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Modesty, The Double Edged Sword: Exploring Veils as a Symbol of Female Liberation and Oppression in the Work of Lalla Essaydi

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Author

Luce, April Lauren

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Library Award for Undergraduate Research Reflection Essay
April Luce

UCSB's Art 1A (Visual Literacy) course provided me the opportunity to explore, visit, and write about Lalla Essaydi's artwork. My decision to hone in on the controversial implementation of veils in Essaydi's work was born from my fascination with female self expression. To this day, women's freedom to communicate varies broadly, and it appears that even in spaces where women seemingly have full autonomy over their words and dress, their modesty or lack thereof is subject to intense, misogynistic scrutiny. As an artist and a feminist, I wanted to explore the treatment of women's voices across cultures and the nuance of traditions, stereotypes, and rebellion.

My research process began with gathering ideas from Art 1A lectures and discussions about feminism, the nature of modesty, and Middle Eastern Art with my professor, Helen Taschian. Professor Taschian encouraged the use of library sources, and with Teaching Assistant Mariana Rodela, educated me on accessing UC scholarly databases and using UC Library Search to find books and articles along with their online/in person availability. I decided to search the library for art history books mentioning Essaydi with a focus on feminism and Middle Eastern art, as I have found UCSB's library has a wide section of highly focused art analysis books. Finding this literature allowed me to gain relevant background insight to Essaydi's work as well as feminist artwork at large, creating a philosophical framework for my analysis that I could later expand upon through detailed studies and critiques found in academic journals.

When evaluating the credibility of my sources, I made sure to only use sources from scholarly databases, such as academic articles from UC Library Search, Jstor, and Project Muse. I opted for scholarly journals and non-fiction books from a variety of relevant disciplines, from art history journals like the *Journal of Contemporary African Art* to ethnic studies publications such as *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*. Combining disciplines in this manner allowed for a richer formal and contextual analysis of Essaydi's art and the fields it influences, as art reaches beyond the study of aesthetics to reflect the sociological and philosophical state of the world. I favored peer-reviewed publications and journals published by academic institutions such as Duke (*Journal of Contemporary African Art*) and the University of Oklahoma (*World Literature Today*).

Essaydi being a specific and somewhat obscure artist, UC Library Search was particularly helpful, as it allowed me to find art history books and academic papers referencing Essaydi available both online and in UCSB's physical library. I searched for Essaydi by name, and also sought more general publications on Middle Eastern art through the UC Library Search engine. From the results, I was able to narrow down sources to those that emphasized the feminist implications of Essaydi's art. After finding books by art critics and historians available through UCSB's library, such as Charlotte Jansen's *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female Gaze*, I searched for them in person in the Art and Architecture section of the library, using the guides on shelves for the associated book codes. Once found, I documented

relevant information about the source such as author, publisher, and relevant pages, for my bibliography, and outlined key information about Essaydi and her art.

After gathering factual background and summarized analyses from library art history books, I accessed articles both through searching the UC system's database, as well as other online academic archives as mentioned above. The final step of my research process was visiting the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's (LACMA) exhibition on female Middle Eastern artists, and viewing Essaydi's art in person, which allowed me to enhance my perspective while editing my paper. In this process I learned how to find niche information from the library through multiple methods (i.e., book codes and databases), and how to synthesize information from a wide variety of academic media to form my own perspective.

I would like to extend my gratitude to both Professor Taschian and Mariana Rodela for consulting with me, advising me on focusing my argument during the writing process, and encouraging me to explore resources both inside and outside the library.

