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## Finding Home: (Re)thinking Identity through Texts as a Queer, White Woman

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**Finding Home: (Re)thinking Identity through Texts as a Queer, White Woman**

**Lydia Pebly**

## [Introduction]

The catalyst for the following project was *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa. Reading that book, and the ways in which Anzaldúa wove together her history and identities within its pages, I knew I wanted to do a project in which I could spend significant time with it. Borrowing the concept of intersectionality from Kimberlé Crenshaw, I wanted to explore the ways in which the process of reading texts like Anzaldúa's influenced my identity, as well as the ways in which my intersectional identity influenced the way I read texts. Originally, I wanted to incorporate my future profession as an educator in the project, but as I progressed, I decided to more narrowly focus on my individual identity and interactions with texts. Using the guiding question "As a queer, white woman, what can I learn and unlearn by reading 20th and 21st century American (women) writers?", I started by grossly overreading texts by American women writers from the past two centuries. As I dove into this fairly expansive genre, I specifically sought out texts by women of intersecting marginalized identities. Therefore, the majority of the works I read were by Black, Indigenous, or women of color, several of whom were queer. One text I read was by an Indigenous, Two Spirit<sup>1</sup> poet and activist, so although the majority and basis of my reading was written by female authors, not all of it was, which is why I put the word "woman" in parentheses in my guiding question.

After reading extensively in this genre, I began to do much process writing, beginning by writing about my queer identity and interactions with Anzaldúa's text. In doing this process writing, I did a close reading of the section of her work titled "Fear of Going Home: Homophobia." As I wrote, I latched onto the motif of home; this subsequently shaped the remainder of my written project, which loosely breaks into four sections: Homelessness, Finding

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<sup>1</sup> Two Spirit is an Indigenous umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community that encompasses many different genders and sexualities. Chrystos, the author in question, uses they/them pronouns.

Home in Texts, Colonizing Home in Texts, and New Consciousness. I begin by exploring the homelessness I felt within my queer identity and the cognitive load and anxiety that accompanied it. Then, I move into the experience of finding home in texts that reflect myself and my experiences; however, I also grapple with the ways in which I colonized these texts, ignoring my whiteness and the ways the texts critiqued my whiteness. Ultimately, I seek to move into a New Consciousness, an adaptation of Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness that attempts to integrate acceptance of my identities with critique of them, through writing and community with others.

Within these four sections, I decided, for the purposes of this project, to focus on my interactions with *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa; *Passing* by Nella Larsen; *Sister, Outsider* by Audre Lorde; and *Not Vanishing* by Chrystos. Anzaldúa's work focuses on her identity as a queer, Chicana woman inhabiting the U.S.-Mexico border. *Passing* details the experiences of a Black woman who can pass as white. Lorde's work is a collection of essays which center her experience as a queer, Black woman. Chrystos's work is a book of poetry centered in their queer, Two Spirit, Indigenous identity. Additionally, I draw from Edwidge Danticat's *Create Dangerously* by writing in a style similar to hers, one which blends the academic and personal, as well as drawing inspiration from her idea of returning to "origin stories" through texts.

Also important to my project, specifically the concept of intersectional identity within it, are Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Policies" and Rekia Jibrin and Sara Salem's "Revisiting Intersectionality: A Reflection on Theory and Praxis." Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality is firmly rooted in the specific intersection of Black and female identities. While I deviate from this original basis in order to discuss my intersecting

identities as a queer, white woman, I also recognize Jibrin and Salem's critique of the co-optation of intersectionality by those with privileged identities. Based on their critique, I remain committed to critiquing my privilege, as well as exploring the unique ways it intersects with my marginalized identities.

Throughout my project, I combine literary analysis and close reading with personal narrative and reflection. Due to the blending of styles and genre, I do not use traditional signal phrases in my writing to indicate when I am quoting another author. Because I found myself and my experiences reflected by the words I read, I felt as if I found language to articulate myself in a way that I would have been unable to without the words of these authors. Therefore, I seamlessly weave the words of others with my own as I show the power of reading to reflect and influence the ways in which we process our identities. I also frequently utilize the method of questioning to indicate my past and continued thought processes as I wrestle with the complexities of identity and identity integration.

Ultimately, due to the time constraints of my project, I was not able to analyze my gender identity as fully as I was my queer and white identities. Neither was I able to explore fully the ways in which this project can and will translate to the classroom. However, I remain committed to further engaging in texts that both affirm and challenge my identity and experiences, just as I remain committed to bringing texts into the classroom that do the same for my students. As I model the critical thinking and reflection of the project for them, I hope that they will also engage in rich and transformative interactions with the written word.

**[dedication]**

to anyone and everyone who has felt homeless within themselves, to those who gave me a home,  
and to those who listened and continue to listen well

**[Homelessness]**

Anzaldúa writes that after the straight students and faculty discovered the lesbians on her college campus, there was a bit of an uproar. And then one student said, “I thought homophobia meant the fear of going home,” and Anzaldúa “thought, how apt. Fear of going home. And of not being taken in” (42). And I too think, how apt, because perhaps their homophobia will make me afraid to go home, or I will no longer feel the joy and comfort I once felt in their presence. Perhaps I will “come home like fitting in a space no one else wants” and “watch [them] try to drape my queerness in ruffles,” try to smile, say the right things and avoid topics where “[w]e’ve nothing [left] in common / different views of the same demolishing crew,” side-step to avoid the “rubble” left by your words, or lack thereof. And yet, I know that I will still trip over the “broken bricks” and “glass shards” left by your homophobia, but I will hide my blood from view because you “want me to say I love you & I do / but” you’ve left wounds in my soul (Chrystos 25).<sup>2</sup>

