

## ***VOYEURISM, LITERARINESS, AND THE LUST OF SEEING: SYLVIA MOLLOY READS FELISBERTO HERNANDEZ BEFORE QUEER THEORY***

**Patrick O'Connor**  
Oberlin College

**Resumen:** Sylvia Molloy was doing queer theory "before queer theory," finding inconvenient and unruly impulses in the authors that she studied before 1991. Whether researching, reading, or remembering, she finds an erotic component in the act of seeing, and her 1981 novel *En breve cárcel* often echoes the tactic of occupying the hollowed-out or phantom male bodies of patriarchal institutions. The "disembodied" Borges that she found in French readings of Borges is countered in her own later treatment of him as a voracious, greedy reader; but it is only in her readings of Felisberto Hernández that she can fully turn the "básica extrañeza" of voyeurism into insights about the autobiographical project. Although she sidelined him due to her commitment to feminism and queer theory, Felisberto remains in Molloy's early oeuvre as a figure for the selfish small pleasures of uncommitted literature for its own sake.

**Key Words:** anxiety of influence, impersonality, Blanchot, memory, lo entreabierto, unethical criticism

Hay dos maneras de establecer antepasados. Una de ellas poco tiene que ver con nuestra voluntad. Cada texto que escribimos dicta, entre líneas, sus propios precursores, refleja para el lector los meandros de nuestras lecturas previas. Quizá tengamos conciencia de esos precursores, quizá no; quizá lo que hemos escrito despierte en un lector ecos de un nombre que quiera atribuirnos. Así alguien una vez me propuso como precursor a Felisberto Hernández. Yo no lo sospechaba; tampoco lo veía como hecho del todo evidente. Sin embargo, como he leído mucho a Felisberto y es uno de los escritores que más quiero, me dejé convencer. Los dos compartimos después de todo la "lujuria de ver". (Molloy, "Sentido de ausencias", 485)

Once upon a time I wanted to write a book about the Uruguayan author of uncanny fictions and odd memoirs Felisberto Hernández (1902-1962), and about literary influence. It struck me as odd, but fitting, that although much of his literary reputation was preserved by some important male critics and authors, notably Angel Rama and Julio Cortázar, he came to the attention of and was indeed championed by four women writer-critics, all of the same generation, Rosario Ferré, Alicia Borinsky, Cristina Peri Rossi, and Sylvia Molloy, although each of those writers would invoke and support Felisberto's oeuvre only temporarily, as part of projects that needed to do battle with more substantial literary precursors (the vocabulary I use I borrow consciously from Harold Bloom's prestigious though heavily sexist ideas about the anxiety of influence). Knowing his biography, I could make it into a joke: Felisberto was married four times, and thanks to the liberal divorce laws of Uruguay in almost all of the cases it was the wife who initiated the divorce proceedings. These women writer-critics, then, would be "Felisberto's ex-wives," attracted to his seductive oeuvre – especially in its idiosyncratic use of voyeurism and fetishism– but eventually seeing through him and moving on from their contact with him with lessons learned.

They didn't relate to Felisberto's oeuvre in the same way, as it turned out, and especially not in the fictions that they wrote while simultaneously being critics. Male characters who display a Felisbertian dynamic of voyeurism and fetishism appear in the early fiction of Rosario Ferré and the novels of Alicia Borinsky, and they are presented as attractive alternatives to the bombastic machismo of stereotypical males at first; still, for both authors these dynamics are heavily criticized, either because of the way they, too, objectify women (Ferré) or because they paralyze the man in positions of impotence (Borinsky). And in their academic criticism, neither Ferré nor Borinsky decides to make Felisberto a permanent touchstone for their criticism (for Ferré that was Julio Cortázar; for Borinsky it was Macedonio Fernández). Invested neither with the power of the books and popular culture we imbibe in our childhood, nor with the weight of canonical respectability, nor with the power to make that claim of literary paternity which is so necessary to inaugurate the dynamics of Bloomian literary history, Felisberto is not your tutor; he is not your required reading; he is not, in the end, your father. It is true that, in a cultural and literary environment full of macho fools, Felisberto's foolishness seems (and is) less threatening: but Ferré's analysis of his unreliable narrators suggests that in the end he is a man who cannot be trusted; and Borinsky's analysis of his private spectacular theaters suggests that in the end he is a man who cannot be reached. Felisberto, then, is not good husband material either.

For that reason, perhaps, the two women author-critics who have absorbed Felisberto in the most positive way, Sylvia Molloy and Cristina Peri Rossi, are the ones who are not looking for husbands. Like Ferré and Borinsky, these two authors use Felisberto to correct the course of their writings from falling under the sway of more powerful precursors (Borges and the French nouveau roman for Molloy; Cortázar and committed leftist fiction for Peri Rossi); unlike them, however, Molloy and Peri Rossi (perhaps because of their lesbianism, perhaps not) are

not afraid of the perversions we associate with Felisberto. Ferré and Borinsky, each from their very different position in the feminisms of the '70s and '80s, criticized Felisberto's world of male voyeurs and female exhibitions, and each rejected the thematics of fetishism which are so clearly part of that world. Molloy and Peri Rossi entertained far more fully the positions of the voyeur and the fetishist –indeed, Molloy seemed intent on vindicating the position of the voyeur, and Peri Rossi of the fetishist. As they do so we are often made aware of phantom male bodies lingering at the edges of Molloy's critical text, occupying the center of Peri Rossi's fictional texts more fully, into and out of which these two authors step almost at will; irrecoverable to the crasser Oedipal dynamics of Bloomian literary history, this shadow man never needs to be banished as fully as Ferré and Borinsky must banish Felisberto. In Molloy's critical writing in particular he is a position to be inhabited which offers a window into the past without yielding to patriarchal guilt; in Peri Rossi he is a sign for the inevitable melancholy of obsessive desire. (We might say that Molloy wants the right not to be trusted; Peri Rossi wants the right not to be reached.) Finally, even in an era in which both acknowledge to a certain extent the notion that the distinction between the political and the personal, or between the public and the private, cannot strictly be maintained, for these two authors Felisberto's insistent, half-comic desires represent a resistance to the political and the public, a synecdoche for the literary itself.<sup>1</sup>

