

**April Seminar 2019**  
**NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP**

*Date: Wednesday 24 April 2019*

*Time: 6-8 pm*

*Location: Tutorial Room, No.3, NIDA, 215 Anzac Parade*

*A kind of writing in which the flesh and its drives comes to fore*

## **Lacan and Feminist Debates: Irigaray and Cixous**

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Despite its critique as part of the age-old hegemonic patriarchal and phallogocentric discourse in the Western world, Psychoanalysis has become a hinge between the movement of feminism and its foundational theoretical parlance. Freud was considered a phallogocentric figure of the twentieth-century, but his *The Interpretation of Dream* and especially his discovery of the unconscious and its deterministic effect on the human desire and sexual preferences were among the key reference points for justification in feminist studies. Notwithstanding the criticism of his earlier theories, Lacan has become a landmark for the development of feminism notwithstanding the criticism of his earlier theories which were accused of phallogocentrism. French feminists were among the first group to show their ambivalence towards psychoanalysis and Lacan. The reception and criticism of Lacan by the feminist was implicated in Lacan's late and final theories on the sexual differences. In his early theories, Lacan brings to view the significance of the phallus and the masculine subject formation as the determiner of whole subjectivity. In these set of theories Lacan has shifted focus from his earlier position and developed theories with a strong appeal to the feminist theoreticians. Lacan's theory of the feminine *jouissance* and choices in relation to this paradigm of *jouissance* for example is the most significant notion that doesn't allow for the entire consummation of feminine desire by the phallic socio-cultural ecosystem. The privileged feminine position in this guarantees her liberation from phallic castration. The crucial moment in the history of French feminism is marked when Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous develops their theories of *parler-femme* (speaking as woman) and *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) in a bid to liberate the voice of women once and for all. These strategies for both theorists were aimed at the creation of a new woman with a new discourse. This essay is dedicated to a constructive dialogue between feminists and Lacan and the reception of Lacan in feminism. In the first part of the essay, I examine the evolution of Lacanian theories in relation to the phallus, phallic determinism, feminine *jouissance* and his notion of sexualisation. In the second part, I would observe and bring to view the focal points of the French feminists, Irigaray and Cixous. I endeavor to draw attention to Lacan's theories of writing and feminine *jouissance* as pertinent to these feminist theorists.

Lacan delivered a lecture "*La Signification Du Phallus*," in Munich on the ninth of May 1958. This lecture stirred momentarily controversies and inspired hot debates within Parisian feminist circles about Lacan's ineluctable loyalty to Freud's theory of sexual differences by taking up a Freudian position vis-à-vis gender identities. Lacan's theoretical urgings about the phallus and its signification, in a nutshell are:

1. The preverbal bonds with the mother and the undoing effect of the invasion of the father in the symbolic. The subject would have two choices: the fixation of the subject

with the preverbal bond fills and entraps the subject in the discourse of the demand in the imaginary. The capitulation to the father and his dominant cultural law offer to the subject the detour to desire. Desire itself provides deliverance and a metonymic deferral to the being of the subject. The father position is strengthened by the fact that he has the phallus, the marker of masculinity. Father and its law offer the subject access to language. This implies that the symbolic order is sustained by the symbolic father—the-Name-of-the-Father.

2. The phallus is the master signifier that provides signification or the effect of signification for all other signifiers in the signifying chain. Thus, as hinted above, the role of the phallus as master signifier brings together the language and desire. This is an affirmation and re-appropriation of Freud's motto that there is only masculine libido. Further this assumption places masculinity as the denominator that constitutes both sexes.