This is my “*herida abierta*,” when going home and seeing you reminds me of all the painful memories -- words of invalidation spoken over the phone while I sat silently weeping in my dorm; our conversation on the back porch, before you went to the garden where I know you cried -- and what I thought was long ago healed rubs open once more (Anzaldúa 25). And in the renewed pain of my reopened wounds, I long to “go home [and] be received instead of tolerated;” I long to “go home . . . with [a] woman lover in [my] arms / holding hands in the streets;” I long for “[n]o anguished mothers afraid of father’s response or / neighbors’ gossip” or grandparents’ politics or congregation’s judgment or, or, or (Chrystos 76). I long for a home

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<sup>2</sup> Chrystos is a queer, Two Spirit, Menominee poet. I use their words to express many of the same feelings and experiences I have had with homophobia, especially within my family and home, because I have felt and experienced what they describe in these words. However, I think that perhaps Chrystos would not be entirely happy with my use of their words. As I white person, I belong to the people who have colonized and appropriated their culture, and I wonder if they would see me as another “white queer” who does not “notice their albino effect,” a colonizer and appropriator of their words (94).

where no one “believes in / a religion that would murder me;” I long for “you [to] give me a home” (Chrystos 39). Instead I nurse my wounds alone, “a stalk of numb cold lonely grief” (Chrystos 39), with only “*loquería*, the crazies” for company (Anzaldúa 41). And yet, I question whether the conclusions I’ve drawn are based in reality or merely my perceptions of reality filtered through “*loquería*, the crazies,” not daring to trust even myself (41). So perhaps, in addition to the fear of going home, homophobia is also homelessness, for what I once thought was home no longer comforts me the same way, yet my own internalized homophobia also prevents me from finding a new home, even within my own mind.

In high school, before I even admitted to myself with some finality that I was not heterosexual, the Gender-Sexuality Alliance (or Gay-Straight Alliance) club always intrigued me. But I couldn’t actually go to any meetings, because then all of the Christians would think I was affirming and condoning “homosexual behavior.” In fact, I listened and watched as a friend from church, a straight ally, fielded this very question from a church youth leader. And I knew that I could never attend a meeting for fear of being asked the same questions. I knew that I would feel awkward, uncomfortable, like I didn’t belong. Even now, years later, after years of wrestling and working through my queer identity and the internalized homophobia and heterosexism within and around me, I still feel a little homeless. At my “home church,” I wonder what all of the congregants would think if they knew little, perfect Lydia Peibly was gay and would resist all efforts to pray it away. When I sit in the chairs in the sanctuary trying to listen to the sermon, I’m constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for whatever homophobic or heterosexist or insensitive thing the pastor will say this time.

But I haven’t found a home in LGBTQ+ spaces either. I feel like an imposter; I’m not gay enough or educated enough or woke enough to be there; I’m too Christian and still too



internally homophobic to truly fit in. I feel like a perpetual outsider, uncertain of myself and my experiences. As someone who only began to embrace their queer identity later in their life, I feel as though every other queer person has a headstart; I'm perpetually catching up. I don't get half of the gay slang and references they make, so when I laugh along it's only to hide my confusion and questions. I've created a category of people, the all-knowing queers, that probably don't even exist except in my head. Logically, I know that everyone else is probably just as lost in this heterosexist world as I am, but I feel locked out and outside nonetheless.

Homophobia isn't just "fear of going home," but fear of never finding a home and feeling alone with "*loquería*, the crazies," even when you're surrounded by people (Anzaldúa 41). It's masking an immense cognitive load behind a seemingly peaceful, heterosexual exterior. It's constant, heart-pounding fear whenever I hear someone's footsteps coming dangerously close to the closet in which I'm hiding. It's seemingly simple questions and conversations that are immensely difficult for me to navigate and nearly impossible for me to leave unscathed. It's feeling like the world, or at least my world, has been designed and operates in such a way as to exclude me or make me shave off parts of myself so that I can smoothly function within it. It's feeling like I'm constantly trying to fit into spaces where I don't belong or am unwanted.

Assumed to be straight until proven otherwise, I feel as though I always have a "dark secret forever crouching in the background of [my] consciousness" (Larsen 201). Always on my mind, if not in the forefront, lurking somewhere, waiting for people to reveal the worst in themselves. When LGBTQ+ topics come up in straight or non-affirming spaces, I inwardly freeze. And then, within an instant, my mind begins to whirl with questions and fear: *Do they know? But how could they know? Who could have told them? Will they figure it out based on my reaction? What will happen if they do? Will they reject me?*

So, I often stay silent out of fear, though I know while perhaps making me feel secure, my silence will culminate in shame; “[m]y silences [have] not protected me” (Lorde 41). And I sit, with the appearance of being “unruffled . . . while [I am] in reality seething with anger, mortification, and shame,” “repressing” my “rage and rebellion” (Larsen 174). Inside, “*loquería*” is fighting to emerge, but not “the crazies” where I’m “in and out of my head,” but “the crazies” in which I suppress the urge to jump to my feet and scream my identity so loud that no one can talk over it, no one can question me, no one can make me feel like a fraud or a fake, no one can make me feel anything less than myself (Anzaldúa 41). Instead, I say nothing, letting “anger, scorn, and fear slide over [me]” (Larsen 150), my “unexpressed anger [lying] within [me] like an undetonated device” waiting to be “hurled” at an unsuspecting and undeserving victim (Lorde 127)

Later, “mingled with [my] disbelief and resentment [is] another feeling, a question:” Why didn’t I say anything? Why, in the face of “ignorant hate and aversion” did I “conceal” my “own origin? Why had [I] allowed [them] to make [their] assertions and express [their] misconceptions undisputed?” (Larsen 184). “In and out of my head,” awash with shame and self-loathing, self-questioning and doubt, their homophobia, and my own, making me homeless even within myself (Anzaldúa 41). And despite wrestling and resolutions for “next time,” I wonder if I will ever overcome my fear, “anger, mortification, and shame” enough to make a home for myself with words (Larsen 174). Yet perhaps the home I attempt to construct with my words will be torn down, leaving more “rubble” for me to try to avoid (Chrystos 25). So, instead of trying to construct my linguistic home on the constantly shifting sand of my own thoughts, my “*loquería*,” I will instead begin building on the bedrock created by the words of others (Anzaldúa 41). My

foundation will be Gloria and Nella and Audre and Chrystos, and I will take the “rubble” left by the homophobic language of others and rebuild (Chrystos 25).

