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CONCERNING THE POETS OF THE RIVER GENIL
AND RAFAEL ALBERTI

(Improvised poetry from the geographical centre of Andalusia)

Preliminary Notes

Along the shores of the "Middle Valley" of the Genil River an ancient tradition has been preserved. According to the flamenco critic and specialist Juan Casillas (Juan Atero),¹ this tradition is that of improvising verses (in five line stanzas) which are then interpreted by *cantaores* (singers of the flamenco style) to the sound of the *fandango cortijero*. The area native to the song of these poets extends from the localities of Granada of Huétor-Tajar, Loja, Zagra and Algariñejo; to Cordoba: Iznájar, Rute, Lucena and Cuevas de San Marcos (where the greatest dam in Andalusia and the third largest in Spain was built; the same dam that retains the waters of the Genil) until reaching Malaga's own Villanueva de Algaidas, Villanueva de Tapia and Villanueva del Trabuco.²

In Juan Rejano's opinion it is clearly stated in the following verses, that the Genil River has its own personality. It doesn't lack in poetry and is made up of many centuries of history:

¿El río es vida o es muerte?
¿Mi sangre es río o es mar?
¿Dónde acabará su curso
Y cuándo, yo, de soñar?
(Is the river life or is it death?)

¹We thank Don Juan Casillas for conceding us an interview at his home in Antequera where he offered us his explanations and commentaries. He is now retired from singing completely.

²The largest dam in Andalusia was flooded in 1968 drowning half a dozen people, flooding 605 homes, and leaving 2000 people homeless in the municipality of Iznájar. Along with them the most popular poets of the region emigrated and were traumatically dispersed, including El Cávila and Pedro Rama. The Pharaonic construction took 14 years to complete and more than 1000 days were required to fill it. The new dam guaranteed a water supply to 200,000 inhabitants of Cordoba and provided water to 80,000 hectares of irrigated land. But it seriously affected the lives of many people. Franco formally opened the dam in 1969.

Is my blood a river, or is it the sea?
 Where will its course end
 And when will I stop dreaming?)

Juan Rejano, *El Genil y los olivos*, 1944.

In this entire area, almost a natural region that distributes its territory between the regions of the Subbética Cordobesa, the west of Granada and the northeast of Málaga, the village poets abounded. These poets improvised their verses in *fiestas de palillos* (flamenco song parties) and in the gatherings of poets as well as in any other auspicious moment such as weddings, baptisms and a variety of family celebrations. They are in some ways the carriers forward of the Malagan *decimista* tradition (poets that improvise poetry in ten line stanzas) that Vicente Espinel initiated and that crossed the Atlantic where it spread across Hispanic-America.³

This region is one characterized by the olive crops and the fertile irrigated areas on the dried-up banks of the Genil that Pedro de Espinosa commented on in his *Fábula de Genil*. Historically and culturally, it is a transitional land between High Andalusia (the old Nazari kingdom of Granada) and Low Andalusia (the flatter lands bathed by the Guadalquivir). This border character has been established by historians, geographers, linguists and other researchers.⁴

Rafael Alberti discovers the poets of the Genil River

In recent times a group of poets, among whom we include Gerardo Páez, *El Carpintero* (a man of great brilliance and talent), who has ener-

³For more information on the Hispanic-American decimist tradition, see the valuable works coordinated and edited by M. Trapero; *La décima popular en la tradición hispánica: actas del Simposio Internacional sobre la Décima*, (Las Palmas, del 17 al 22 de diciembre de 1992), Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1994; *El libro de la decima: la poesía improvisada en el Mundo Hispánico*, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Servicio de Publicaciones, 1996; *VI Encuentro-Festival Iberoamericano de la décima y el verso improvisado*, Ed. M. Trapero and others, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Ministry of Education and Culture, 2000; and the recent collective monograph *La décima: su historia, su geografía, sus manifestaciones*, Gran Canaria, Centro del a Cultura Popular Canaria, 2001.