The phallus is a signifier, a signifier whose function, in the intrasubjective economy of analysis, may lift the veil from the function it served in the mysteries. For it is the signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole, insofar as the signifier conditions them by its presence as signifier. (Lacan, 2006, 579)

3. The phallus is a pure signifier and the signifier of the signifiers. As such it is separated from its biological and anatomical shade of meaning and become an emblem. If the masculine possesses it, the feminine is its being. However, there is no signifier for Lacan to signify femininity. For members of both sexes, the phallus has different meaning. For male, it is the signifier of lack and always having a symbolic value in fantasy and for woman it has an implication of masquerade. Masquerade of the lack shows itself as the cultural expression in human history in terms of veiling of the woman. This is what concludes Elizabeth Wright in *Lacan and Postfeminism* by interpreting Jacques-Alain Miller's statement that, "We no doubt cover women up because we cannot discover Woman. We can only invent her," Miller cited in Wright, 2000, 37). The male as Lacan emphasizes at the outset of the lecture always "assumes the attributes of that sex only through a threat or even in the guise of a deprivation." (Lacan, 2006, 573)
4. Lacan clarifies and reaffirms his position in relation to need/demand/desire in this lecture. He maintains that the alienated thing which is brought about in need by primal repression reappears "in an offshoot that presents itself in man as desire (*das Begehren*)," (Lacan, 2006, 579). Demand is asking for something other than what it satisfies and this is a demand for the presence and absence of the object. "This is what the primordial relationship with the mother manifests, replete as it is with that Other who must be situated *shy* of the needs that Other can fulfill. Demand already constitutes the Other as having the "privilege" of satisfying needs, that is, the power to deprive them of what alone can satisfy them," (Ibid). Desire places itself in the splitting between need and demand, for demand is unable to satisfy the need. "that is why desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of splitting (*Spaltung*)" (580)

In lieu of feminist criticism of his theory, Lacan often tried to reread and modified his theory of the phallus. In his *Seminar VI: Desire and its interpretation*, Lacan lays expressly emphasis on castration rather than phallus in his analysis of Hamlet and sees this as the marker of desire. Lacan stresses that as a signifier, the phallus is still the signifier of lack. A quantum leap for his theory of the phallus is discernable in his *Seminar XX: Encore (1972-1973)*, where in an antithetical turn, Lacan develops two important ideas with an enormous significance to the

feminist theoreticians. Throughout the seminar, accent falls in Lacan's theory on the failure of the function of the phallus in relation to sexual difference. This failure arises from the lack in the phallus as a signifier, which makes the boundaries between sexual differences. The phallic women (in literature, Volumnia, the mother of Coriolanus is an exemplary phallic mother in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. She is virtually controlling her son's military achievement) and masculine homosexuality bear evidence to this failure. The second important notion is *feminine jouissance qua mystical jouissance* beyond the phallus. He argues that mystical discourses "are neither idle chatter nor empty verbiage; they provide, all in all, some of the best reading one can find—at the bottom of the page, drop a footnote, Add to that list Jacques Lacan's *Écrits*, because it's of the same order...I believe in the jouissance of woman insofar as it is extra (*en plus*), as long as you put a screen in front of this "extra" until I have been able to properly explain it." (Lacan, 1998, 76-77). Yet, Lacan remains faithful to his idea of the phallus as a signifier and paternal metaphor that function in human discourse as the grand denominator and referential Centre. As such, the paternal metaphor produces signification and an effect of meaning in the signifying chain. The primacy of the phallic signifier makes language phallogocentric depriving women from their own signifier. The lack of feminine signifier that Lacan theorizes here offers an impetus to the feminist cause especially to Irigaray and Cixous to find ways for the voice and writing of women.

This writing "tries to find positive terms: women's unconscious dreams, wishes and traumas form the source for the fictional work. Women want to liberate the female libido," (Braidotti, 1995, 175). This feminine text subscribes to other language that Cixous outlines its teleology as the poetic and personified writing of the body. The inscription of the body and psyche for Cixous was a road for the liberation of woman and above all the birth of a feminine subject and feminine discourse free of the systematic and historical repression of the symbolic order.

The linguistic horizon of these texts is a writing which some describe as closer to the (mother's) voice, to flesh and rhythm...The texts are characterized by play, disruption excess, gaps, grammatical and syntactic subversion, ambiguities; by endlessly shifting register, generic transgression; by fluid figurative language and myth. They are anti-authoritarian, questioning unsettling," (Wright, 1992, 75).

Moreover, Lacan's theories the *jouissance* of writing in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (*Seminar XXIII*) as germane to feminine textual production and applicable to the context and grounding for such writing. As mystical discourse in Lacanian sense reveals the collapse of the function of the father is germane to the feminine desire. For Lacan and for Cixous, it was easy to categorize Male writers such as Nietzsche, Genet, Lautréamont, Artaud, Joyce, as the forerunners of feminine writing.