Modesty, The Double Edged Sword: Exploring Veils as a Symbol of Female Liberation and
Oppression in the Work of Lalla Essaydi

April Luce
PERM 5151162

Professor Helen Taschian, Ph.D

Art 1A

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Women as the subjects of art have long been objectified under a voyeuristic male gaze. In Orientalist art, which portrays the East from a limited Western perspective, objectification compounds with racial exoticization, fantasy, and stereotype. Often portrayed as weak, vulnerable, and fully nude, the Eastern women in Orientalist paintings find themselves stripped

entirely of their autonomy, while Eastern men face a racist portrayal of brutishness and borderline inhumanity. This dehumanizing portrayal caters to the white male gaze, employing racial stereotypes as means to objectify. Photographer Lalla Essaydi's compositions speak in opposition to oppressive Orientalist narratives of Eastern women, employing traditional architecture and henna calligraphy not only as a document of her lived experiences as a Moroccan woman but also as a means of exploring and trespassing against conventional gender roles. As Essaydi veils female subjects within textiles, text, and architecture, she simultaneously liberates her subjects from voyeuristic sexualization and highlights the restrictive nature of patriarchal structures. Yet, by choosing to shield her subjects, Essaydi has generated a controversy amongst critics over whether these veils autonomize or further restrain women. The discourse over Essaydi's implementation of veils highlights a problematic duality in which veiling women without giving them a choice in the matter subdues as much as it protects them. However, it is within the safe haven of the veil that Essaydi empowers herself and her subjects to subvert and overcome patriarchal oppression by implementing the fabric of the system she seeks to undermine, doing so through architectural and calligraphic veils that act as both shelters and protests.

Concealing women in order to free them from an objectifying lens, though effective, often endures the plague of its capacity to diminish female autonomy, a dichotomy from which Essaydi's work is not exempt. With regard to *Converging Territories #21*, a set of 4 photographs following the lifetime of a woman, increasing the amount of fabric covering her as she ages, critic Murtaza Vali feels that Essaydi's implementation of calligraphy as a physical and conceptual veil is "reducing the women represented to the stereotype of veiled females oppressed

by Arab/Muslim culture.¹ In some sense, as Vali's contention implies, the hiding of women's bodies against their will can be a method of oppressing women in a manner that plays into Orientalist belief rather than against it. Vali raises a question that renders the use of veils convoluted in its efficacy for Middle Eastern women, who differ vastly in culture but are collectively subjected to Western stereotyping. Indeed, the fabric in *Converging Territories #21* feels almost suffocating, as in the photo representing childhood, while modestly clad, the young girl's face and hair are visible, while in the photo representing mature adulthood, the woman is entirely covered in clothing that matches and blends into the background, erasing her identity. Modesty, when it is a choice, empowers women to set boundaries for their privacy through their clothing, but the modesty in this series, with its heavy opaque fabric camouflaging into the wall and the somber expressions of the girls and women photographed, feels imposed on the subject. The woman is not covering herself, she is *being covered* until she is only visible through the shadows of her clothing's folds. It is not a challenge to see Vali's perspective of the veils being both restrictive and a symbol of Western stereotypes of Arab culture marginalizing women. However, Essaydi's depiction of veils and female modesty is not a one sided coin. Paradoxically, even as veils reinforce Orientalist stereotypes around Arab culture, they also liberate women from the Western style of voyeurism woven into Orientalism. Such is the case according to art history professor Erin Farrell, who asserts, in contrast to Vali, that Essaydi's veils of both text and plain textile "den[y] her viewers the many elements that have become expected of women in North Africa as a result of the nineteenth-century European vision" with figures impossible to

¹ Murtaza Vali, 'Uncovering the Arab World: Photography and Self-Representation', review of the exhibition *Nazar: Photographs from the Arab World* and exhibition catalogue *Nazar: Photographs From the Arab World* by Wim Melis, *Arab Studies Journal*, 13/14 (2005–2006), 244, quoted in Naïma Hachad, "Borders and Bridges: Configuring the Feminine in Lalla Essaydi's Photography," *Francosphères* 2, no. 1 (2013), 98. doi:10.3828/franc.2013.8.