In the early works of Sylvia Molloy, the threat to the literary will be similar to the threats to the continued influence of Felisberto, and the defense of the literary will also involve the roundabout rescue of the ambivalent privileges of the voyeur. The quote above, from her essay "Sentido de ausencias" (1985), already encapsulates much of Molloy's entanglement with Felisberto and with ambivalences. Written as a reflection upon influences, the essay for *Revista Iberoamericana* begins with a wish to disavow acknowledging influences altogether, and ends with a long description of her relation to a specifically Latin American women's tradition; between them, the only Latin American authors to have "marked" her are (without comment how) Silvina Ocampo and (with the comment quoted above) Felisberto. Yet that train of thought is so redolent of Borges's famous essay "Kafka and his Precursors" that one feels that the "sense of an absence" in the essay's title refers not just to the meaning of the absence of female precursors but also to a felt absence of a precursor, Borges. As we will see, the privilege of seeing as Borges does will be conjugated with the costs of feeling as Felisberto does about what she sees.

Of course, I write this essay in the wake of Sylvia's death. She had been my dissertation advisor, with all that that entails, and we remained good friends for the twenty-five years after that. More relevantly to this essay, the Sylvia Molloy who defends Felisberto in a 1985 essay in which she redoubles her feminist commitment to women writers for ethical reasons, and who would soon join in enthusiastically to the cause of queer theory and queer literary studies for ethical and political reasons, is not the Molloy whose work I am commenting on in this essay. This is Molloy wielding Felisberto before feminism, before (some kinds of) queer theory, to a certain extent before the ethical or the political. Molloy's Felisberto is a figure for literariness itself, but a literariness that partakes in the flickering desires that would eventually constitute the subject of much of the earliest, and my opinion best, queer theory.

### **Sylvia the Spy: Phantom Male Bodies and the Hunger of Intellectual Curiosity**

[...] así fue su infancia: nada mágica, tampoco atroz, un mero lugar provisorio. [...]e su infancia poblada de disfraces –el que arma con ropa de su padre, grotesco y divertido– y de largas contemplaciones, disfrazada o no, entre espejos enfrentados. Manía de desdoblamiento y de orden, según series interminables. (*En breve cárcel*,14)

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1. For more on Peri Rossi's strategic use of Felisberto, see O'Connor 2019.

The unnamed protagonist of Molloy's 1981 novel *En breve cárcel* reflects back on her childhood, and sums much of it up in this vignette (there will be a few more), of long contemplations in the mirror between facing mirrors, sometimes dressed in her father's clothes, sometimes not. Although "grotesque and amusing," the practice shows a *manía*, an obsession with or fixation on, both doubling and order.<sup>2</sup>

Let's begin with order. Of Felisberto's four "ex-wives," Molloy is the one who hewed most closely to impersonal academic protocols and, for the first twenty-five years of her career, invoked the most impersonal of those literary styles available to her within the literary field. Her first book was published in French and obeys the starchiest and most positivist of Sorbonne dissertation procedures as it traces the diffusion of Latin American literature in France from *modernismo* to Borges's Parisian triumph of 1961; her 1978 chef d'oeuvre, *Las letras de Borges*, while often called "poststructuralist," avoids the quirky playfulness of a Derrida or Barthes. Were we tempted to read a personal pursuit into her 1991 treatment of Spanish American autobiography *At Face Value*, we face a friendly but daunting warning in the second paragraph of the book's introduction:

I am not tempted [...] to suggest that writing about autobiography is itself a form of autobiography, nor to posit that the organization of this book mirrors a personal itinerary. If I choose to write about [...] Spanish American autobiography, the choice is due to sheer critical inquisitiveness" (1).

While such a statement, and the book which it introduces, does disimplicate Molloy from certain kinds of biographical readings, it also lays open her work to an examination of the pleasures of "sheer critical inquisitiveness," especially in three forms—researching, reading, and remembering—, each of them oddly assimilable to the concept of spying as well as to the pleasure of voyeurism.

Remembering, the third of these variations on "the lust of seeing," will be thematized through her reading of Felisberto; but it may not be out of place to examine the first two as well, since an examination of the role of "research" and "reading" as a sort of spying will help us place Molloy's understanding of Felisberto in a better perspective.<sup>3</sup> Molloy has no difficulty in attributing almost physical pleasure to certain intellectual activities; and the energy directed to accumulating the many thousands of tiny facts which constitute the book on the diffusion of Latin American literature in France bears some resemblance to the marbles which the protagonist of *En breve cárcel* used to take pleasure in taking from the neighborhood boys, on whom she used to spy:

Manía de desdoblamiento y de orden, según series interminables. Recogía las bolitas que se les escapaban a los chicos del colegio de al lado (a quienes espiaba) y que caían en su jardín: las atesoraba, con ellas pasaba horas organizándolas en fila. Marcaba siempre del mismo modo el comienzo de la serie: con una ágata, mucho más linda que las otras. No olvida ese rito... (14)

In the context of that novel (paired with the image of staring at herself in facing mirrors, whether disguised in her father's clothing or not), the image of the girl stealing marbles is an image of the autobiographical novelist as gatherer of discarded fragments of language and of her surroundings; for my purposes, however, it can also stand as an allegory for the girl child as a future academic, forming "interminable series" of pretty facts in a row, picking up on the material which escaped the schoolboys next door.

In later books, the schoolboys who do not make good enough use of the marbles they play with will be the authoritative figures of Latin

2. The concept of *manía* appears in Molloy's analysis of Norah Lange, as we will see; it's also a term used frequently by Felisberto to describe his driven and often hapless protagonists.

3. Molloy permits herself no anecdotes in her 1991 book on autobiography as a person, but she does recount an anecdote of herself as researcher, correcting the secretary of the Museo Nacional Sarmiento about the existence of Sarmiento's younger brother, who died when he was eleven and about whom Sarmiento "asserted, no less, that his brother was more intelligent than he was" (qtd. in *At Face Value*, 244). Stretching the point, one might claim that Honorio Sarmiento is another one of those phantom male masks or positions towards which Molloy throws her energies, even when female positions (in this case, Sarmiento's revered mother and sisters) are profusely available.