Being a woman and being 'feminine' are radically different things. It is women who have been excluded from culture; not the feminine'. And women won't progress by embracing the mythology of the patriarchy that turns female Otherness into some kind of metaphysical metaphor for that which eludes consciousness and language. (Battersby, 1994, 198-199)

What Lacan prizes in Joyce's writing is the *sinthome*—the fourth ring that ties together three rings of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. This fourth ring is in fact Joycean ego that makes at the same time his art of writing.

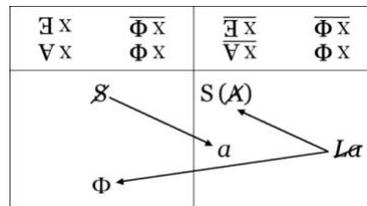
The *sinthome* buckles them [the three Lacanian registers] up, as it were, just as one buckles a parachute. The fourth ring functions as Joyce's ego. "Writing," Lacan insists, "is absolutely essential to his ego. (Wolf, 2005, 61-62)

Joyce's writing overlays the real and its freedom from the law of the Father. According to Lacan Joyce's text in which 'signifier is stuffed in signified' (*Encore*), makes the writing of the real and by

consequence the writing of the impossible and unrepresentable possible via the free-floating *jouissance* of writing itself.

In a multidisciplinary setting, Lacan in *Seminar XX*, draws a diagram and formula of sexuation by using the theory of Aristotle’s logic of affirmation (full or particular affirmation) and negative (full or particular). Lacan borrows from modern mathematics and the *set* theory and Freud’s notion of the mythical primal Father. The diagram is divided into left and right sides. On the right side, we have the barred subject \$ and the phallic function  $\Phi$ ; and on the right-hand side, S barred ( $\bar{A}$  or Other), object  $a$ . The barred woman is shown here as barred French definite article,  $L\bar{a}$ . The  $\forall$  stands for quantifier and  $\exists$  for existential quantifier.  $\Phi x$  is for the Phallic function (Castration)

We also have on the top of the diagram the following two sets of formulas:



Courtesy of lavaisujet.wordpress.com

On the left-hand side:  $\forall x \Phi x$  and  $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$  means that all men are subject to the phallic function (Castration and desire) except one man, the non-castrated primal Father who had access to all females of the horde (Freud), thus there is one  $x$  that negate the phallic function. On the right-hand side:  $\overline{\exists x \Phi x}$  and  $\forall x \Phi x$  implies that there doesn’t exist one woman who isn’t submitted to the phallic function. The woman isn’t whole because “as soon as Woman is enunciated by way of a non-whole, the  $\bar{W}$  cannot be written. There is only barred Woman here. Woman is related to the signifier of  $\bar{A}$  (Other) insofar as it is barred,” (Lacan, 1998, 80). This implies that the woman’s position is more privileged because she has access to both *jouissance(s)* (phallic and Other). In addition, this makes the gender boundaries fluid for both sexes. Accordingly, a biological male can position himself psychically in the feminine position and vice versa. “This implies that a biological male can inscribe himself on the female side and a biological female on the male side. Each speaking being can choose to inscribe itself on either side, although this will be ‘forced’ choice, imposed by the parameters of the history of the subject’s unconscious.” (Wright, 2000, 31-32) Lacan’s theory of sexuation doesn’t entails gender demarcation or the mapping of fixed boundaries of masculinity and femininity in terms of biology and anatomy. To put it more subtly, Lacan’s conception of sexuation is the unconscious choice for both members of gender division beyond biological and phallic determination.

