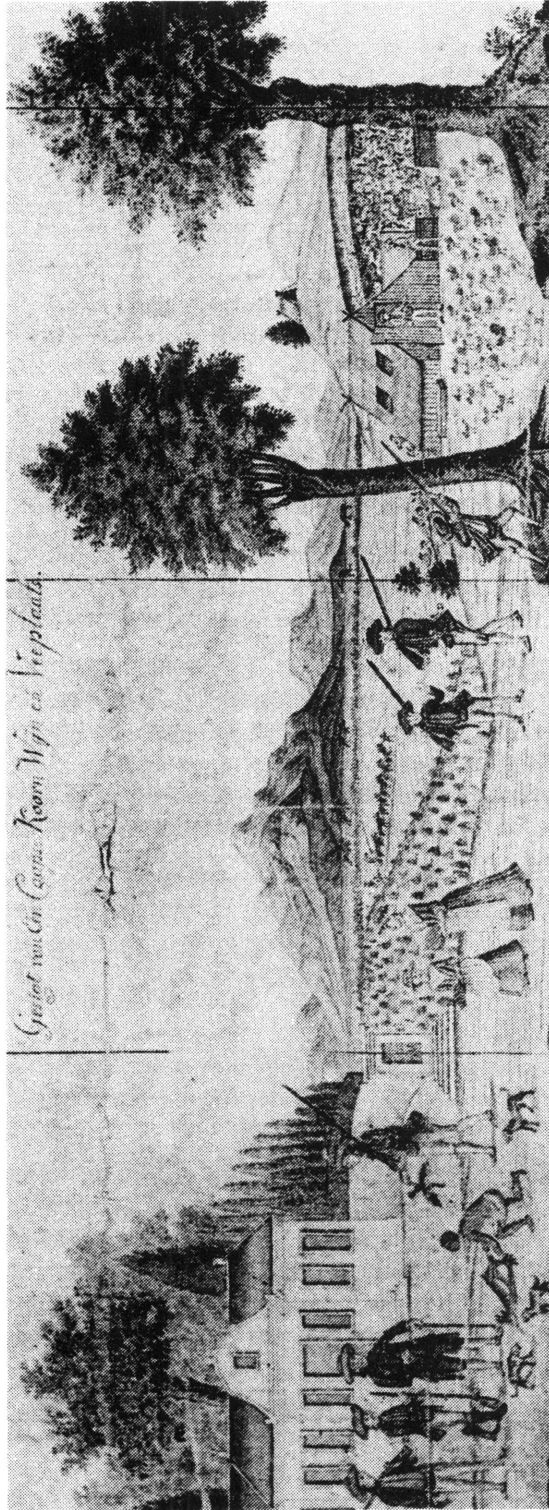


Figure 1: "View of a Cape Corn, Wine and Cattle Farm," by Robert Jacob Gordon.

Gordon's representation of colonial farming (Figure 1) is composed of a number of oppositions which express both gender and class. The pair of male hunters in the center of the sketch (perhaps father and son) are set against the pair of female figures carrying baskets of corn and fruit (mother and daughter?); the hunter versus the harvester. To the left of the sketch, two more men flank a person of higher rank (marked by his boots), while in front of them kneels a subservient slave (master and servant). All ten human figures (seven male figures, two female and a slave) are contained in the foreground of the gabled building—an embrace that is emphasized by the circular sweep of the werf wall. In its turn, this manor house complex is set both against the cattle kraal and *kapstylhuise* to the right of the sketch, and against the rugged blue mountains in the distance (the civilized heartland versus wild nature and the frontier).¹³

Gordon's image of mother and daughter carrying the produce of the fields towards the manor house expresses an association between the "house" (understood both materially, and as the patriarchal community) and female fertility and fecundity. Jan Splinter Stavorinus, a Dutch sea captain who visited between 1768 and 1771, put the matter succinctly:

The fruitfulness of the women in this healthy climate, where few, have less than six, and many, more than ten or twelve children, has occasioned, and still occasions, the continual extension of the colony inland (1969[1]:564).