American history and their hagiographers; in her first book, Molloy's pleasure will derive from spying on an entire nation.<sup>4</sup> *La diffusion...* is a book which examines how the male Latin American writers from *modernismo* to the mid-1960's set out to conquer France, and does so not by chronicling what these authors said about the task, but by finding out what the French themselves thought of it all. An odd love triangle, like a daughter rummaging through the diary of her father's mistress to see what she really thinks of him; yet the text is hardly salacious in that way. The energy of the text arises first from its thoroughness, the satisfaction felt in correcting France's poor judgment of Latin America's cultural past.

Second, by focusing on three authors in particular, Rubén Darío, Ricardo Güiraldes, and Borges, Molloy succeeds in tracing an itinerary from Latin American author as flamboyant voyager (Darío), to Latin American author as cosmopolitan performer of his difference (Güiraldes), to Latin American author as *el hacedor*, the maker of texts with no human presence behind them to distract from those texts. (This phantom Borges is far preferable to the Borges of earlier French responses, who was awkwardly assimilated to the existentialist reading of Kafka and Beckett.) But while this gradual correction of the image of Borges in the eyes of the French is persuasive, Molloy also presses it into service to offer a sort of teleology in which the Latin American author no longer needs to conform to stereotype in order to be taken seriously. Indeed, Borges is said to herald a time when the Latin American author will be imitated in France rather than vice versa, and Borges's works are assimilated into a French literary tradition: his great success comes when the massive 1964 collection of essays about him places him as the original contributor to a line of French writers that begins with Mallarmé and Valéry and continues through Blanchot.

It would be nice if Borges had inspired France to dispense with stereotypical judgments about Latin Americanness; elsewhere in her book, however, Molloy acknowledges that this may very well not be the case, either due to the Surrealists' insistence on Latin America's thrilling violence, or to the continuing presence of Latin American authors in France, a group of whom will imminently generate the Boom, and whose present male bodies extend a tradition of sophisticated machismo against which Borges's absent body really offers little opposition.<sup>5</sup> Molloy's research shows that Borges is an exception who has not yet been able to budge the rule; his phantom male body is a position which, impersonally set forth by Molloy's research, defends impersonality, a position which Molloy wills for herself as much as she actually finds it for Latin Americans in the Parisian landscape.

Borges's impersonality can be used by Molloy as a strategy not merely to defend against the personality of previous Latin Americans such as Victoria Ocampo, but also against the impersonality of otherwise formidably attractive French models in criticism and fiction, especially the *nouveaux romanciers* and *nouveaux critiques* Nathalie Sarraute and Maurice Blanchot. In her next book of criticism Molloy moves from the practice of researching to the practice of reading; and yet while the Borges of *Las letras de Borges* (*Signs of Borges*) seems to adhere to the doctrines of Blanchot's high-modernist questionings of the self (summed up by the title of Borges's early essay "La nadería de la personalidad," the nothingness, triviality, of personality, which Molloy cites often), and while Blanchot figures prominently in the series of epigraphs, mostly French, which mark like agate marbles the beginning of each chapter, the Borges which Molloy constructs swerves from Blanchot, ending up far from the mystical *eminence grise* who read the futility of the work of literature only in a tragic, agonistic key. Molloy cites (albeit sparingly) Blanchot and Sarraute, but neither of them would employ the vocabulary which she does when describing the physicality of Borges's acts of reading.

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4. A gratifying amount of attention is paid to this first book of Molloy's in the new anthology of work dedicated to her, part posthumous Festschrift, part analysis of her place in Latin American literary studies, in the magazine *Chuy* from 2021; see especially Valentín Díaz and Graciela Montaldo.

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5. Her book acknowledges Breton, Artaud, Leiris only in footnotes and asides; more curious is a total absence of an assessment of the Cuban Revolution's effect on the rhetoric of "Latin Americanness" since 1959 in France. Her introduction does acknowledge the right-wing coups of recent Argentine history.

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6. On this element of *Las letras de Borges*, Balderston in Link et al. is invaluable.

Molloy's Borges is a fomenter of disquiet: verbs of upsetting and disequilibrating, adjectives of the uncanny and the off-balance, are used throughout the text.<sup>6</sup> The good reader of Borges finds tension everywhere and experiences that tension without prematurely resolving it. The bad reader of Borges reads as if he or she is eating, digesting, even shitting: "To read Borges [is] to consume a predictable Borges [...] Borges is consumed voraciously [...] The physical metaphor is not entirely impertinent, underscoring a voracity that no longer recognizes its true appetite" (1). The good reader also eats the text, but does so slowly, to catch the text's contradictions, the moments where Borges cannot be reduced to the stereotype "Borgesian," where he is different from himself. Yet Molloy insists in the text not on a language of the gourmet but of the gourmand. Borges himself is tempted to resolve the tension of his self-contradictions, and does so coded in the language of appetite: when Molloy analyzes his habits of reading, she finds that the "nothingness of personality" produces in Borges-as-reader violent desires: the early Borges displays "vicarious voraciousness" as a "flaneur-voyeur" both while wandering Buenos Aires and while grazing through texts; he is a "coveter of souls" (10) whether reading Hudson or "greedily" (12) remaking Evaristo Carriego's Palermo for himself. The mature Borges of the *ficciones* retreats in his demands, but his creation of the minimal units of narrative desire in his doubles who so much resemble each other does not fool Molloy: "Covetousness and greed abound in Borges's characters"(48); "[w]hile difference, then, is a narrative necessity, what matters is the way in which it manifests itself in the illusory exchange between doubles, and the desire, the craving, that difference awakens" (47); the protagonist of "Ibn Hakkán al-Bokari, Dead in his Labyrinth" is "an emptiness hungering for a script" (57). It seems particularly sly for Molloy to cite approvingly Blanchot's allusions to Borges, as an author of texts in which reason outwits itself, in a chapter in which the reader is defined almost animalistically, a voyeur constantly on the move in an orality that (rather like voyeurism itself) cannot be mapped firmly onto the axis of active versus passive.