### [Finding Home in Texts]

Often, it is in the words of others that I see the truest version of myself. Writing is a meaning-making activity, but in order to write, one must first read. In order to write well, one must be well-read. Therefore, it follows that if we are to write what we know, we must first read what we know. If we are to write the self in order to make meaning of the self, we must first read the self. As I sought to make a home for myself with words, I first needed to find a home already under construction, and the first construction site I entered was *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

When I first picked up Gloria Anzaldúa's book for my Ethnic Literatures of the U.S. class, my world burst open in front of me. I'm not sure I had ever read, or will ever read, a text that made me feel so alive and home and understood and welcomed.

Initially, due to the course context in which I opened the book, I expected a text largely focused on ethnic identity that I could appreciate but not necessarily relate to. Beginning the first chapter, I remember appreciating the Spanish Anzaldúa used, even as I struggled through it. In a presidential administration that wanted to make the physical border between Mexico and the U.S. more prominent and less-easily traversed, Anzaldúa's discussion of the movement between the arbitrary borders of the two countries felt particularly timely, despite being written decades prior. As she condemned the Spaniards, Anglos, and whites for their oppression of her people, I condemned them with her, even though I was more like her oppressor than I was like her. I was intrigued by her version of history, what she chose to include that my history textbooks and white history teachers had left out. I expected her book to continue on like this, with me able to learn from her particular Chicana experience, to learn from her critique of the systems and powers in place.

But then, as I continued to read, Anzaldúa began weaving in her other identities. Suddenly, I felt as though she was writing to me, as though she was writing my own experiences and thoughts. As a queer woman surrounded by the pressures of the dominant culture, I felt seen, heard, and affirmed by Anzaldúa. She knew what it was like to be surrounded by homophobia, to experience the pressure to conform to a heterosexual standard when almost no one else around me did; and she wrote about it in such a way that I felt like her words were my own. As she wrote about being queer, but “indoctrinated as straight” and raised within the Church/Christianity, I saw myself reflected in her words (Anzaldúa 41). Raised in a family and church that espoused a “love the sinner, hate the sin” ideology and advocated for “showing them the love of Christ” while holding a theological position firmly against their “lifestyle” (i.e. relationships), I felt the “two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality” (41).<sup>3</sup> I understood Anzaldúa’s “fear of going home” and “of not being taken in,” the fear of rejection by culture and family, for if anyone is not extremely explicit in saying that they are affirming, that they love and accept me wholly and totally, I find myself inhabiting the room they leave for interpretation, allowing my thoughts to run wild with the “Shadow-Beast” lurking just below the surface, struggling to contain it, tame it, subdue it, keep it confined to the closet from which it constantly threatened to escape (42). For years, I denied its existence even to myself, refusing to acknowledge it or attempting to explain away its presence.

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<sup>3</sup> Within the Christian context, there is a broad spectrum of perspectives on the “LGBTQ+ issue,” which is generally spoken about in large and abstract terms. Some Christians believe that to be gay/LGBTQ+ is a sin in-and-of-itself; that is, to even be attracted to someone who is not of the opposite sex is wrong. Others believe that to have/”struggle with” (implying that these feelings should be fought, are not natural or right) these feelings is not sinful, but to act on them (i.e. be in/pursue a relationship) is sinful, and that LGBTQ+ people should be celibate. I am less familiar with the spectrum of beliefs in regards to those who are not cisgender. While Christians who believe being gay is a sin might, and do, advocate for conversion therapy, which is opposed by the American Psychological Association as of 2009, there are many who would not. However, these people, like my parents, might still believe that malformed parental relationships can and do sometimes correlate to attraction to people of the same gender.

But reading Anzaldúa, I began to wonder what it would be like to purposely “awaken” the “Shadow-Beast,” to “confront [it] in the mirror without flinching,” to look into its face and see myself reflected, to see “not lust but tenderness,” to see the truth, to “uncover the lie” (42). So I began to slowly let it out of the cage I had made for it, and I was finally able to see the joy and beauty in what had previously only been “struggle,” sin, and heartache. As I confronted the Shadow-Beast, each time I felt heart-pounding, stomach-twisting anxiety, but then relief. For I knew that even if I was not welcomed in once I revealed the Shadow-Beast within me, I would always have a home in Gloria’s words and, through them, Gloria and her process of homemaking. For in many works, and deeply personal works especially, it is almost impossible to divorce the text from the author. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria’s words are Gloria, her very life blood, and it is through the words that I first encountered the woman; and in the woman, I found a home. And as I continue to find a home in her each time I return to her words, I began to look for homes in other texts as well.<sup>4</sup>

As I began this project several years after first encountering Anzaldúa, I sought out texts which would similarly provide shelter and refuge. Although no text offered an experience identical to my reading of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, I found similar affirmations of myself and my experiences through the different textual encounters. One such text was *Sister, Outsider* by Audre Lorde.

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<sup>4</sup> In the section of her book, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Gloria resists the pressures to speak just Standard English or Standard Spanish. Instead, she celebrates the seven languages that she speaks, which she affirms as neither “incorrect” nor “deficient” but “living” and created for border peoples to “connect their identity to,” languages “capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves” (77). Throughout her work, she blends different languages, frequently incorporating dialects other than Standard English or Spanish and intentionally choosing not to translate them. In this way, she does not conform herself for mass consumption; she does not shave off pieces of herself to be fully understood, maintaining her wholeness.