⁴See F. Ortega Alba, *El Sur de Córdoba. Estudio de geografía agraria*, 2 vols., Publicaciones del Monte de Piedad, Cordoba, 1974; C. Torres Delgado, *El antiguo reino nazari de Granada (1232-1340)*, Granada, Anel, 1974; Manuel Alvar, "Estructura del léxico andaluz", *BFUCh XVI* (1964), 5-12; J. Mondejar, *El verbo andaluz, Formas y estructuras*, Madrid, CSIC, Añejo XC de la RFE, 1970; M. Galeote, *El habla rural del treviño de Iznájar, Vva. De Tapia y Venta de Sta. Bárbara*, Granada, Ediciones TAT, Ayuntamiento de Iznájar (Córdoba), 1988.

getically promoted the recovery of the art of the Genil poets. This art is the same one that Rafael Alberti knew. In the winter of 1924–1925 he was convalescing at his sister's home in Rute where she was the wife of the local notary. During his stay in Rute that winter, Alberti was in contact with these poets and so he speaks of them in his personal letters, sent consecutively to Federico García Lorca and to José Bergamín⁵

Carta número 2 a Federico García Lorca

Sierra de Rute (h. 1924-1925)

Federiquísimo sacrosanto. (Ora pro nobis).

Un abrazo muy fuerte desde la punta nublada del Monte de las Cruces.

Aquí no hubo tormenta. Aquí lo que hay, desde hace una semana, es una niebla espesa, que no me deja ver desde mi cuarto la carreterita de Loja. (Por ahí, por ahí se va a Granada). (...)

No se puede salir a la calle, ni al campo, ni a ningún sitio (...)

Si el tiempo mejorara iríamos de excursión algunos chicos y chicas a las *Granjas del Genil*, donde los poetas tienen su Huerto. Allí se reúnen todos y hacen sus fiestas. Guitarra, baile, cante e improvisación de poesías. Debe ser algo extraordinario. Tanto es el prestigio de estos poetas, que cuando hay jolgorio en Iznájar, Cuevas o Benamejí, reciben sus cartas y acuden todos, por dos o tres duros, a amenizar la juer-ga con sus versos (...)(cursiva nuestra)

Rafael Alberti

(Letter number 2 to Federico García Lorca

Rute Mountains (h. 1924-1925)

My dearest and most holy Federico. (Ora pro nobis).

I send you a very strong hug from the cloudy peak of the Mountain of the Crosses.

Here there was no storm. Here what there is, since about a week ago, is a thick fog, which prevents me from seeing from my room the small highway to Loja. (It's that way, that way that one goes to Granada). (...)

One cannot go outside at all now, not to the countryside, nor any place (...)

If the weather gets any better a group of us, girls and guys, will make an excursion to the *farms of the Genil*, where the poets have their kitchen garden. There they all reunite and have their parties. There is guitar, dance, song and the improvisation of poems. It must be an extraordinary experience. Such is the prestige of those poets that when there is fun in Iznájar, Cuevas or Benamejí, they all receive letters and flock there for 10 or 15 pesetas to enliven the party with their verses (...) (our italics)

Rafael Alberti)

⁵See *Cuaderno de Rute (1925): un libro inédito de Rafael Alberti*, Revista Litoral (Numbers 70-72), Torremolinos (Málaga), 1977. It is well known that in Rute Alberti typed his manuscript of *Mar y tierra*, see R. Alberti, *Marinero en tierra; La amante; El alba del alhelí*, ed. by R. Marrast, Castalia, Madrid, 1972, 29.

Carta número 1 a José Bergamín

Rute, diciembre 8, 1925.

Queridísimo Pepe:

(...) Como llueve a mares, no puedo salir al campo. Es un fastidio. Si el tiempo continúa así, *se nos aguará la fiesta que proyectábamos: iríamos, para Navidad, chicas y chicos, a las Granjas, donde está el Huerto de los poetas. Y oiríamos las coplas que se echan unos a otros; porque siempre hablan en verso.* Luego, en barcas, merendaríamos por el Genil, que ya por las Granjas va muy ancho. ¡Cuánto iba yo a aprender! ¡Cuánto me iba a divertir! Pero, ¡abajo las ilusiones!, porque, según me han dicho, este mes de diciembre suele ser muy malo por esta parte de Córdoba. ¡Qué jeringazo! (...) [our italics]⁶

Rafael Alberti

(Letter number 1 to José Bergamín

Rute, the 8th of December, 1925.