Molloy's Borges first takes his pleasure in a voracious reading; however, as a writer he is portrayed in terms of temptation and fear, a man who, incorporating everything, is forbidden from excreting or ejaculating anything since everything has already been written.<sup>7</sup> Having granted Borges the full pleasures of the voyeur, Molloy is much more diffident about attributing to him the pleasure of the fetishist: those multiple small objects, the *hrönir* of Tlön, the Zahir in Borges's palm, the Aleph, cannot be avowed directly as objects of pleasure in Borges but instead may only be used strategically by the author to disrupt our confidence in the solidity of the conventional world. The materiality of these objects generates anguish for the Borgesian character; on the verbal and rhetorical levels, however, Molloy acknowledges what she calls Borges's "pleasure in interpolation," in disrupting pre-established sequences by adding seemingly innocuous terms that call attention to gaps inherent in the sequences. Without citing Derrida once, Molloy gives Borges a desire for and a satisfaction in "the pleasure of delaying closure" (101), leaving Western metaphysics where he found it but "resigned to the 'treacherous swerving' built into [syntax], which seldom reflects the true will to swerve, to dissent, which drives the text" (134). Borges demands the right not to be trusted, occupying a constantly moving position on the margins of the West from which he can greedily see, protected from punishment by a taboo on originality and on loquacity: Molloy compares the space he inhabits to the hotel rooms of which Proust writes, dangerously full of objects until habit (Proust) or forgetfulness and distraction (Borges) clear space for these self-limiting, distrustful philosophical idealists—hotel rooms that echo the rooms which *En breve cárcel's* protagonist returns to and which she must inventory in order to reclaim their space from its past owners.<sup>8</sup>

Borges's constant injunction to keep reading, and to keep moving as one reads ("Inattention to texts equals death" for Borges, says Molloy (35)),

6. On this element of Las letras de Borges, Balderston in Link et al. is invaluable.

7. There are metaphors of economy and transactions in Molloy's Borges too, but according to her methodology the characters' positions are too fungible for stories or knowledge to be useful as coins between agents; rather, in Borges economy is seen as husbandry or hoarding, a reluctance to emit (or a taboo against emitting) unnecessary signs. Always absorbing, never emitting: no wonder the importance of forgetting in Borges; the "economy of memory," memory as a sort of invested capital, is one of the recurrent minor themes in her later book *At Face Value*.

8. Francine Masiello 1985 compares the hotel rooms of *En breve cárcel* to those of Onetti, a novelist Molloy overtly recognizes in her criticism and in interviews (see García Pinto 138 and Speranza 142). Onetti, a Uruguayan contemporary of Felisberto's who was professional and successful where Felisberto was neither, also thematized voyeurism in such a way that Molloy can use it (his "codicia de relatos" (Speranza 142) can be compared to the greed we have seen that Molloy sees in Borges); but Onetti spies not for its own sake, but to achieve a mixture of fact and imagination that can be exchanged for what he truly desires.

is balanced in his later texts by his equal desire to achieve a monumentality, however futile he reminds himself this monumentality is; and this tension between the desire to monumentalize oneself and the desire to celebrate one's mobility as reader and writer is the axis along which Molloy's subjects arrange themselves in *At Face Value*. The book, in its search for recurring units of autobiographical tropes in the memoirs of statesmen and the recollections of artists, divides into three sections, "the scene of reading," "childhood and family tales," and "memory, lineage, and representation". The tension between mobility and monumentalism appears in almost every one of her principal subjects, and could well be said to be the real conducting thread which links all these chapters together. Those authors who court monumentalism without much interest in a mobile self (Picón Salas, Cané) are treated less warmly than those who happily perform their mobile, rather privileged, marginality (Mansilla, the Condesa de Merlín) or who see to their monumentality in so lavish a manner that the mobile self clearly exceeds the monument in the very act of monumentalizing (Sarmiento, Ocampo, Vasconcelos).

The most heroic of her autobiographers is the nineteenth-century Cuban poet and freed slave Juan Francisco Manzano, who engages in a desperate attempt to establish his self-portrait as an artist and wrest it from the well-meaning attempts of various politicians and publishers to rewrite his self-portrait as merely a victim of slavery; the autobiographer most relevant to my project here is the only Argentine woman novelist in the book, Norah Lange. Lange, wife of the ultraísta poet Oliverio Girondo, is more famous for her 1938 autobiography *Cuadernos de infancia* than for her novels or poetry, and perhaps more famous in her day for her flamboyant public demeanor than for her writings.<sup>9</sup> As with Manzano, Molloy rescues Lange's autobiographical portrait from a naive or ideological reading in favor of its status as a deliberate work of art: "[while] it has often been asserted that women's autobiographies tend per se to be fragmentary [...] I would argue that Cuaderno's disjunctive composition is especially marked by the literary conventions – *ultraísmo* and surrealism – within which Lange chooses to write" (132). But if Lange's *vanguardista* attitude towards words is different from Molloy's own, she nevertheless shares the notion that childhood is an era of satisfied spying, which forces the adult reader, somewhat uncomfortably, to spy upon the child in his or her turn.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Lange's double gesture, both voyeur and exhibitionist, is in the end why she is an alluring figure to Molloy, who defends "sheer intellectual curiosity" (voyeurism) whereas the protocols of impersonality deny her the corresponding temptations of exhibitionism.

I have remarked that in many of Molloy's critical texts there operates a placeholder of a male body such as the missing physical body of Borges, a position into and out of which her critical voice can move. Like the schoolboys whose marbles the narrator of *En breve cárcel* snatches, the Argentines Cané and Mansilla have both perfected tones of voice which she can borrow wholesale for her own use, one as the spokesman for his class and generation's childhood and the other as a genial conversationalist writing his mobile self from exile. In another chapter on childhood and exile, Molloy segues away from the Cuban Condesa de Merlín's Paris salon to insert an analysis not of an autobiography but of a novel, Jorge Isaacs's *María* (1867), whose paternalistic recounting of a paradise lost which lays bare the defects of that paternalism exemplifies even better than the Condesa's does Molloy's apologetic yet critical stance within patriarchal criticism: competent to annotate a learned lady such as Victoria Ocampo's critique of sexism (and eager to unmask its hidden class pretensions), Molloy would nevertheless prefer to give herself the pleasure of interpolating a male perspective which is either itself already ironic (Borges, Mansilla) or which can be ironized further. The male author who is interpolated into the chapter on Norah Lange is, of course, Felisberto Hernández.