While both Anzaldúa and Lorde wrote out of their experiences as queer women of color, their audiences and genres differed in ways that affected my process of reading and responding. Anzaldúa, while she does address the reader who cannot relate to her, mainly focuses on her *mestiza* audience, calling them in to her own experience and affirming their navigation of borderlands territory. Lorde, on the other hand, assumes the role of teacher as she seeks to call those with whom she differs into community and understanding. Gloria's words offered a more abstract, emotional home that I find difficult to put into words. Audre's words offered a slightly more concrete, intellectual and logical home in addition to an emotional home. Lorde's work as a whole took me in: her essays on silence and power, her definitions of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia, her affirmation of poetry and the written word. Yet, her essay "Uses of Anger" provided me a home that I did not expect.

I expected to find a home in her calling women together, in her denunciation of heterosexist and homophobic ways of being and thinking. I expected to find a home in her affirmation of written language, her explicit naming of power and the insidious ways it works against oppressed peoples. I expected anger to color her words, but I did not expect a separate and explicit defense of the power and value of anger, and I certainly did not expect to take her words and use them in conjunction with my own.

Growing up within the Christian tradition, I have a complicated relationship with anger. The Christian Church often counsels its congregants against feeling any anger at all. Wrath is included in the Seven Deadly Sins, and Christians are frequently told that they must leash and master their anger. While uncontrolled anger certainly has the potential to create much harm, it is also a valid emotion with the potential for good. Even Jesus got angry at injustice and

exploitation in the temple, flipping tables and driving people out with a whip.<sup>5</sup> Yet, while I recognize my anger as valid, I “still tremble [my] rage under harness,” striving to not feel it too long or too deeply so that I can attempt to move quickly past it into the immediate and almost supernatural forgiveness that I feel pressured to give (Lorde 127). But this response, while perhaps the one the Church counsels me to take, is not necessarily the best one, and perhaps not even correct. While the Church is correct in its call to forgiveness and grace, it often overlooks justice and accountability.

When we blindly “forgive” without accountability, which in practice often becomes making excuses for people and justifying their harmful behavior, it is almost as dehumanizing as the actions which initially caused the harm. Part of the essence of humanity is the capacity for growth and change. When we don’t hold people accountable for their past actions and demand that they do better in the future, we essentially claim that they’re beyond hope or redemption, which is entirely counter to the heart of the gospel. Further, in addition to dehumanizing the perpetrator, we also dehumanize the victim further by denying them reparations. We minimize their hurt and place the feelings of the person in the wrong over their own. We pressure them to forgive and forget while they are in the midst of pain and heartache. Forgiveness is incredibly important, yes, but not at the loss of accountability and justice brought forth from righteous anger.

Reading Lorde affirms the anger I harbor from years of homophobia and heterosexism. Reading her words that assert “[a]nger is loaded with information and energy,” I wholeheartedly agree and posit my own assertion: anger is just as loving as forgiveness, for it recognizes the humanity of both the perpetrator and the victim and calls for justice, accountability, and

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-16



reparation of harm (127). We need to stop avoiding and demonizing anger. Lorde's "fear of anger taught [her] nothing," mine taught me nothing, and "[y]our fear of that anger will teach you nothing, also" (124). For it is anger that stays unexpressed that is the real danger, "[lying] within [us] like an undetonated device" (127). Instead of fearing anger, we must embrace it rather than demonize it as "useless" or "disruptive," for "[f]ocused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (127). Anger is a valid response to injustice and "anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies" (127).

Righteous anger is very different from the hatred the Church fears. "Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction" (129). The goal of the oppressed is life and progress born out of anger, which is "the grief of distortions between peers" whose "object is change" (129). But perhaps, contrary to what the Church claims, hatred is not what it actually fears. Perhaps what it truly fears is recognizing the hurt it's caused and giving up the power it has to continue to harm. Perhaps it does fear anger because it fears anger's potential to hold it accountable.

But in order for anger to achieve its productive potential, those to whom it is expressed must not respond with "denial or immobility or silence or guilt" (129). Lorde asserts that "[g]uilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action" and she has "no creative ways to use guilt," because it is "only another way of avoiding informed actions, or buying time out of the pressing need to make clear choices" (130). I perhaps would not go quite as far as Lorde and call guilt useless. Guilt is useful as a catalyst for restorative actions.

However, when the perpetrator wallows in guilt and uses it to redirect attention away from their harmful actions and center their own feelings above those of the victim, then it truly does become destructive and useless.

Like anger, guilt is a catalyst that contains useful information when utilized in the proper ways. When guilt prompts reflections about one's harmful actions or lack of actions *and then* prompts self-improvement and actions to remedy the situation, then it is useful, but only as a spark for change. Sustained, paralyzing, and/or self-centered guilt help no one.

Lorde could not “hide [her] anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts” (130). But I still can. Even as I sit here, writing a defense of anger, I have buried my own, constantly wary of your impulse to patronize, demonize, and dismiss it. Even as I fully affirm, validate, and value my anger, I fear that you will not. I feel the need to convince you of its worth before I allow myself to reveal it to you. You policed my anger until I learned to police it myself to prevent you from doing so. “In and out of my head,” not with “the crazies,” but with the desperation to be heard and the fear of being ignored (Anzaldúa 41). Worried that you will not listen to my anger as you should, I burden myself with the responsibility to make you listen, convince you to listen, which should not be my burden to bear.

Unlike Lorde, I can still “hide my anger to spare you guilt, [and] hurt feelings, [and] answering anger” and have previously chosen to do so, have chosen to do so here; but recognizing the destructive effects of constrained anger, recognizing its insult and trivialization of myself and my efforts, recognizing the validity and value of my anger, I refuse to hide it anymore. This homophobic and heterosexist world did not spare my feelings, had no qualms about flooding me with shame, cared not that it made me feel homeless within myself, felt no

pity for my emotional and cognitive burden. Therefore, I will hurl the “rubble,” “broken bricks,” and “glass shards” left by your homophobia right back at you and tell you to pick up the pieces and rebuild what you’ve broken. I have found a home elsewhere, I have no need of the one you demolished anymore. I have found my home in Gloria and Audre, Chrystos and Nella.