objectify, the bodies borderline invisible.² Farrell, ruling in favor of Essaydi's effectiveness in using the veil, is specifically referencing non-objectified women in the photographic series *Les Femmes du Maroc*, which, like *Converging Territories #21*, employs near complete covering of women in calligraphy coated cloth. Unlike *Converging Territories #21*, the women in this piece are more active; one woman stands and moves while others sit looking away from the camera, appearing deep in thought and conversation. In this piece, action gives the women a greater sense of identity. In combination with *Converging Territories #21*, *Les Femmes du Maroc* portrays modesty in its complexity; while associated with one dimensional stereotypes and oppression when it is imposed and not chosen, modesty is nuanced, and serves as a safe haven to be oneself with comfort and privacy from the male gaze. By reinforcing one stereotype of Islamic culture, the veils in *Converging Territories* and *Les Femmes du Maroc*, shielding the body and curbing expectations with their monochrome simplicity,³ subvert another Orientalist stereotype in that they liberate the women from voyeurism. Noteworthy, however, is that Farrell's interpretation of women being non-objectifiable due to their heavily draped fabric and writing-covered veils begs the question of whether true liberation is possible in a world in which the female body must be completely concealed in order to escape the voyeuristic male gaze. While Essaydi implements these veils as a tool for her message, the necessity of the tool is a grim reminder of how heavily patriarchy burdens the lens under which women are viewed. According to biographer Naïma Hachad, the veil's history as both an anti-voyeuristic and oppressive tool stems in part from Orientalism itself; in response to overt sexualization of Arab women in Western art, Eastern men invoke the veil to protect women, but control and possess them in the process.⁴ Yet again, the

² Erin Farrell, "Review of Revisions, by Lalla Essaydi," *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 33 (2013), 117. muse.jhu.edu/article/539547.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Naïma Hachad, "Borders and Bridges: Configuring the Feminine in Lalla Essaydi's Photography," *Francosphères* 2, no. 1 (2013), 89. doi:10.3828/franc.2013.8.

duality of veils as both a necessary shield and a means for patriarchal control emerges, which Essaydi uses to the advantage of her feminist message. Essaydi clarifies that her work is not a denunciation of Western nor Arab culture, but rather an intricate interaction with these cultures in which she can express herself; thus the veil is not discarded, but is instead incorporated into her personal voice and feminist perspective.⁵ Despite not merely undermining Western culture in her work, Essaydi still wishes to emphasize Orientalism as a “voyeuristic tradition” from which the veil serves as a safe haven.⁶ The veil’s oppressive potential rings clear in Vali and Hachad’s insights, but embracing the veil with its inherent dichotomy, Essaydi transforms it into a protective framework with which to protest misogyny.

Traditional clothing is not the only mode of veiling women in Essaydi’s artwork. As she hides the female body in ornate patterns made to emulate the architecture of her culture, Essaydi speaks out against female objectification and relegation to the private sphere. According to Essaydi, women in Eastern culture have historically been permissible to exist only in private space, with men dominating the public sphere, indicating how “hidden hierarchies dictate patterns of habitation” in which women are bound to the architecture that conceals them from the public.⁷ The theme of women being objectified non-sexually through their architectural confinement reveals itself in *Harem #1* of Essaydi’s *Harem* series, in which a woman lies down in a palace, her clothing closely matching the patterns of the walls around her while large columns trap her in her environment.⁸ The use of matching patterns in both the clothing and the

⁵ Lalla Essaydi, “Disrupting the Odalisque,” *World Literature Today* 87, no. 2 (March - April 2013), 65. 10.1353/wlt.2013.0263.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lalla Essaydi, “Disrupting the Odalisque,” *World Literature Today* 87, no. 2 (March - April 2013), 63. 10.1353/wlt.2013.0263.

⁸ Naïma Hachad, “Borders and Bridges: Configuring the Feminine in Lalla Essaydi’s Photography,” *FrancoSphères* 2, no. 1 (2013), 93.

walls veil the woman further than plain drapery would, as it camouflages her in the scene, symbolizing the objectification of women and their imprisonment in private spaces as described by Essaydi. Such is the goal of *Harem*, as Essaydi is “constraining the women within space and also confining them to their ‘proper’ place, a place bounded by walls and controlled by men,” signifying the oppression of misogynistic societal structures.⁹ In this process, Essaydi is making odalisques (Turkish term meaning “to belong to a place”) of her female subjects.¹⁰ At a first glance, it seems as though Essaydi is herself participating in the oppressive tradition of forcing women to remain in the home. However, by taking symbolism of women’s confinement to privacy and a so-called ‘proper’ place to an extreme that transforms women into odalisques, Essaydi satirizes female subjugation. She calls attention to and protests misogyny without the need to trespass outside the socially accepted veil of the private sphere.