9. Certainly Lange was more famous for her flamboyance to the mother of young Sylvia, who once pointed her out in the street to Sylvia when they were together: "Es una extravagante [...] Mirala bien". Molloy would never use an anecdote like this in her 1991 chapter about Lange, but she told it in her 2005 prologue to Norah Lange's *Obra Completa* and it is used to great effect by the delightfully surnamed Adriana Amante in Link et al. (27).

10. Molloy courts a similarity in order to heighten the difference. The Lange chapter is entitled "A Game of Cutouts" and highlights a scene in which little Norah cuts polyglot words whose meanings she does not bother to learn out of the newspapers, "looking for the difficult resonance of unusual words" (qtd. in Molloy 132); conversely, in an autobiographical fragment introducing the *Speranza* interview, Molloy describes her method of learning to write academic English, which until then had been pragmatic and "uno de los lenguajes del recuerdo, el recuerdo de mi padre. La elección del inglés, para ese libro, fue deliberada [...] Anotaba en papellitos palabras, expresiones, cláusulas adverbiales (por lo general adversativas) que me gustaban y que quería usar, como quien plagia" (*Speranza* 136).

By 1991 Felisberto can be cited as something like a philosopher of memory, the one who offers both some examples of autobiography and a theory of autobiography which supposedly coincides with Lange's example. Both of them looked back at the past, not to compose a self, but to inventory its fragments, further fragmenting it. Neither of them, writing in the era of the avant-garde, will fall prey to the temptation of monumentalizing themselves: "Vested in the seductive garb of the quaint and the outmoded, sheltered from the intrusions of history and defying all change, childhood stories become, in this instance, ideological credos. It takes a special kind of "eccentric" writer—I choose to consider Norah Lange here, but Felisberto Hernández would do equally well—to liberate childhood from such ideological constraints" (7). Molloy remarks that Lange once met Felisberto (239), as if to make Felisberto retrospectively part of that charmed circle of ultraist *señoritos* or a childhood playmate of little Norah's; this hardly confers innocence upon them since "[i]n recounting her childhood, Lange (again, like Felisberto Hernández) has the ability to hit at the uncanny by repeatedly undermining the *regard familier*" (131). The voyeurism which Molloy admits to while reading Norah's voyeuristic recollections and exhibition of her own past is a theme of Felisberto's *El caballo perdido*, quoted to begin *At Face Value*'s section on childhood. Molloy even tries to claim that Lange alternates pleasure with anxiety in her memoir, a theme which would align her with Molloy's Borges, and would have aligned her with Molloy's Felisberto: "the quotidian is a constant source of anxiety: it suffices to catch it at the right moment (or, as Felisberto would have said, to catch it unawares)" (131), although later on that page she admits that "*Cuadernos* refuses to elaborate on the potential for disquiet that the child sees."

The researcher is a spy, the reader is a spy, the rememberer is a spy: all crouch in a protected, hollowed-out male position, observing the exhibitionistic woman or the transactions within the workings of their own minds in an alternation of hunger and anxiety. Felisberto is Molloy's playmate and co-conspirator in the lands of memory.

### The Basic Pleasure of Perverse Reading

Siempre me han atraído escritores que de algún modo han planeado la marginalidad, la autorreflexión, la ambigüedad, la perversidad. Supongo que resulta difícil a estas alturas verlo a Borges como marginal, pero creo que lo es ...Felisberto por su básica extrañeza, por su perversidad. No sé qué elemento en común reúne a todos estos escritores, salvo mi placer al leerlos. (Speranza 142-3)

If Ferré and Borinsky write about Felisberto in our specialist journals in the years before Peri Rossi and Cortázar's publicity bring him to a general attention, Molloy waits until after the small first outburst of criticism in 1977 before she publishes her own essay on his generally unstudied, posthumously published autobiography, *Tierras de la memoria*, in 1982.<sup>11</sup> She will also direct the readers of the 1991 *At Face Value* to Felisberto's autobiographical writings. Since 1981 is the year of the publication of *En breve cárcel*, Molloy is marking clear signals that Felisberto is a figure for her in almost exactly the opposite direction that he is for Borinsky: while the latter suspects the glance towards the past in its paralyzing, melancholy form, Molloy wants us all to see the glance backward in its energy, even in its violence.

We can see how Molloy related the project of her Borges book to *En breve cárcel*. Borges is reconstructed as a phantom male body whose reading is a hunger and whose writing is an anxiety, both of which are dedicated to demonstrating the incoherence of the self; Molloy constructs a Blanchot-like Borges respected in a Parisian center which he does not himself much respect. *En breve cárcel* is, paradoxically, full of such phantom male bodies, even as it highlights female bodies: the novel recounts a lesbian love triangle between an unnamed protagonist, an earlier older lover named Vera, and a younger lover Renata who had

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11. A somewhat shortened version of the same essay appears in a 1985 collection *El Cono Sur*, the last four of whose essays include two pieces on *En breve cárcel* (one by Roberto Echavarrén, who published an entire book on Felisberto in 1981) and two essays on Felisberto, one by Molloy.

also previously been Vera's lover, but the protagonist deliberately cuts between the love triangle scenes and scenes recounting her dreams and childhood memories, and the most frequent figure to appear in her dreams is her father.