Dearest Pepe:

(...) As it is raining cats and dogs I cannot go out to the countryside. It is such a bother. If the weather continues this way, *it will rain us out of the party that we were planning: we would go for Christmas, all of us boys and girls, to the Farms, where the garden of the poets is. And we would listen to the verses that they utter to one another, because they always speak in verse.* Later, in boats, we would picnic on the Genil since by then we would have had enough of the farms. All the things that I was going to learn!! How much fun I would have had!! But, my dreams are dashed! Because as I have been told, this month of December tends to be very bad in this part of Córdoba. How annoying!! (...) [our italics]

Rafael Alberti)

In the last thirty years much has been done due to the many requests to rescue, preserve and divulge those popular song and dance parties with the poets of the land, accompanied by guitars and other musical instruments. However, as strange as it may seem, although we have seen that Rafael Alberti left us evidence of the existence of those popular poets that improvised their verses on the shoreline localities of the Genil River, even today we lack studies on the continuation of the phenomenon. Those same popular artists call themselves (and the public calls them) poets, par excellence, although some of them today perform for the public as *troveros* (local poets that improvise verse), under the influence of the *troveros* of the Alpujarra region.

Alberti defines the five-line stanza

Without a doubt, there is a text in the recovered *Cuaderno de Rute* that seems to us to be exceptional: it is the unequalled definition that Alberti achieved of the five-line stanza:

⁶*Ibidem*, 117-120.

—Antoñuelo: ¡qué tema para una copla de esas que tú, de pronto, te sacas de las sienas. ¿No ves tú ya, cerrando los ojos, cinco hileras de versos como cinco llorosas veredillas? Por la primera, amigo, baja tiritando, el alba; por la segunda, sube, nostálgica, la pena de Rafael, que es muy grande porque tiene sueño y quisiera quedarse allí calentito, entre las pajas del pajar; por la tercera, camina, pensativo, el mismo Rafael, lejos de sus compañeros; por la cuarta, vienen, en tropel, con los brazos abiertos y escarchadas las frentes, los olivos; por la quinta... ¿Qué vuela por la quinta, Antoñuelo? El aire frío de la serranía, curvo, como un alfanje. ¡Qué copla para ti, amigo!⁷

(—Antoñuelo: What a subject for a verse of those that you so quickly pluck from your brain. Don't you see now when you close your eyes, five lines of verse like five tearful paths? Along the first one, my friend, comes shivering the dawn; along the second, Rafael's sorrow nostalgically goes up—a sorrow so big because he is sleepy and would like to stay nice and warm between the sheets; along the third walk, pensively, this same Rafael, far from his companions; along the fourth comes a mob of olive trees, with their arms open and faces frosty; along the fifth ... What flies by the fifth, Antoñuelo? The cold air of the mountain ranges, curved like a cutlass. What a verse for you, friend!)

Undoubtedly, this original definition of the five-line stanza should not go unnoticed by the researchers of improvised oral poetry in the Hispanic world. It seems to us that no other definition can rank with Alberti's: five lines, barely five rows of words to condense a thought, attack his companions, ridicule the public, express an idea, formulate a wink of humor, satirize his opponent, etc., etc.

An entire world is condensed into five lines along with the circumstantial setting of the poet who with great intelligence, speed and mastery improvised the verse. The last line is always the most important, the origin and the essence, the conclusion, the invisible axe blow, the impeccable cut that leaves the public breathless: the fifth line of verse: "*What flies by the fifth, Antoñuelo? The cold air of the mountain range, curved, like a cutlass.*" (our italics).

The sound archive of the Genil Poets

Today we are working on the history, genealogy, the anthropological recovery of oral texts and the classification of this improvised popular poetry around the Genil. It is about compositions of five-line stanzas that the poets of the region improvised going back to ancient times. This art then, deserves that its literary, musical, linguistic-dialectal and artistic-cultural importance as a whole be recognized and disseminated.⁸

⁷*Ibidem*, 90.