What is sexuation? It is the process by which we unconsciously ‘choose’ our mode of being as either feminine or masculine...Lacan defines sexual position in terms of getting a place in the social as sexed subject. Lacan stresses that we are all speaking beings: we speak and we have being. Every human ‘being’ is submitted to castration by language and speech. (Ibid, 18-19)

In the early seventies of the last century, Lacan devoted his whole *Seminar XX: Encore*, to clarify his theoretical position on the genesis of human sexuality. In Chapter-VII of this seminar, he outlines his ground-breaking description of a flowing principle of sexuality wherein, according to his/her personal choice, a speaking being subscribes to either phallic *jouissance* or the Other

*jouissance*. Lacan's theory of sexualization ultimately intends to bear witness to the choice of surplus enjoyment or *jouissance* as the determiner of sexual preferences. This theory entails two paradigms of *jouissance(s)*, namely, the phallic and the Other as the two borderless domains that are open for the entry of either member of the gender groups. In other words, the two sides of the gender difference are not confinements. Moreover, in this seminar, Lacan made a number of statements such as *a woman doesn't exist*, a woman doesn't need a definite article because she is *not whole*, *woman is not-all* and so on. Many feminist commentators take these statements at face value, merely as illustration of Lacan's antifeminist stance. However, looking closely at these statements, Lacan is giving weight to the legitimacy of feminist agenda and on the other hand, he shows the constitution of feminine sexuality thoroughly other by the symbolic order controlled by masculinity.

The fact that woman does not exist does not mean that the place of woman does not exist, but rather that his place remains essentially empty. The fact that this place remains empty does not mean that we cannot find something there. But in it we find only masks, masks of nothingness, which are sufficient to justify the connection between women and semblances. (Miller, 2000, 14)

In addition, the Joyce's writing where drives and the real write themselves on the grounding of a *jouissance* remains beyond the unconscious and beyond gender differences. The feminine writing also issues forth from such grounding.

Lacan's new conceptualization can therefore be summarized as follows; the real of the drive is not gender-specific insistence, and it cannot be constructed from a male-female opposition. Rather, it consists in an opposition between the real on the one hand and the combined symbolic and imaginary on the other, each one with a lack of their own. It is this double lack that determines the ever-insistent gap between the real and the symbolico-imaginary, and thus the constitution of the subject. (Verhaeghe, 2000, 147)

## II

The French feminist theorist situates their considerations about the emancipation of the voice of woman in a dialogue with Lacan. With Lacan they share their vision on the universality of language as the primary source of access to desire. However, it isn't difficult to observe a number of misinterpretations and misreading of Lacan's theories in the last decade of his life. In the following section, we will briefly discuss the crucial points within the viewpoints of the two influential French feminists, Irigaray and Cixous a propose of Lacanian theories.

While feminist suspicions about the impact of Freud's patriarchal legacy are quite legitimate, in the case of Lacan they too often have been enacted in the form of a superficial glossing and dismissal of what—in contrast to classical analytic appropriations of Freud—is a quite nontraditional reading. Hence, we encounter the unfortunate, though not unrelated, consequence that the best known of Lacan's remarks in femininity also are some of the most easily misread out of context. (Barnard, 2002, 2)

Their central concern about the suppression of feminine desire is the invasive phallogocentrism and “Luce Irigaray has been the first to deconstruct, from the point of view of women, this phallogocentric logic,” (Marini, 1992, 55). Her perspective like that of Cixous derives support from the overwhelming analytical authority of psychoanalysis especially Lacanian theories. In “Women on the Market,” Irigaray re-describes the position of woman in human culture as an object of exchange and her body as condition for the organisation of the patriarchal socio-cultural system.

The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men (when a man buys a girl, he “pays” the father or the brother, not the mother...), and they always pass from one man to another, from one group of men to another. The work force is thus always assumed to be masculine, and “product” are objects to be used, objects of transaction among men alone. (Irigaray, 2004, 800).

A Woman's commodified body is the physical support of her price in this exchange, as Irigaray writes, "*woman has value on the market by virtue of one single quality: that of being a product of man's 'labour,'*" (802). Thus, in the phallic economy of culture the woman's body is reduced to a fetish-object. She concludes that the machinery of human culture reproduces phallocracy by the force of the law of the father. In short, Irigaray endeavours to destabilize the very foundations of contemporary socio-cultural system in order to uphold the status of a woman who is caught up in the phallogocentric web of language, depriving her from language and her signifier.

In a typical interview where she provides answer only to two questions, "why is the sexualization of discourse one of the most significant questions of our time? And how can this be translated in language," (Irigaray, 1991a, 63). She claims that the problem of 'gender and language' wasn't a serious issue until our time, for it was merely a sphere controlled and dominated by masculine paradigm, the paradigm which was valid for both men and women and Christianity bore the evidence of its confirmation.