Molloy sets out the protagonist's family configuration deftly: a warm father and a distant mother, an aunt named Sara who offered maternal care without parental authoritativeness, and a younger sister named Clara whose body fascinated the narrator. Besides the typical Oedipalized triangle of parents and child, the narrator reflects that much of her childhood energy was devoted to resenting her father's neglect of her younger sister, who was so unsuccessful at winning their father's affection. (One is tempted to read this triangle, too, as an allegory for Molloy's critical project of the '80s and '90s: secure in the approval of a basically benign patriarchal institution, she sets out to vindicate women writers under-read or misread by that institution.) The two events which have spurred the narrator to sit and write her story are that she has inadvertently rented in Paris the room in which years ago she met Vera and began their affair, and the news of the death of her father and aunt in an accident: unlike her mother, who offers her daughter very little access, the father is actually quite a co-conspirator with the daughter, both in real life (although he is partly shadowed by madness and death, and although she resents his access to her body in the form of the door he leaves half open when he kisses her good-night while she is asleep) and in her dreams. The novel's dramatic "first-act curtain" is a violent scene between the narrator and Renata, who responds to the narrator's Proustian jealousy in a scene of cold, deliberately loveless sex, leaving her standing naked in the hotel room; but the novel's actual halfway point comes when, after a rest cure away from Paris, the protagonist has a dream in which her father tells her over the phone to seek out the statue of Ephesus. In the dream she conceals this call from her mother, just as in other dreams she eats her father's disembodied hand so that her mother is not frightened by it and, in the novel's final dream, her father does battle with a large decapitated woman, blocking the protagonist's way to the mother. The novel resolves its plot as, somewhat to her own surprise (the novel begins with, "quiere fijar la historia para vengarse" (13)), the protagonist finds a way to make peace with both Vera and Renata; the symbolic quest of the novel is resolved when she chooses to reinterpret her father's dream telephone call by replacing Diana of Ephesus, goddess of fecundity, with Diana the solitary hunter, a decision understandably emphasized by feminist readings of the novel (Masiello, García Pinto, Montero). The protagonist never worries that she might be punished by her father for swerving from the more obvious meaning of this dream's message; indeed, in her further interpretation, she recalls the gifts that Diana/Artemis asked for as an infant in the lap of Zeus.<sup>12</sup>

The tone of this chapter, so much more essayistic than the rest of the novel, recalls Molloy the researcher and reader (allusions to the statue of Ephesus, to the literary tradition) and not the protagonist-rememberer, lover, daughter, sister; the voice of confident authority that brushes aside the novel's more common self-correcting, self-criticizing tentativeness. The tone suggests a sort of impunity, rare in a novel in which the narrator's love affairs are full of small vengeance and an awareness of the exposed position she herself is in vis-à-vis Vera and Renata, where words wound, and the protagonist catalogues the scars one of her lovers inflicted on her and recalls the childhood scene in which she whipped her sister. If the tone feels a bit out of place here towards the end of the novel, it may be for the same reasons that the novel's "happy ending" seems mildly out of place. First, from the very beginning of the text, to *fijar*, to pin down or fix, has been seen as a violence one practices upon recalcitrant lovers or the past, so that any closure would seem violent or arbitrary. Second, the novel is about the unpredictable way writing affects a writer's life, and we are self-protectively prone to believe that writing makes our lives worse, not

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12. Conversely, he may fear that she will punish him: the dream's first word was "Egeo," and the narrator recalls that Theseus's father Aegeus committed suicide when Theseus forgot to change the color of the sails of the ship which returned from the Minotaur: "le recuerda la muerte de un padre desesperanzado, víctima de un olvido del hijo"(77). That sort of second-guessing, in which we wonder if a character's solicitous fear for her father may really be a veiled threat, is common to our interpretive habits, whether for an autobiographical fiction or not; but how would it be legitimate, under these circumstances, to note that Aegeus is also the name of the complaisant king to whose realm Euripides's Medea escapes after murdering her children?

better. We—even we, especially we— do not trust writing to free us. Molloy has one strategy in her novel to break down her own skepticism towards the power of language: in a direct contrast to the self-imposed agoraphobia of her isolated room, the narrator learns to “put down her weapons” with Vera through a recollection of the way language can also envelop one like the sea or wash one and carry one down, like rain or a river. (Of course, sometimes having weapons means you don’t have to use them: Renata returns to the protagonist and behaves better, once she has heard through the grapevine that the protagonist is writing an autobiographical novel.) But Molloy herself seems to have reconciled herself to the power of recollection, the gathering of the past in language, through a reading of Felisberto’s *Tierras de la memoria*.

The choice is apt: although on the one hand Molloy begins her essay claiming that “*acaso ... todos los textos*” (69) of Felisberto’s equally show the nothingness of personality, the “*desconcierto y la inconsecuencia del yo felisbertiano –tómense los dos términos en su sentido más estrictamente literal*” (69) are particularly evident in *Tierras*, with its double flashback structure of unexpected, unrequited sexual urges, with an almost unrelated payoff at the end. Felisberto recalls a trip taken into the interior of Argentina touring with an equally shabby fellow-musician Mandolión; interspersed with memories of attractions to a pair of music teachers when he was a child, he recalls while on the train a trip he took into the interior as a Uruguayan boy scout. There he unsuccessfully tried to impress some women at the house that hosted the troop, fondled the panties of one of the women which he found in a hamper in one of the shared bathrooms there, and then fantasized about her while she recited a poem for the people assembled, followed by a great disillusionment about her when he overheard her later conversation, about money, about deliberately skinning a cat, about being a butcher’s daughter. The mix of desire and frustration of that day produced an anxious dream about the closed doors of the bedroom wardrobe, which may serve as the basis of a fantastic story he would like to write; and the narration ends with a return to the scout trip with a temporary relief from his anxieties or desires and then a return to the second trip equally free from pressing anxieties, partly because it was on that very second trip that “*no sólo volví a reconocer esa angustia, sino que me di cuenta que la tendría conmigo para toda la vida*” (*Tierras*, 58); he resolves to reread the diaries he kept from that earlier journey. All in all, this text, which foregrounds the occasion of remembering as *En breve cárcel* foregrounded the site of writing, is as much about composing a past self while also preserving the parts which do not fit that past self-image as *En breve cárcel* itself is.

Molloy focuses on Felisberto’s desire. While other analysts have emphasized in their writings the figure of the fat woman and the tension between coldness and warmth in these desirable bodies, for Molloy the pattern Felisberto sets out in *Tierras* is based on the “*entreabierto*,” the tantalizing half-open space that offers a glimpse that that leads the eyes of Felisberto further into the body of the desirable object.<sup>13</sup> Willing to use psychoanalytic vocabulary as long as it does not entail any one psychoanalytic system, Molloy approvingly quotes Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text*:

Is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes*? In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) there are no “*erogenous zones*” (a foolish expression, besides); it is *intermittence*, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing [...] between two edges; it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance. (10, italics in the original)

What “Molloy avec Felisberto” adds to this definition of the erotic, as in

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13. And not just objects, but words as objects: Molloy’s analysis points out the frequent occurrence in Felisberto in which words and phrases are half-opened, mysterious objects which themselves dissolve into fragments or are animated into objects, where a prepositional phrase can seem like a dog with a tail or the first vowel in a two-syllable word can have a meaning which contradicts the second vowel: Las letras de Felisberto and his game of cutouts....