⁸Many researchers have explored this poetry of the region and have published a few introductory pages from the musical and anthropological perspective,

Of all the old poets of the Genil, those that remind the people and fans of the region's improvised poetry and those that have now passed into history and legend are *Los Lázaros* (who R. Alberti listened to),⁹ *Los Ruchos*, *José y Luis Serrano*, *Juan Alba*, *Los Tosquillas*, *Basilio el de Los Claveles*, *El Conejillo* or *Luis Ariza*. For different reasons or because of their deaths, the following retired from singing completely: *Pedro Rama*, *Juan Casillas*, and *El Cávila*. Many other such as *Fermín*, *Zamorano*, *Chorrillos*, *Petaca*, *Lojilla*, *Dominguillo*, *Valoy*, *El Sorupa*, *El Carbonero*, *Lizana*, *Cabrillas* or *El Timba*, only sing sporadically. Unfortunately, there is no continuation of this tradition among the younger generations.

In the history of the verses created on the shores of the Genil many poets deserve special recognition: *Diego Castillo*, *Juanico Carboneras*, *María Serrano*, *Isabel Hinojosa La Guapa*, *El Chispa de las Peñuelas*, *Dieguito Páez*, *Ricardín de las Fuentes* and *El Ciego de la Rincona*.

But in the genealogy of the Genil Poets without a doubt we would have to demand an honoured spot for Gerardo Páez, *El Carpintero* (born and raised in Villanueva de Tapia, Málaga) who in the last decade has fought against wind and tide so that the whole world (including both scientific and academic fields) might recognize the art and poetry that abounds on the shores of the Genil. This recognition was also sought at International Festivals such as Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Las Tunas or San Luis Potosí. In the company of his friends *El Caco*, *El Guardia Civil Lojeño* and *Chaparillo*, *El Carpintero* has elevated the improvised five-line stanza to the place it deserves within popular folklore and the art of Andalusia.

El Carpintero, along with *El Caco*, *Chaparillo* and *El Lojeño* in 2003 recorded a record titled *Así cantan los poetas del Genil (Homenaje a Rafael en el I Centenario de su nacimiento)*. This recording pays homage to the universal Rafael Alberti, *El Carpintero's* godfather. As such, they give us a valuable linguistical-musical and ethnographic testimony to improvised poetry.¹⁰

see José Arenas, Ramón Rodríguez and Miguel A. Berlanga, *El Trovo de la Subbética* (Sevilla, Consejería de Educación de la Junta de Andalucía, 1998); and Miguel A. Berlanga, "Fiestas de poetas en la(s) Subbéticas andaluzas", en <http://www.ugr.es/~berlanga/trovo.htm> (page visited on May 15th, 2003); and also the recompilation of verses of F. Rodríguez Aguilera, *La poesía popular en la serranía sur de Córdoba*. Lucena, Gráficas González, 1987.

⁹See the brief narration "Rafael el de la Lázaros", "inspirada en personajes reales que vivían por aquellos años en Iznájar, Rute y Almería" ("inspired by true characters who lived around those years in Iznájar, Rute and Almería), *Cuaderno de Rute*, op.cit., 90-92.

¹⁰*Así cantan los Poetas del Genil: Homenaje a Rafael Alberti en el I Centenario de su nacimiento*, Edition of Manuel Galeote, Col. Fonoteca del Genil, vol. 1, Ediciones ALDA, Málaga, 2003.

Currently, El Carpintero, now 70 years old, continues to show to Andalusian society and to the general public, his skills on stage alongside his companions and friends. It is an art that he learned from his ancestors who were also poets, particularly his grandfather best known by his nickname of Dieguito. In homage to El Carpintero, in the year 2000 the Municipal Council of Villanueva de Tapia realized the appropriateness of celebrating a gathering in that villa nueva (new town) (founded by Licenciante Pedro de Tapia in 1603) of both Andalusian and international talents in improvised poetry in the Hispanic world. It was in this way that the I Festival Internacional de Poesía Improvisada was born. Its success was instantaneous. The news of the Festival spread like wildfire throughout the region and Andalusia. Thousands of spectators arrived during those days to contemplate the artistic custom of improvisation. The Town Hall of Villanueva de Tapia, represented by its Mayoress, with great clairvoyance and intuition offered the emotional, poetic and unequalled Homenaje a El Carpintero (Homage to El Carpintero) in 2001. This moment will remain etched forever in the memories of El Carpintero, all those who attended, in that of his friends and everyone there. Along with El Carpintero another master of improvised poetry also collaborated in the organization of that I Festival: the Cuban artist Alexis Díaz Pimienta, the universal magician of words and of the Improvised Oral Ten-Line Stanza (Décima) in Cuba and Hispano-America.