Essaydi’s veil of architecture not only serves to empower women by unearthing and denouncing repression of women from a safe environment, but also autonomizes them from Orientalism through the safety of the veil. Women are not merely restrained within the palace by their clothing; they are an integral part of the architecture, rendering them “confident women with legitimate claims to the colors, patterns, and architecture of their home,” directly contradicting the lack of agency granted to Arab women in Orientalist art.¹¹ While Moroccan women are hidden in architectural patterns, they are not fully silenced in their confinement; rather, the blending of their bodies with their home subtly grants them power over the space, liberated from the male gaze, and thus they “reclaim the intimacy of the interior.”¹² The nuanced

⁹ Lalla Essaydi, “Disrupting the Odalisque,” *World Literature Today* 87, no. 2 (2013), 65. 10.1353/wlt.2013.0263.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Erin Farrell, “Review of Revisions, by Lalla Essaydi,” *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 33 (2013), 117. muse.jhu.edu/article/539547.

¹² *Ibid.*

balance between female empowerment and confinement in *Harem* epitomizes how the controversial duality of the veil enables Essaydi to create feminist messages within the fabric of patriarchal notions. Female autonomy within a private architectural space also occurs in Essaydi's series *Three Silences* (2003) (full series not pictured here, see "Lalla Essaydi, *Silence of Thought #5*" in Images for an example of a similar piece). In this photographic series, Essaydi has chosen to use a space from her childhood where women were sent when they misbehaved, writing in henna the perspectives of her cousins from their diaries on the walls and clothing with a technique known as washi.¹³ In doing so, Essaydi reclaims a private space for the punishment of women as an environment that is "safe for women, evoking the most traditional sense of the veiled harems in Islamic culture as spaces where women are free from the public eye."¹⁴ By transforming architecture for punishment into architecture for female safety, Essaydi subverts the Orientalist narrative of Islamic culture as innately oppressive and grants a voice to her female family members and their stories, uplifting women in the process. Furthermore, while Essaydi subverts an oppressive space by portraying it as a protective one, her message does not indicate support for the punishment of women. Indeed, by employing the art of calligraphy, which will later be discussed as an art form from which women have been historically excluded, Essaydi's women raise their voices through their writing and continue to rebel from the space that punishes them. The henna is a subtle nod to support of women's freedom even within the spaces where they are trapped. The way Essaydi interacts with architecture as both an oppressive space but also a veil of safety and privacy allows her to promote feminist ideals while shielding her subjects from Orientalist voyeurism.

¹³ Erin Farrell, "Review of Revisions, by Lalla Essaydi," *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 33 (2013), 118. muse.jhu.edu/article/539547.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Essaydi most poignantly protests misogyny from both the Western and Eastern male gaze while sheltering the female body through yet another veil: her appropriation of henna, a socially acceptable medium for women, for conventionally non-feminine purposes that reclaim womanly autonomy. In both her series *Femmes du Maroc* and *Converging Territories*, Essaydi adorns her models in henna, an art form exclusively worn by women in Arab culture, but pierces the gender barrier by using the henna for calligraphy, a prestigious art only permissible for men.¹⁵ In Hindu and Islamic traditions, henna on a woman's body is exclusively for the viewing of her husband, as women's bodies are fully veiled beneath fabric in public spaces; therefore, by applying henna on top of physical veils, Essaydi brings women's private expression into the public light¹⁶, autonomizing their voices while still protecting their bodies from objectification via the cloth veil. Although a large portion of the calligraphy is from Essaydi's personal diary, she purposely makes her writing nearly illegible to stand as a reminder for the Quran, symbolizing "the use of religion to justify the exclusion of women from the public space, a way for Essaydi to impose contemporary struggles of women in Islamic societies."¹⁷ By veiling women with henna, Essaydi plays by the socially constructed rules of her gender, only to disregard them through the masculinized art of calligraphy. The "veil" of conventionally feminine activity in henna gives Essaydi a socially acceptable starting point from which to embrace her female identity, while also finding a new voice to express her journaled experiences and reference feminist struggles of religious subjugation as she rebels in her calligraphy. Essaydi further explores presenting feminist messages under the protection of physical veils in *Converging Territories #12*, in which

¹⁵ Naïma Hachad, "Borders and Bridges: Configuring the Feminine in Lalla Essaydi's Photography," *Francosphères* 2, no. 1 (2013), 92. doi:10.3828/franc.2013.8.