Images of fertility abound on decorated gables—wheatsheafs, grapes, vines, sometimes the entwined initials of husband and wife and, spectacularly, the pediment which Hendrik Cloete had built on Groot Constantia's wine cellar in 1791, in which Ganymede—the cupbearer to the gods—is surrounded by frolicking putti (Fransen and Cook 1980). However, the ebullience of the gable and its associations of fertility and natural increase is contained by the second definitive component in the design of the Cape country manor house—the strict symmetry of the building plan, again well captured in Gordon's sketch. Cape houses invariably have balanced facades, with a front door directly beneath the gable leading into a reception room. To the left and the right are equally sized rooms, and the regular layout is repeated in the back offices. The surrounding werf is usually symmetrical as well; the effect is that of approaching, and passing beneath, an emblem of excess that is contained within a strict system of regulation.

An equivalently structured verbal metaphor is to be found in the descriptions of the Company's garden at the Cape. Many writers comment on the seemingly unbounded fertility of the Cape soil. Here is Francois Valentyn's description:

I saw here also astonishingly large nurseries of melons, whole rooms full, and incomparably lovely large water-melons in abundance, so that all the gardens and fine plantations which I have seen in our own country and elsewhere are unworthy of comparison with this noble Garden, since all that is useful and rare which all the famous gardens of the world produce is here closely assembled, as if in the womb of this African Mother-Garden (Valentyn 1971:105).¹⁴

And Peter Kolb, reveling in the female qualities of one of "the noblest and most beautiful Curiosities in all Afric":

Nature has Little or Nothing to set her off there besides her own Charms and the Hand of the Gardener: And she is more charming than I have seen her in any other Part of the World. Thousands of various Flowers strike your Eye at once, vying with each other for superiour Beauty (1968:346–7).¹⁵

But these, and other, contemporary writers are at pains to point out that the garden is also strictly contained within a regular grid of paths, hedges and walls. Many of them paced it out, enumerating the grid and testing its regularity. Many of them made it clear that its walkways formed an extension of Cape Town's street grid; the male domain of formal processions and informal visiting; places where respectable women could not go alone.

I suggest that this same metaphor interprets the eighteenth-century baroque gable at the Cape. The house as a whole signifies colonial control and dominance. But the gable stands for excess that must be contained within order—the symbolic capital of women, so crucial to the identity and material prosperity of the Cape's gentry class.

IV

Women, gables, fertility and containment, then, seem to form a bundle of interrelated metaphors that contributed to the habitus of the rural Cape elite. But again comes the question—why?

In taking my study further, I have found particularly helpful Ann Laura Stoler's work on women in colonial Asia since the sixteenth-century. Stoler shows how European women, in the face of the perceived dangers of miscegenation, were charged with carrying colonial identity, with promoting white solidarity, but were also ambiguous as both subordinated in colonial hierarchies and as "active agents of imperial culture in their own right" (1991).¹⁶

Stoler shows that in Dutch colonial Asia—of which, of course, the Cape of Good Hope was a part—there was a constant shortage of women. Dutch East India Company colonization was almost entirely male, resulting in particular problems at the Cape from 1657 onwards, when the first freeburghers were granted farms along the banks of the Liesbeeck. How were domestic units of production to be set up without wives? There was a brief experiment with the importation of orphan girls from the Netherlands. There was also limited incorporation of Khoi women; if this happened on any scale, it seems to have become largely invisible in the historical record.¹⁷ But the more prevalent solution was to transform slave women into marriage partners. In this respect, the Company's Slave Lodge seems to have functioned as a virtual factory. Otto Mentzel described the process in his characteristic style of fascinated disgust:

They herd together like animals, and have no higher moral sense. Female slaves are always ready to offer their bodies for a trifle; and towards evening, one can see a string of soldiers and sailors entering the lodge where they mispend their time until the clock strikes 9. After that hour no strangers are allowed to remain in the lodge. The Company does nothing to prevent this promiscuous intercourse, since, for one thing, it tends to multiply the slave population, and does away with the necessity of importing

fresh slaves. Three or four generations of this admixture (for the daughters follow their mother's footsteps) have produced a half-caste population—a mestizo class—but a slight shade darker than some Europeans (1925:125).¹⁸

All half-breed female slaves were encouraged to marry a European man, who would then have to repay the cost of the bride's former upkeep (estimated by Commissioner van Reede in 1685 as 150 guilders). Many European men were prepared to buy wives in this way.

But while this offered a solution to the problem of domestic reproduction, the deracination of slave women, and their easy transfer into *huisvrouw*, was dangerous. Apart from dissipating cultural capital (the accumulated identity of "European," opposed to "Native"), unions down into the ranks of slaves, and across the permeable geographical boundaries of the colony, worked profoundly against economic accumulation by parceling up inheritances into ever more negligible patrimonies. And, as the colony expanded outwards, the ease with which a Khoi "apprentice" could be transformed into a concubine threatened to submerge colonial identity completely.

A solution to the problem of preserving economic capital was for the aspirant elite to combine an insistence on Roman Dutch partible inheritance with a strong tradition of cousin marriage, thus keeping property and wealth circulating within a narrow group, while ever widening the gap between rich farmers and poor colonists, effecting class divisions within what had originally been a homogeneous group of freeburghers.¹⁹ The solution to preserving symbolic capital was to insist on the racial purity of the women through whom lines of descent and connections of marriage gave the elite cohesion.

V

In a seminal paper, Robert Ross traced the roots of the twentieth-century white rural aristocracy back to an emergent gentry in the eighteenth-century, countering the traditional view that wheat and wine farmers in the Cape countryside were debt-ridden and inefficient with evidence for a steady rise in production through grain and wine cultivation, generating in its turn capital for investment in agricultural equipment and slave labor (1983).

In this paper, I have tried to take this point further, arguing that a critical part of the habitus that constituted the emergent gentry class throughout the century was their material culture, in particular their manor houses. In this view the material "world of things" is not just an external manifestation of gender and class relations, but is rather at the heart of the construction of identity; the "written" and the "wrought" are tightly intertwined.

I have also argued that the gable constellated a collection of interrelated metaphors including, critically for the later history of South Africa, racial differentiation—the investment of identity and concentration of resources in women who could claim European descent, in contrast to the threatening tide of Khoi and slave women and the dispersal of symbolic and economic capital. "Cape Dutch" architecture, rather than being reminiscent of a civilized age prior to institutionalized racism, is implicated in a crucial, formative stage of racial discrimination.

Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* is a foundation stone in the canon of white South African writing. Although written more than a century after the end of my period of study, the caricature of Tant'Sannie's courtship of her third husband captures the essence of the Cape marriage pattern in vicious satire:

Here Piet's black hat appeared in the doorway, and the Boer-woman drew herself up in dignified silence, extended the tips of her fingers, and motioned solemnly to a chair. The young man seated himself, sticking his feet as far under it as they would go, and said mildly:

'I am Little Piet Vander Walt, and my father is Big Piet Vander Walt.'...

'I was related to your aunt Selena who died,' said Tant'Sannie. 'My mother's step-brother's child was married to her father's brother's step-nephew's niece.'

'Yes, aunt,' said the young man, 'I knew we were related.'...

'Did you ever have convulsions when you were a baby?' asked Tant'Sannie.

'Yes,' said the young man.

'Strange!' said Tant'Sannie; 'I had convulsions too. Wonderful that we should be so much alike!'...

'When do you want to get married?'

'Next month, aunt,' said the young man in a tone of hopeless resignation. 'May I kiss you, aunt?'