Leo Bersani's similar post-Freudian reflections, is that an increase of arousal is as likely to produce pain as pleasure. Poorly buttoned dresses, half-opened lips, glimpses caught from half-opened doorways, bathroom hampers that don't close all the way, are all objects that arouse the younger Felisberto; but other half-opened objects upset him or invade a personal space he cannot fully close.

Like the White Queen in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, who would be happy if only she could remember the rule, Molloy tries to figure out the rule by which the half-open does or does not produce pleasure in Felisberto. All of the sites of the half-open in the childhood scenes of the text end happily, as a music teacher rescues him from a false accusation or an aunt forgives his hiding in the folds of her skirt; a threat of punishment appears, only to be banished by the benevolent woman. The boy scout trip is the moment when he learns that the site of the *entreabierto* can be an occasion for punishment as well as anxiety. Throughout the memoir when Mandolión's accordion half-opens and closes or his gut spills out of his vest, when as an adolescent he is trapped in the chair by his dentist-scoutmaster or silenced by the chubby pretty reciter, the half-open body of others who also immobilize him threaten the voyeur into a sort of impotence. (Perhaps not surprisingly, this pattern appears, although as a very minor theme, in *En breve cárcel*: on the one hand, Renata's half-closed eyes lure the protagonist further onto Renata's body; on the other hand, awakening to find her bedroom door half-open, the protagonist as a young girl is irritated that her father has come in while she was asleep to kiss her goodnight.)

According to Molloy, the only way that Felisberto's text can resolve the tension between the *entreabierto* of voyeuristic jouissance and the *entreabierto* of anguish is through a third *entreabierto*, after a dream which "abre un espacio de un orden distinto donde se da la angustia en grado máximo y también su resolución" (90). The dream itself is the feeling of a grim horror facing the fully closed doors of the bedroom armoire, and the horror forces a complete opening of Felisberto's throat and eyes as he wakes up to feel "las paredes de mi sueño," the walls of his dream, fully knocked down. It is after this dream that he sinks into a half-asleep state, in which his self splits so that he can have a "deliberado (re)conocimiento de esa angustia" (Molloy, 90) while his "curiosidad de persona despierta" (qtd in Molloy 90) remains outside and vigilant, and it invents a tale about a cannibal butcher hiding behind doors like the armoire's. Inventing the story (he uses the verb "discovering" it) resolves the anguish for the adolescent Felisberto.<sup>14</sup>

Molloy concurs with Echavarren that it is the ability to tell the story of how he came up with the story that truly calms the author's anguish, not the story itself; analogously, we might conclude that an interpretation, any interpretation, of the dream of the father's call to Ephesus will purge the protagonist of *En breve cárcel* from the fear of punishment for disobedience. Such an interpretation becomes even more likely when we realize that Felisberto has consciously employed the language of divinity to describe his reciter: "Hacia poco tiempo yo había tenido que estudiar historia Antigua [...] me habían quedado flotando lejanamente las figuras de algunas diosas y los ritos de algunas religiones" (*Tierras* 57-58). It is this fantastic but reverential thought in particular which Felisberto tries to communicate to the woman after her recital (62), and it is this speech which she interrupts, silencing him with chatter about making money in Buenos Aires and her vain pride in her stage presence.

Molloy is committed, then, to a writing practice which fragments the self even as it claims to wish to compose the self-in-memory. Suspicious of closure, even "earned" closures, her novel offers one closure through the unexpected reformation of one of the protagonist's rivals (Vera) and through a sort of unexpected blackmail brought about in the act of

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14. Molloy excises the economism in Felisberto's treatment of the theme of the split self. For Felisberto, the present self splits off a socio or ally-business partner, which safely repackages the memories so that one can make a living off them. Instead, Lange's exhibition of her memories is seen as anti-economic, and sexy: "This ritual performance [of screaming from the housetops], running counter to a type of narrative that usually opts for economy and mindful husbandry [...] has a wasteful elegance to it, a kind of devil-may-care dandyism that is infinitely seductive" (135-6).

writing itself (Renata's fear that she will look bad in a roman-à-clef, although the narrator notes that Renata does not even read Spanish). The other closure that it offers, the dream interpretation of the father's telephone call, seems most attractive to those readers with a feminist commitment to the independent woman, the huntress Diana not the matron of Ephesus. Commenting upon the text of Felisberto, Molloy can direct her readers' –in some sense, her own– attention to the need for demystifying any readers who might incorrectly prefer a goddess to the state of "curiosidad de una persona despierta" which allows you to transform the attributes of a goddess, albeit a bit spitefully, into self-reflexive, self-critical fiction.

### Conclusion: The Perversity of Literariness

In an essay published in 1985 on *En breve cárcel* entitled "La literariedad,"<sup>15</sup> Roberto Echavarren departs from his usual Lacanian protocols (ones which he will use when he again treats the novel in his 1992 collection *Margen de ficción*) to argue that by foregrounding the act of writing in her autobiographical novel Molloy has also purified her writing of any intentionality, of achieving any desired effect upon specific individuals. That definition of literariness, relatively common in our field in 1985 and perhaps still today, was certainly part of Paul de Man's presuppositions when in 1971 in *Blindness and Insight* he included a chapter called "The Impersonality of Blanchot," and Blanchot is cited by Echavarren in his 1992 reading of *En breve cárcel*. The sort of impersonality which Echavarren looks for in literariness may sit less well with the destabilized self that Molloy's Borges, and Molloy's protagonist, and Molloy's Felisberto all take for the ground of their being, not just feeling ill at ease in their skin but roving outwards with a voyeuristic gaze upon ever-shifting objects of desire, as likely to provoke anxiety as satisfaction, settling for a knowledge of the inner workings of one's own desires. Yet Molloy's Borges does give in to the monumentalized self, in his later texts which she refuses to cite in her book about him. Molloy's protagonist does resolve her feelings towards Vera and Renata: she does put down her words as weapons against other women; she does explicate the dream of the wrong Diana to her own (and to her academic feminist readers') satisfaction.<sup>16</sup> So too in her 1985 essay "Sentido de ausencias" Molloy dedicates herself to a committed academic feminism (and, after 1990, a committed queer theory).<sup>17</sup> This commitment, however, might indeed threaten that literariness, just as the well-meaning anti-slavers of Juan Francisco Manzano's day threatened his self-understanding as a poet rather than as a victim.