The linguistic code, like the modes of exchange, like the system of images, and representation, is made for masculine subject. Thus God is father; he begets a son, and for this purpose he uses a woman who is reduced to maternity. This has been the most abiding structure in our religious and civic traditions for centuries: a relation between men, or in nan...through a woman. (Ibid, 64)

Then Irigaray spells out a tally of the attributes and inequalities that the controlling patriarchy in language has given to a woman in human history. For example, Irigaray defines a feminine paradigm in language:

Living beings, animated beings, cultivated beings, become part of the masculine. Objects which are inanimate, deprived of life, inhuman, turn out to be feminine. This means that men have attributed to themselves subjectivity and have reduced women to the status of objects. (Ibid, 66-67)

Irigaray concludes that in our generation, it is necessary for members of both sexes to regenerate themselves. Women are better aware now more than any time in the history of the need to become free subjects. In the process of this regeneration, woman wishes to restore her identity by having their own voice and discourse. In "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," while argues against 'phallogocentrism' and 'phallogocritism' in language and human culture, Irigaray proposes a new discourse, 'style' and 'writing' so that woman can express herself in her own language. Such self-expression and the right to speaking as a woman will be obtained when woman is able to speak and write her 'self-touching' in her own discourse and 'utterances' as she writes, "This "style," or "writing," of women tends to put the torch to fetish words, proper terms, well-constructed forms. This "style" does not privilege sight, instead, it takes each figure back to its source, which is among other things tactile. It comes back in touch with itself in the origin without ever constituting in it, constituting itself in it, as some sort of unity. (Irigaray, 1998, 779)

To comprehend Cixous's undertaking in this struggle, we need to scrutinize briefly her idea of *écriture féminine* which along Irigaray reaffirms the need for the feminine experience of a new type of writing free from phallogocentric language. Her "Laught of the Medusa," in 1975 was a manifesto for feminine writing where she trsely encourages women to never stop writing.

And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for your; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven't written. (And why id didn't write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you. (Cixous, 2010, 28-29)

At present Cixous and Irigaray are the leading practitioners of feminine writing whose paramount concern is the inscription of feminine bodily desire in the discourse. Both drawing

on the Freudian case of Dora and hysteria reveal the feminine corporeal resistance against masculine domination of language. In other words, they rewrite the psychoanalytic diagnostic perception of hysteria as manifestation of the anti-phallogocentric endeavour. Cixous “wages war against the cast-iron hierarchical oppositions embedded in Western culture,” (Sant, 2013, 202).

Both she [Cixous] and Luce Irigaray place a problematic emphasis on the woman’s body and the maternal body, a ‘writing from the body’ that restores to women the difference denied them in phallogocentric discourse. Cixous, is stressing the subversiveness of writing the feminine. (Wright, 2000, 2)

One thing that I usually discern in my reading of French feminist theoretical and literary texts is the rise of double argument: in an elliptical style and intensive use of allusions they take up an ideological position against the overriding patriarchal consequences on feminine desire and an abiding craving for bringing the body and its touch into the web of this new experimental writing—*écriture féminine*. This experimental writing of the body itself reverberates Lacan’s theory of feminine *jouissance*, *jouissance de l’Autre*,—jouissance of the body or Other’s *jouissance*—beyond the phallic economy and outsider of the unconscious. Re-counting the parameters and texture of feminine writing, Cixous is building for herself and women writers an ivory tower that inside of it they refuse to accept phallic language and making every attempt to allow new light, new air, new gaze and so on. Cixous needs a seclusion to write, to write the true and unbearable text, she prefers to take an ‘interior journey’ and write not on the table but under the table. For her writing is an expedition to uncover, to destroy and to touch the real as Blanchot wrote, “Write in the thrall of the impossible real, that share of disaster wherein every reality, safe and sound, sink,” (Blanchot, 1995, 39), as she writes in her essay, “Writing Blind: Conversation with a Donkey”.

To go off writing, I must escape from the broad daylight which takes me by the eyes, which takes my eyes and fill them with broad raw visions. I do not want to see what is shown. I want to see what is secret. What is hidden amongst the visible. I want to see the skin of the light.