Chrystos, too, spilled their roiling emotions onto the page. As I read their poetry, I found myself returning to the word “diatribe” to describe it. While off-putting for some, I let the waves of rage, unapologetic and piercing, wash over and refresh me. They wrote all of the things I wanted to scream: “we’re here . . . [but] you don’t even see us” (Chrystos 13), you’re not even trying, and you’re certainly not listening, and even if you were you still wouldn’t understand. Refusing to mask themselves in the façade of silent, stoic suffering, they made the people who “didn’t want / to bother with [them]” pay attention (94). Chrystos threw the “rubble” others created out the window, kicked them out too, and then slammed the door in their faces even as they opened the door for me (25).

I found a home in Laren’s words as she gently prompted me toward releasing my anger, albeit differently and more subtly than Lorde and Chrystos. Irene seems to be angry, or at least annoyed, with everyone and everything around her: Clare and her “having way” (Larsen 210), her husband and his restlessness (178), even herself and her own silence and deceit. But she’s most bothered by her inability to change the people and circumstances around her, so she controls what she can, repressing her true feelings - her anger, insecurities, and shame - behind a silent, seemingly “unruffled” exterior (174). In opening the door to the cognitive load behind Irene’s facade, Larsen showed me my own fears and anxieties building up pressure as they threatened to crack my own mask. She reminded me, or perhaps revealed to me for the first time, that I was not the only one who felt alone in the crazies of my interior.



### [Colonizing Home in Texts]

But as I build my new home on the words of these wonderful women/femmes/people, I must also recognize that they did not build this foundation with me always in mind; in fact, some of them constructed this foundation in spite of me.

Gloria dedicates her words to “*todos los mexicanos on both sides of the border,*” acknowledging “. . .you whom I never chanced to meet but who inhabit borderlands similar to mine; . . . you for whom the borderlands is unknown territory” (Anzaldúa). I am not *mexicana*; I do not inhabit this borderland. I cannot find a home in the words she writes for herself, her racially *mestiza* audience. Yet, I sometimes forget that this home she has begun to build is not for me. I attempt to take up residence there, colonizing a space meant to be only for the colonized.<sup>6</sup> It is easier for me to identify with the marginalization Gloria depicts with her words, because to wrestle with the ways in which I myself marginalize others is uncomfortable. And as a white person, I do not need to feel uncomfortable if I do not want to.

When Gloria writes about the “Gringos” who consider her people “transgressors, aliens,” I recognize that I am a *gringa*, but I do not want this identity, do not want to claim it because to claim it is to claim the harm it and I have perpetuated, to claim it is to claim responsibility for it, to claim it is to once again become uncomfortable with myself (Anzaldúa 25). It is easier to say I am a *gringa*, but I am not like those other ones because I, too, am part of “*Los atravesados*” as a queer person (Anzaldúa 25). It is easier to commiserate with other oppressed and marginalized

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<sup>6</sup> Yes, perhaps Gloria has intentionally created some space for me, even as a white person, for she claims her own whiteness, but I, ever the colonizer, am not content to be peripheral to the racially *mestiza* Chicax people she centralizes. In my desire to find home, I am not content with the foundation Gloria has left me, stealing the construction materials that she has left for others. My colonization of Gloria's words also extends to those of Audre, Nella, and Chrystos. While each has perhaps left room for me as a white woman to learn and grow, in ignoring their critique of my whiteness, in nodding along to their critique of white people without acknowledging the harm that I have perpetrated, I take up too much space. In reading them, I attempt to present myself as the woke ally, neglecting my need to humbly listen and learn.

people as a queer woman, easier to bemoan and blame, because it is hard to convict myself of oppressing and marginalizing. “The Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority,” I see no flaws in myself, do not want to see any flaws in myself and ignore them when I do, nor do I see my whiteness (Anzaldúa 29). And in failing to see my whiteness, I monopolize the home I find in Anzaldúa’s words. I do not leave space for Black, Indigenous, and people of color to also find their home within her, or I whitesplain to them, or by entering into their space I disrupt the home that it was meant to be for them. I need to acknowledge my whiteness, remember it, and remember that I cannot claim *all* of Gloria and Audre and Chrystos and Nella for myself.

Yes, I may find a home as a queer woman; but I also need to remind myself that as a woman, my oppression is not the same as the oppression of all woman; as a queer person, my oppression is not the same as the oppression of all queer people. As a white person, I am not oppressed, but I can and do oppress others. And that is difficult to do, to lean into the discomfort and responsibility. I don’t want to be the oppressor. It is difficult to acknowledge that I am a part of the problem, that I occupy a similar oppressive position as those in the oppressive systems that have hurt me. But I must, because in ignoring the intersection of these oppressions, I weaken any effort to dismantle them.

“[I]n a country where racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable,” I cannot speak on one without also addressing the others (Lorde 110). If I do not address my own racism when discussing with other women the sexism leveled against us, then I fail to identify all of the ways in which patriarchy operates, and I fail to have a fully-formed strategy for its defeat. If I ignore racism when I bemoan the homophobia of this world, then I do not truly understand homophobia. If I continue to ignore our differences, we will never overcome these oppressive systems. For if I do not “[learn] how to take our differences and make them strengths,” we will

be defeated before we even start, “[f]or the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 112). They might “allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game,” but with them we will never see “genuine change” (Lorde 112).

In ignoring my whiteness, I continue to use the master’s tools and not only harm others, but also harm myself. For as I try to ignore race in order to be more inclusive, I actually exclude. I exclude myself, my whiteness, my particular white lens and experience. I exclude Black, Indigenous, and people of color who experience oppression based on their race/ethnicity. I become a part of a group “of all white queers who [don’t] notice their / albino effect” (Chrystos 94). I become a part of a group of white women where there is “[t]he absence of any consideration of lesbian consciousness or the consciousness of Third World women” or women of color (Lorde 111). I forget that I need to “[learn] how to take our differences and make them strengths” rather than ignore them (Lorde 112). How can I find a home in Gloria and Nella and Chrystos and Audre if I cannot know myself and how I differ from them? How can I find a home within their words if I do not read them responsibly?