¹⁶ Ellen Rudolph and Cecilia Gunzburger Anderson, *Pattern ID* (Akron Art Museum, 2010), 71-72.

¹⁷ Naïma Hachad, "Borders and Bridges: Configuring the Feminine in Lalla Essaydi's Photography," *Francosphères* 2, no. 1 (2013), 93. doi:10.3828/franc.2013.8.

one woman, covered in heavy drapery with her back turned, is in the process of writing calligraphy in henna, while another veiled woman faces the viewer, “less like a traditional muse, than like a guardian who queries the nature of our gaze.”¹⁸ The veiling of the women, as well as the forward facing woman serving as a guardian for the writer, protects the women from the objectifying male gaze, especially in the Orientalist sense, as the guardian woman appears to judge any voyeuristic intention on the part of the viewer. *Converging Territories #12* combines women being protected by the veil and protecting one another, ensuring the sanctity of the calligrapher’s body and safety as she transgresses the exclusion of women from calligraphy before the viewer’s eyes. The photograph is a clear representation of how traditional veils, despite playing a role in unjust gender norms, provide Essaydi with the power to protest against them. To her, the veil and the rebellion of calligraphy “are not so much in opposition as interwoven,”¹⁹ indicating that the veil is integral to conveying her stance on female liberation. Some criticize *Converging Territories* as doing little to empower women, claiming that by using her diary, Essaydi’s voice is merely a stand-in for the voice of the white Western male in Orientalist works.²⁰ It is imperative to recognize that Essaydi knows that there is no one single story of her culture, that to be an Arab woman is a non-monolithic experience, and all she can do is contribute her perspective and claim her voice.²¹ With this in mind, it is clear Essaydi is not just a substitute for the white male voice, but one outspoken stitch in the vast tapestry of the Arab female experience, empowering her own voice so that other women may gain their own

¹⁸ Susan Denker, “Lalla A. Essaydi: *Converging Territories* (review),” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 19 (Summer 2004), 87. muse.jhu.edu/article/422726.

¹⁹ Lalla Essaydi, “Disrupting the Odalisque,” *World Literature Today* 87, no. 2 (March - April 2013), 64. [10.1353/wlt.2013.0263](https://doi.org/10.1353/wlt.2013.0263).

²⁰ Naïma Hachad, “Borders and Bridges: Configuring the Feminine in Lalla Essaydi’s Photography,” *Francosphères* 2, no. 1 (2013), 98.

²¹ Charlotte Jansen, *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female Gaze* (London: Laurence King Publishing LTD, 2017), 14.

power to be heard. Essaydi, in addition to uplifting her own perspective, displays a solidarity with all women in her choice to employ her cousins' stories in *Three Silences*, and her display of women protecting and uplifting one another as in *Converging Territories #12*. As so eloquently put in Rose Issa and Juliet Cestar's *Arabicity*, the text in *Converging Territories* "is incomplete because the woman is a work in progress,"²² and Essaydi's perspective is a work as incomplete as the fight for female liberation itself.

While the veiling of women as a means for protection is the subject of valid criticism as a somewhat repressive tool, Lalla Essaydi capitalizes on its controversy to shield women from the male gaze so she can safely question and protest oppressive patriarchal infrastructure, such as the silencing of women and the barriers to entry for female self expression through art. From the paradoxical liberation and restriction of women through architecture in *Harem* to the calligraphic rebellion of *Converging Territories* revealing private female expression through hidden bodies, the veil in all its controversial glory is tightly woven into the fabric of Essaydi's feminist voice. Although she has been criticized for only promoting her own voice, Essaydi is outspoken against the concept of the Eastern female experience as a monolith,²³ and has demonstrated in her work that she values the advancement of all women's stories while largely conveying her own. As Essaydi covers the bodies of her women in authentic symbols of her culture and upbringing, she is an active antithesis to what Berkely professor of ethnic studies Hershini Young calls the "accessible racialized sexuality" present in Orientalist paintings exploiting nude Eastern

²² Rose Issa and Juliet Cestar, *Arabicity*, (London: Saqi Books, 2019), 142.