I cannot write without distracting my gaze from capturing. I write by distraction. Distracted...I write by the other light. (Cixous, 1998, 139)

The ineluctable power of feminine writing lies in its ability to allow the writer to take an interior journey within herself. “Cixous’s fictional orgies in language are clearly an attempt to unchain the female ‘other’ in the text,” (Meijer, 1995, 33).

Writing dictates with such power that you do not say I’m not ready or I have no paper. So: on what? I will not go into the infinite details of the signifiers, of the uses of paper etc., but perhaps one must consider the attitude of submission to writing. That this submission, so as not to be transformed, so as not to transform itself into a resistance, needs to be assured of or equipped with the means of its own docility. Materiality must not resist. I always try to have pens that I don’t notice. It must flow. If you start being in conflict with your pens all of a sudden you are called back to the exterior. You leave the trousers. (Cixous, 1997, 104-105)

By way of conclusion, as it was discussed, early Lacan especially his “The Signification of the Phallus,” could be read as a footnote on Freud’s deterministic discourse on sexual difference and his theory of gender difference on the basis of having or not having the phallus. Lacan drastically revised and rewrote his theories in his late seminars, where a profound reading of his late works and his revelation of human culture as the symbolic order, which is ruled by phallic law turns him as a protagonist of feminism. He opened the road of feminine writing by deconstructing the patriarchal determination of discourse. However, there is a critical line of thinking in the feminist circles that still sees Lacan as the heir of Freudian phallogocentrism. Irigaray by using psychoanalysis and its critique considers liberation of woman, her desire, and her

identity free from the historical repression. This repression reduced a woman to neutral and an inanimate object in order to be a commodity of exchange between men. Woman is deprived of her own desire as she writes, “the girl shun or is cast out of a primary metaphorization of her desire as a woman, and she becomes inscribed into the phallic metaphors of the small male,” (Irigaray, 1991b, 351-352). Irigaray’s account of her focal lines of her position on feminism examined here unfolds the essential otherness of woman in discourse and the need for fully understanding gender identities. Cixous’s aligns herself with Derrida and his deconstruction in her project of feminine writing. Writing for her was synonymous with the practice of deconstruction. Toward the end of *Encore*, Lacan postulates in writing a ‘trace’ of the ‘effect of language’, which Cixous desire to detect and undermine in order to produce a purely feminine text. She also utilizes psychoanalysis to liberate woman, her body and desire from patriarchy. “Cixous (1990) sees in the twists of poetic language hidden resources for extracting ‘other’ meanings from the unconscious to contest any exclusively phallic definition of the signifier which, if liberated from patriarchal narrowness, could prove liberatory for both sexes, and especially for women,” (Wright, 2000, 213). As the works of Irigaray and Cixous bear evidence, psychoanalysis has brought into view its influential waves of creative support for feminist theories and writings. Lacan reminds us in *Encore* that “woman will never be taken up except *quoad matrem*. Woman serves a function in the sexual relationship only qua mother,” (Lacan cited in Cassin, 2017, 23). The centrality of psychoanalysis in these sets of theories and writing praxis undoubtedly offers assurances for what is yet to come in their future growth. An important lesson we may well derive from Lacan’s discussion feminine sexuality in his *Seminar XX*, is the traumatic encounter of the subject with the signifier and language as a whole. This traumatic experience has its roots in castration anxiety or rather the experience of loss and lack in the symbolic order. From this lack and loss rise desire which finds currency in language as the signature of the trauma. The fear of blank sheet and the writer’s block bears evidence to the traumatic experience of writing. “The sheet of paper becomes the locus for conflict and the stroke of the writer’s pen is testimony to the turmoil of the writing experience.” (Sant, 2013, 288). Is this traumatic experience in writing identical within the feminine and masculine economies? Is *écriture féminine* free from traumatic experience in writing? These questions still need to be answered. Though, the case of Joyce, Genet and other male writers and the feminine mystical discourse bear evidence that the trauma in writing traverse gender division. Cixous admits conflictual experience in writing when the writer is translating “the language of thought into the language of writing,” (ibid).

## NOTES:

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