Often, too often, I read myself as the author of color writing the critique of white women, rather than one of the white women they are critiquing. Reading “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” it is difficult to remind myself that I am not Audre writing to Mary, but that I am Mary receiving and ignoring the letter. I am living the “history of white women who are unable to hear Black women’s words, or to maintain dialogue with [them]” (Lorde 66). When they begin to talk, I immediately steal their words for my own use and begin to build on top of them, burying them and their true meaning. In seeking to take up the call, I shout over the voices that were there first, and I begin to “imply” that “all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women,” and in doing so I “lose sight of the many varied tools of the patriarchy,” I “ignore how

these tools are used by women without awareness against each other” (Lorde 67). When I nod and interject *Yes, I know exactly how you feel because I am also a woman*, in seeking to bind us I divide us further, because I do not know *exactly* how you feel, for while I struggle against the patriarchy, you also struggle against white supremacy, and while I commiserate and participate in struggling against the patriarchy, I often help white supremacy in making you struggle.

Like Mary, I fail to recognize “the differences which lie between us as a Black and a white woman” (Lorde 67). When Lorde asks Mary, “do you ever really read the work of Black women?” I jump to justify myself, immediately thinking, *I read the work of Black women!*, failing to question if I “merely finger through them for quotations which [I think] might valuably support an already conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us” (Lorde 68). I fail to ask myself if I *really* read the words of Black women in order to do that “hard and often painful work necessary to effect change” (Lorde 67). I fail to ask myself if I read the work of Black women responsibly, if I read it to justify myself or convict myself, if I read it to confirm what I already believe or if I read it responsibly and open to change. When I read the works of Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color, I must be aware of how my biases serve “the destructive forces of racism and separation between women;” I must be aware of my “assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women” (Lorde 69); I must be aware that as I read the works of Black women, I often “fail to recognize that, as women, [our] differences expose all women to various forms and degrees of patriarchal oppression, some of which we share and some of which we do not” (Lorde 70). Yes, “[t]he oppression of women know no ethnic or racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences;” “[t]o deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference” (70).



And when I am asked to realize all of these things, my participation and complicity in the oppression of Black, Indigenous, and women of color, I must remember not to respond with “destructive guilt and defensiveness” (70); I must not seek to justify myself or center myself in the conversation. And I must not walk away or ignore the conversation altogether as Mary Daly did, as I have done in the past. To do so “denie[s] the real connections that exist between all of us” (68), and in denying that connection, in excluding our differences, I weaken rather than strengthen our efforts to create change; I make simple, and thereby ineffective, the efforts to destroy a complex system of interconnected oppressive forces. As I read Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color, I must *really* read them in such a way as to set aside my own fragility and privilege. I must learn what it is to be uncomfortable and confronted with my own failures. I must examine the very thing which I have tried to forget and ignore: my whiteness.

So I attempt to peel off my whiteness and examine it intellectually, scientifically, even though I know this is futile because whiteness is more than skin deep, and one cannot rationally and logically examine that which defies rational logic. Race, whiteness, odd constructs that do not exist, except they do and they infiltrate everything. What and who does whiteness encompass? It depends who you ask, and when and where.<sup>7</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa is a Chicana, a

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<sup>7</sup> Whiteness was constructed in order to keep a dominant majority over enslaved, oppressed, displaced, and genocided Black and Indigenous peoples. Whiteness, like race, did not exist several hundred years ago. Additionally, whiteness insidiously changes in order to maintain power. The dominant white, rich class invented whiteness to pacify the white, lower-class so that they would not band together with Black and Indigenous oppressed peoples. Whiteness also expanded to include different ethnic groups which were not formerly considered white, such as Irish and Italian immigrants in the U.S. For more information or research on this, consider the following: *How to Be An Antiracist* and *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* by Ibram X. Kendi; *The Construction of Whiteness: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Race and the Meaning of a White Identity* edited by Stephen Middleton; *How the Irish Became White* by Noel Ignatiev; *More Beautiful and More Terrible: The Embrace and Transcendence of Racial Inequality in the United States* by Imani Perry; *The History of White People* by Nell Irvin Painter; and much other scholarship.

Mexican woman, a *mestiza* woman, a woman of color, an Indigenous woman. But she herself acknowledges that she is also white due to the history and colonization of her peoples. Like many Mexicans/Chicanas, she is a mixture of the Spanish Anglos who exploited, raped, violated, and committed violence against the Indigenous peoples and the Indigenous peoples they violated. She (re)claims what many would seek to deny: the blood of her oppressors flowing within her. Yet while her white ancestors were born to white parents and she claims her whiteness, she is not white, not technically. But why? And who gets to decide?

In America, whiteness changed and morphed over time to retain power and control. It expanded to encompass more ethnic groups; but it also purposefully excluded, saying that any person with “one drop” of non-white blood, no matter how white they appeared, was not white. *Passing* shows how arbitrary the idea of race is, for Clare is Black but looks white, and her husband believes her to be white, so to him she is white, but to Irene she’s Black and legally she’s Black, but no one from her knew lives knows that she’s Black, so is she Black or white?

It’s almost funny in the perverted, sad sort of way, because whiteness itself defies “white rationality” (Anzaldúa 58), that “Western mode” of thinking or “analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (Anzaldúa 101), for “[i]n trying to become ‘objective,’ Western culture made ‘objects’ of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing ‘touch’ with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence” (Anzaldúa 59). Whiteness tries to adhere to the Western mode of thinking, tries to be rational and objective, but in doing so becomes irrational and subjective. Whiteness attempts to distance itself from Black, Indigenous, and people of color and then has the audacity to blame those it climbed over and shoved down for lagging behind. It climbs the hierarchical ladder of its own construction, moving as far away and above Black, Indigenous, and people of color as possible and then has

the audacity to claim to know the most about that which it is most distant from. As if Black, Indigenous, and people of color don't know themselves because their ways of knowing do not fit into the construct of white rationality. As if Black, Indigenous, and people of color haven't had to become intimately acquainted with the violence of whiteness in order to survive. As if Black, Indigenous, and people of color don't navigate their own culture and the white, dominant culture on a daily basis.