²³ Charlotte Jansen, *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female Gaze* (London: Laurence King Publishing LTD, 2017), 14.

women.²⁴ It is through the veils of writing, fabric, and infrastructure that Essaydi overcomes the objectification and stereotyping of the Orientalist gaze.

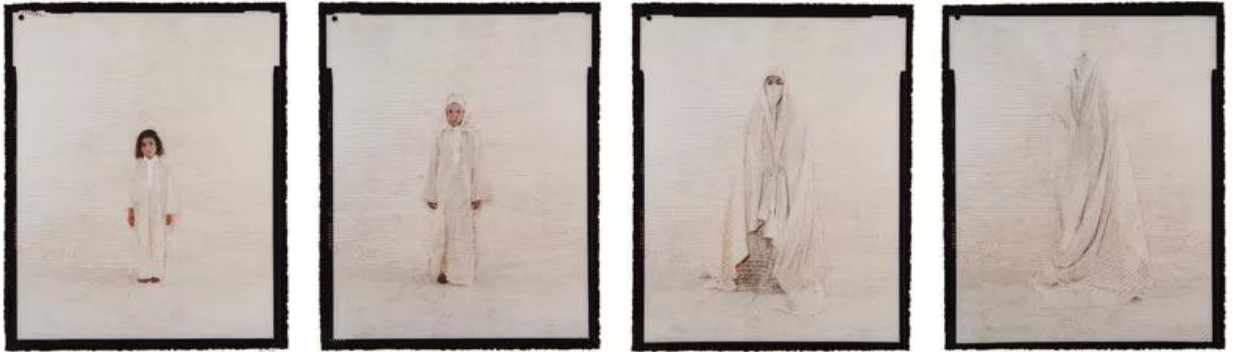
While the veil may be problematic in its silencing abilities, the shield it provides for Essaydi to safely raise her voice is a crucial step in the fight against Orientalism and the misogynistic male gaze. Essaydi's rebellion is subtle, but it is a reminder for women everywhere to embrace agency over their self expression. Her work is a masterclass in using the very structure of oppression itself to destroy it, and embracing controversy to explore the nuances of freedom. Essaydi's voice rising up from beneath the veil sparks hope that arguing against sexism under the safety of hiding the body is the first step to creating a world in which the female body does not *need* to be hidden to be free from objectification. She gives women everywhere hope for a future where their autonomy and rebellion against sexism may become anything but subtle.

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²⁴ Hershini Bhana Young, "Trafficking in pain: genealogies of witnessing slavery in Francesco Bartolozzi and concluding with Lalla Essaydi," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 1, no. 1 (January 2008), 53.

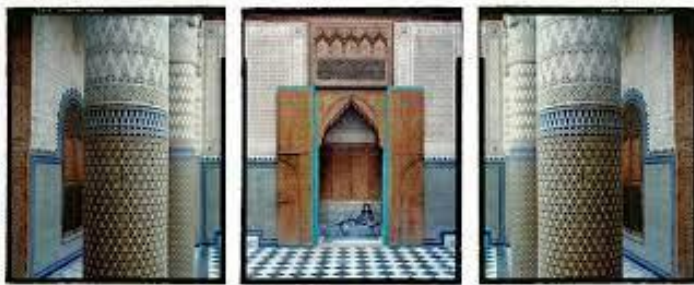
Images



Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories #21*, Chromogenic Print, 2004



Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc #1*, Chromogenic Print, 2005



Lalla Essaydi, *Harem #1*, Chromogenic Print, 2009



Lalla Essaydi, *Silence of Thought #5*, Chromogenic Print, 2003



Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories #12*, Chromogenic Print, 2003

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