'Fie! fie! said Tant'Sannie, and then gave him a resounding kiss. 'Come, draw your chair a little closer,' she said, and, their elbows now touching, they sat on through the night.

The next morning at dawn, as Em passed through Tant'Sannie's bedroom she found the Boer-woman pulling off her boots preparatory to climbing into bed.

'Where is Piet Vander Walt?'

'Just gone,' said Tant'Sannie; 'and I am going to marry him this day four weeks. I am dead sleepy,' she added; 'the stupid thing doesn't know how to love-talk at all,' and she climbed into the four-poster, clothes and all, and drew the quilt up to her chin (1975:187-191).

Notes

- 1 The wider context of this study can be found in Hall (1992a and 1992b).
- 2 Many architectural historians have bypassed the problem of attribution by developing a mode of writing that cauterizes people from the past completely; architectural styles spread from continent to continent, seemingly without human intervention, and the terms of the debate are the question of national origin (is Cape architecture derived from France, the Netherlands, or Germany?) and chronology (how to account for the problem that Baroque architecture was old fashioned long before the possibilities of the Cape had taken shape in Van Riebeeck's ambitious gaze). See De Bosdari (1953), van der Meulen (1962), Fransen and Cook (1980), Obholzer, Baraitser and Malherbe (1985).
- 3 The full evidence for this case is set out in my unpublished seminar paper, "The secret lives of houses: women, gables and gardens in the eighteenth century Cape," University of Chicago and Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town (1994). I am particularly grateful to Karren Visser and Kathy Rubin for their help in assembling this evidence.
- 4 The sample is drawn from Fransen & Cook (1980).
- 5 The geographical distribution of gabled buildings shows a strong correlation with agricultural soils—the heartland of wheat and wine production in the western Cape. All the farms in the sample used slave labor, most throughout the eighteenth century, and most had slave holdings above the average.
- 6 All genealogical connections mentioned in this paper are based on Pama's revised edition of De Villiers' original study, unless otherwise mentioned.
- 7 Will of Widow Sibella Pasman, widow of Heemraad Mons. Jacob Cloete, 1771; Cape Archives, MOOC 7/1/25 folio 8. Modified by Codicil dated 10 May 1777.
- 8 In trying to bring together the evidence of material culture and other elements of colonial discourse, I have found Bourdieu's concept of habitus particularly useful.
- 9 This idea has been usefully expanded by Molino (1992).
- 10 "Principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends..." (Bourdieu 1977:72, 91).
- 11 Robert Jacob Gordon was commander of the Dutch forces at the Cape, and has become well known for his journals describing his travels into the interior. See Raper & Boucher (1988) and Cullinan (1992).
- 12 Reproduced in Raper & Boucher (1988[1]:38, plate 7). The original is in the Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam. The map was made of Gordon's third journey, from

August 1778 to January 1779, in the company of the Governor, Joachim van Plettenberg; see Cullinan (1992).

- 13 The *kapstylhuise* was the common form of frontier house at the Cape, and was a low, single room A-frame, usually made of reeds and thatch. See Walton (1989).
- 14 Francois Valentyn, a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, visited that Cape several times in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. His florid style is particularly suited to a study of the poetics of colonial domination.
- 15 Pieter Kolb came to the Cape to make astronomical observations, and later entered Company service.
- 16 Stoler's study relies heavily on Jean Gelman Taylor's (1983) earlier exploration of the place of women in Batavian society.
- 17 Pastoralists at the Cape were called "Hottentots" by the Dutch. Today they are referred to as Khoi, or Khoikhoi.
- 18 Otto Mentzel was in Company service in the third decade of the eighteenth century. He returned to Europe, entering the Silesian police service. His recollections were written and published in his old age.
- 19 See Guelke (1989) for an account of the early years of Cape colonial settlement. For a study that reveals the effect of partible inheritance in the Netherlands, see Lunsingh Scheurleer, Fock & Dissel (1986).

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