Anzaldúa writes that she was once able to speak seven languages, and still retains most of them, which helped her to cross between dominant culture and marginalized spaces. Clare and Irene are able to inhabit both Black and white spaces, to perform both Blackness and whiteness. Yet, this ability to code switch, to blur and cross racial lines, while it shows the illogical nature of the concepts of race and whiteness, is not necessarily a blessing, as evidenced by Anzaldúa's loss of language and fear of judgement, Irene's immense cognitive load, and Clare's fears of discovery within her marriage. Just because race defies logic and is a human construct does not mean that it does not wield incredible power and cause incredible harm.

And that is the failure of the non-intersectional approach, the Western approach, the white approach, which attempts to make things linear and simple when the problem itself defies all logic and linear reasoning, instead resembling the knot of cords hidden behind a TV. It's much easier to only untangle the one cord we need just enough to use it, leaving the rest to suffer in bondage. And that's only if we acknowledge the tangled mess in the first place.

### [New Consciousness]

In ignoring the tangled mess of my intersecting identities, I ignore a part of myself, “divid[ing] her who had been complete” (Anzaldúa 49). Instead of embracing my “seemingly contradictory aspects” (64), I “[deny] their occurrences and let my inner senses atrophy” (Anzaldúa 58). Because I do not want to do the hard work, because ambiguity makes me uncomfortable, I never truly find myself, remaining homeless. But “[r]igidity means death. Only by remaining flexible [are we] able to stretch the psyche” (Anzaldúa 101). Yet, the Church often demands rigidity; seeking answers or truth from anywhere else is met with suspicion and condemnation. Mainstream, white, American Christianity in particular tends, or intends, to forget that our ways of thinking and being are not the only right or valid ways of thinking and being; and despite its insistence to the contrary, its ways of thinking and being are sometimes the most harmful. And this also extends to the broader white, male, heterosexual, cisgender society: rigidity and adherence to their ways of thinking and being are taught and rewarded, while others are punished. Like mathematical proofs, they give you the starting place and the answer, and then give you the “freedom” to get there how you choose, calling it “critical thinking,” but they’ll still penalize you if you take too many wrong turns along the way.

This way of thinking and being, the path they have set out for me, the starting and end points, do not allow me to remake myself whole; they keep me perhaps safe and comfortable (if I reject certain [queer] parts of myself), but tethered, indoctrinated, and small. They atrophy my inmost senses, letting some of my truest ways of being and knowing wither. So, I must strive to leave behind my “Western mode” of thinking “that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal;” I must move “away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (Anzaldúa 101). I must reject their starting

and end points and the straight line between them, must do the much harder work of pursuing multiple goals at once, and learn to use circular and non-linear ways of thinking and being to achieve all of them at once.

Somehow, I must remake myself whole, must come to terms with my white, female, queerness. Anzaldúa calls this the “*conciencia de la mestiza*” (99), in which “[t]he new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity . . . She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode - nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (101). And yet, *la conciencia de la mestiza* is not entirely for me. Anzaldúa specifically includes her Chicane/x and racially *mestiza* audience. Yes, she herself acknowledges her own whiteness, but she also claims her Indigenous and Black heritage. While I might aspire to *la conciencia de la mestiza*, I am not a woman of mixed race, I do not have either Indigenous or Spanish ancestors. So perhaps, I must strive instead for a New Consciousness, located in my particular white self, along with my queer and womanly selves. Within my New Consciousness, like Anzaldúa’s, I will seek to understand and embrace the identities which I have hidden and shamed for so long. I will seek to see “not lust, but tenderness” as I “confront” and “awaken” my queerness (42). I will seek to coax it out of hiding, to embrace it, love it, find joy in it.

And as I seek to understand and embrace my individual queer self, even amidst all the questions and contrasting forces, I also seek to understand and embrace the queer collective. As I have found a home in the words of Gloria and Audre and Chrystos and Nella, I extend my own words as a home for others. And I seek to understand myself in relation to them, the queers I interact with and live with, just as I seek to understand myself in relation to the written queer and

queer written word. In sorting through my own “*loquería*” and cognitive load, and in presenting it for others to read, I invite them into the New Consciousness by giving them the tools to build a house of their own just as I have built my house through the words of others. In writing about how I have found home through the process of reading, I provide a model for my own readers to do the same. And I also present a new perspective for those who cannot relate to my identity and experience.

In presenting the cognitive load of the marginalized and hurting queer, I create room for empathy and understanding. As I critique the ways in which I, through my whiteness, have colonized texts, I model the critical consciousness that is crucial for dominant groups in order for them to reflect, change, and grow. Like Anzaldúa, my New Consciousness intentionally creates room for the oppressor to join in community, necessitating that we “[learn] how to take our differences and make them strengths” (Lorde 112), in order to do that “hard and often painful work necessary to effect change” (67). But my New Consciousness is not a *mestiza* consciousness, for unlike Anzaldúa, I am part of the oppressors called into community with the oppressed. My New Conscious, even while it seeks to show me the joy within my identity, also critically examines and holds parts of it accountable for the harm it has inflicted.

I must also stop ignoring, rejecting, and minimizing my whiteness, must learn how to not only sustain its contradictions with my queerness, but turn the ambivalence into something new, a way of being and knowing that integrates both acceptance and critique of self. Gloria reminds me that even in my apparent contradictions, in my oppressive whiteness and oppressed queer femaleness, that “the fusion of opposites” is possible (Anzaldúa 69), reminds me that I can have a “third perspective -- something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality” (Anzaldúa 68). And yet, though I know where I want to end up, in a place where I’m at peace with myself

and the world while simultaneously striving to make each better and more whole, getting there is complicated.