In 1985 literariness was only just then beginning to be attacked anew in Molloy's, in our, North American academy, first with the declarations of New Historicism, then with the different powers of feminism and Foucault, all occurring at the same time as the sudden death and posthumous dishonor of Paul de Man in the middle to late '80s. Molloy's 1990 book effects a compromise with the death of the literary. *At Face Value* claims that it is seeking the ideologically and historically constructed units of Spanish American autobiographies; it also says, however, that it does so out of "sheer critical inquisitiveness." Poor Felisberto, the indigent suitor whom women married but whom they eventually threw out of their houses, bows out of this autobiography book to make room for his playmate Norah Lange, partly to reinforce Molloy's ethical commitment to women writers; but Lange also appears as the alluring exhibitionist, whose "devil-may-care dandyism is infinitely seductive." Echavarren must play down the various ways in which writing figures as seduction or persuasion in order to argue that *En breve cárcel* displays literariness. Molloy, just a little canner than her readers on this issue, knows that a pedagogic desire is at work in her fiction and an erotic desire is at work in her criticism; this threatens her disinterestedness as a critic. Yet as long as Felisberto remains a failure in *Tierras de la memoria*, a desiring pattern that is so similar to Molloy's own is not perceived as a threat to that literariness. *Tierras* tells the tale

15. The essay is mistitled "La literalidad" in the MLA Bibliography.

16. Again: of what use is it to second-guess the protagonist about the interpretation of her dreams? Molloy says in interviews that they were all real dreams, but she does not say that they came in the order in which the novel places them. Just before deciphering her dream of Ephesus, the protagonist endures a final dream, in which she and her father are studying together in her nook at home watched over by a woman not her mother. Perhaps nudged by her father, she touches her genitals and experiences an amazing pleasure; she runs downstairs and is pursued by her father, now dead, and the woman, now decapitated; their struggle blocks her access to her mother. The decapitated woman is "para ella, la locura" (149). Why could it not be the body of the lesbian that the father struggles to defeat by means of injunctions to obey a fertility goddess? Or, since she did not find this now headless body attractive at first, might we let the battle serve allegorically as the anguish of the woman critic having to choose between the corpus/corpe of the father and the still under-read "headless" tradition of women's literature?

17. Nora Dominguez (Link et al.) implicitly agrees with my approach by beginning her search for Molloy's "encuentros afectivos" with women writers by using the same essay, "Sentido de ausencias," that I have chosen to use roughly as my endpoint, and quotes with satisfaction its final lines: "Es hora -o por lo menos lo es para mí- de reconocermé en una tradición que, sin que yo lo supiera del todo, me ha estado respaldando. No solo eso; es hora de contribuir a convocarla en cada letra que escribo" (75).

of a man who discovered his literary vocation while a boy scout, after an anxiety dream put him into a half-conscious state which split off into a “curiosidad de una persona despierta,” like Molloy’s sheer critical inquisitiveness. If such a curiosity brings down a figure—a feminist ethics of reading—which had been falsely elevated into a goddess, so much the better.

In a place without ethics, in which reading amorally guarantees distance from others and remembering permits one closure (but a false closure, one that will not fool those readers who know that perception, knowledge, and desire require the constantly half-open), Molloy has found in Felisberto a “básica extrañeza” and perversity which, like literariness, can be preserved from the academic protocols that insert our favorite authors into the dangerously teleological sequences of “influences.” To cast her as one of Felisberto’s four literary ex-wives is my own eccentric method of honoring her promise to that voyeur’s voyeur.

My project of detailing Sylvia’s critical and novelistic itinerary roughly until 1990 (I studied with her beginning in 1987) has always seemed to me to be, well, creepy. When I completed most of it in 2004 I fancied I was imitating Sylvia’s French dissertation, her search for the pre-history of her own arrival in Paris in the late ‘50s; by stepping into Borges’s impersonality, she resisted admitting that the macho swagger of Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, García Márquez *et cie.* would always impress the Parisian and global bourse more than Borges could. Analogously, “my” Sylvia before 1985 would defend a literariness and a perversity that would become harder to maintain, even as feminism evolved into queer theory, insofar as it depended on the privileges of patriarchy, albeit a hollowed-out, non-macho form of it. But Sylvia did not know Borges personally the way that I knew Sylvia, so it seemed unseemly to have written all this, and as far as I recall I never sent a draft of this to her; we certainly never spoke about it. Was I afraid that she would think it completely incorrect?<sup>18</sup> Rather, I think it would in equal parts flatter her and annoy her that a student of hers would rummage through the first twenty-five years of her work without reference to the equally important body of scholarship, and the much greater institutional prominence, of the next twenty-five years, to say nothing of her second novel *El común olvido* (2002) –which narrates the story of a gay academic who makes a journey back to Argentina to find out the truth of the desires of his recently deceased mother.

But if I think that it’s borderline unethical –not unethical! creepy, a little sneaky– to finish and publish this essay now, it’s because I think I am making an argument about the amorality of literariness, an amorality which the early days of queer theory and literary studies seemed to embrace with enthusiasm before we had second thoughts about privilege and third thoughts about patriarchy. I’m sure I know that “Felisberto” would scoff at subordinating the pursuit of pleasure to a respectful consideration of the needs of others (as all those soon-exasperated wives of his would also discover): he wrote for pleasure, and to please himself. To link his project with Sylvia Molloy’s along this angle can sometimes seem to me to be to accuse her of irresponsibility, when what I really hope to do is to praise her for irresponsibility. All I can say in my defense is that she stayed very much alive for me while I was re-reading my earlier text and completing it, and that this made me very happy.

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18. As her graduate student (at least after the first few terrified years), I was serenely confident that Sylvia would always think highly of the content of what I had to say, limiting herself to extremely accurate criticisms of my fondness for convoluted arguments. I even remember her criticisms as compliments: “The introduction of this chapter didn’t tell your readers that this is where they were going to end up; why are you always being so sneaky?” Creepy *and* sneaky: not for nothing did I write a book on the narratives of the perverse.

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