As Gloria analyzes how those before her had split the Aztecan mother goddess into domesticated and dichotomized parts, and then split the women of her people, I am reminded of myself, split into seemingly contradictory parts, wondering how to remake myself whole. As she describes *la conciencia de la mestiza*, I often feel as though I am left with more questions than answers: How can I come to terms with my oppressive whiteness? How can I embrace my whiteness while also holding it accountable for all of the harm it, and I through it, have perpetuated? How can I overcome my internalized homophobia and heterosexism? How can I overcome the shame and the defense strategies against pain? How can I make my own meaning, gather the energy to “disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life?” (Anzaldúa 68). How can I commit to working to reconstruct and know myself when “[k]nowing’ is painful” and means I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable?” For after knowing, “I am no longer the same person I was before,” meaning the process must begin again (Anzaldúa 70).

And then I realize that once again my “white rationality” is the lens through which I am asking these questions (58). While I cannot reject my whiteness if I wish to remain whole, perhaps I must reject my white, western way of thinking, stop compartmentalizing and excluding through simplistic, linear solutions. As I remind myself “how infinitely complex any move for liberation must be” (Lorde 135), not only must I “move against . . . those forces which dehumanize [me] from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which [I] have been forced to take into [myself]” (Lorde 135). Not only must I struggle against external and internal oppression, but also the external and internal manifestations of my ability and impulse to oppress. “Any future vision which can encompass all of us, by definition, must be complex and

expanding, not easy to achieve . . . there is no simple monolithic solution to racism, to sexism, to homophobia” (Lorde 136).

Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness and my New Consciousness are complicated and difficult to achieve because they call for the “fusion of opposites,” the oppressed and oppressor, into a single, whole community dedicated to a radical future (69). But perhaps they are not as complicated as I think. Perhaps they are only complicated because I neglect to listen.

As I seek to reject my western mode of thinking, my white mode of thinking, my mainstream Christian mode of thinking, I remember the usefulness of the anger that these linear rationalities reject. And I remember that not only is my anger useful and valid and productive, but that I must actively listen to, accept, and engage with the anger of others. The anger that is directed at me is also useful, valid, and productive as it spurs me to action.

The full title of Lorde’s essay is “Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism.” Even as I read validation of my own rage, as I stop attempting to snuff out the flame of my own anger, I must remember that Lorde’s anger is often directed at me, a white woman whose racist attitudes and ideas fracture our commonality as women and humans. I must remember not to respond to her anger and the anger of others with the same dismissal, denial, defensiveness, and fragility that I despise. I must acknowledge my own harm, and the harm I know I will continue to cause in my imperfections, and seek to make amends. As I call those around me into the community of the New Consciousness, I must commit myself to the continual work it entails.

And key to this work is active dialogue, which includes engaged and embodied listening. Unlike hearing, which is passive and often unintentional, listening is an active and intentional practice. True, embodied listening not only involves hearing and processing the words of others, but reflecting on your own thoughts, feelings, ideas, and perceptions and subsequently acting



empathetically in response. The New Consciousness requires a community built upon intentionally seeking out listening for self-betterment and the betterment of relationships; this includes listening to the anger of others and acting toward reparations instead of responding defensively. “The possibilities are endless when we decide to act and not react” (Anzaldúa 101).

When I decide to stop reacting to the clashes between my whiteness and queerness, when I decide to act to fuse them together, when I decide to sustain the contradictions, the pain of knowing, when I decide to act to make myself whole within a community of other whole people, the world opens up before me. Instead of reacting to my homelessness and my tendency to colonize home, I act to build myself a home with the words of others, leaving enough behind for the next builder. I graciously accept the materials and foundations left for me by others, but I do not take more than my share. I leave others the room and materials to build; I work toward a collective good. And if another builder comes along and critiques my building, declares that I have misused or abused that which was left to me, I must humbly accept this and seek to right my wrongs, even if this means leaving behind my home for others to dismantle and rebuild. And once I construct my own home, I must seek to aid others in the construction of theirs.

Gloria declared that “if going home [was] denied [her]” that she would “have to stand and claim [her] space, making a new culture - *una cultura mestiza* - with [her] own lumber, [her] own bricks and mortar and [her] own feminist architecture” (Anzaldúa 44). If she was not welcomed at her home, if she was afraid to go home, it didn't matter to her, she was “a turtle,” wherever she goes she “carr[ies] ‘home’ on [her] back” (Anzaldúa 43). If going home is denied me, I will soak up the words of others and carry them with me; I will soak my home into myself. Or perhaps, I will soak up the words of others and pour them onto the page along with my own. I will lean into my pain and homelessness, spilling it out along with my radical joy and hope for

the future. I will write myself into existence, “an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of the experience, whatever it may be” (Anzaldúa 95).

“Writing produces anxiety. Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflicts, engenders anxiety,” but growth does not happen when one is comfortable (94). Growth happens when you are stretched and pulled in so many different directions you think you’ll be pulled apart, wish you were pulled apart because of the pain. But then you emerge more whole than you were before, only to enter back into the pain again. Growth happens when you give words and voice to the pain you’d kept buried. Growth happens when you pour “*loquería*, the crazies” and the cognitive load of oppression and marginalization onto the page, when you overthink your overthinking and how to convey it. Growth happens when you hate what you’ve said and you love what you’ve said, when you slash and burn and meticulously tend. Growth happens in the methodical and chaotical. Growth happens when even you are scared of what you’ve just created, when your impulse is to hide or destroy it because you see too much of yourself, but you set it free anyway. Growth happens when you invite others into the home you have made out of words, let them admire and critique, demolish and reconstruct, renovate and revamp, redecorate and rearrange, and everything in between. Growth happens when you bare your soul onto the page and then let someone else take that piece of you into themselves, soak in the words that are you, and use them to build themselves.

This will be “my home / this thin edge of / barbwire” (Anzaldúa 25), this painful written word, where I almost don’t fit, don’t belong, teetering on the edge of oblivion, yet always catching myself, finding my balance, remaining centered in my whole self.

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