Alexis Díaz Pimienta and El Carpintero were successful in convincing many people at that time (above all the authorities) to allow the X Congreso Internacional de la Décima Oral y el Verso Improvisado to be celebrated in 2002 in Villanueva de Tapia (Málaga), the native land of Vicente Espinel, the inventor of the ten-line stanza or *espinela*. At this Conference the aforementioned cantautor Juan Atero, Juan Casillas, the distinguished representative of the Genil poets, received a special tribute. In this way it came about that in Villanueva de Tapia (Málaga) the flag was raised to convert the locality into the Capital of Verse and the Improvised Ten-Line Stanza in the Hispanic World. These types of Festivals and gatherings of poets will continue to be necessary so that the tradition of the Genil poets renews itself, does not fade away and continues its path into the future. It is necessary to fight strongly on all fronts and using all the available media on behalf of this artistic, literary and musical tradition from the geographical centre of Andalusia; this art that fits into the framework of popular improvised poetry of the Hispanic world.

Ildefonso Pérez Aguilera (nicknamed *El Caco chico*, as he is the son of *El Caco*, another poet since passed away) one of the most popular poets of the Genil, along with the master of Priego de Cordoba (*Fermín, Zamorano* and so many others) also participated in the recording of *Homenaje a Rafael Alberti*. Ever since boyhood *El Caco* has experienced

the poetical-musical and artistic vocation that he learned from the popular poets of his region, including his own father. This people's poet adores rural life and the cultivation of the land. He enjoys improvising his five-line stanzas in the poets' gatherings just as only he can sing them: with guile and irony in his unmistakable voice. He has proved his artistic greatness in the *Concursos de Troveros de Priego de Córdoba* where he was declared the winner on various occasions. On Spanish stages he has performed alongside artists from Argentina, Puerto Rico, Cuba and Panama. He is a poet who actively and regularly participates, as do his companions, in the gatherings in the shoreline localities of the Genil. As well, *El Carpintero* has proven how important it has been for him to participate in radio and television programs in order to spread the art of the five-line stanza that he has performed ever since he was a young man. His work heading up the organization of the *Concurso de Trovos de Priego de Córdoba* is very valuable and makes him the true leader of the annual meeting.

Likewise, José Arévalo, *Chaparrillo*, (a name inherited from his father *Chaparro* along with his inclination for the art of improvised poetry in five-line stanzas) has become an unquestionable figure due to his talent. His innate poetic vocation continued to develop within him until he met Gerardo *El Carpintero*, *El Pavo de las Mesetas*, Luis Ariza *El Relojero* or *Fermín*. It was at that time that he dedicated himself to cultivating this art of the five-line stanza. His personal voice and his characteristic style have made him a famous and applauded poet in the region. In the *II Festival Internacional de Cante de Poetas* and the *X Congreso Iberoamericano de la Décima y el Verso Oral Improvisado* (Villanueva de Tapia, July 2002) he triumphed on stage because of his disputes with Arcadio Camaño, a brilliant Panamanian *repentista*. *Chaparrillo* won first prize in the *Concurso de Trovos de Priego de Córdoba* in September of 2002, competing with time-honoured masters such as *El Cávila* and others.

José María Rufino Pérez, a native of Loja (Granada) and nicknamed *El Lojeño*, has worked for many years as a civil servant. The passion for flamenco singing and poetry runs deep in his veins and he has harvested prizes and had great success in the *Concurso de Trovos de Priego de Córdoba* and in other regional competitions. Among the masters he remembers with special fondness *Madero (cantaor)*, *Los Ruchos* and *Doroteo*. He has shared the stage with *El Cabo*, *Torres*, *El Greñas*, *Nogales*, *El Sorupa* and the rest of his colleagues. He has performed alongside the troveros of Murcia, the *decimistas* of Puerto Rico, of Cuba and of other Hispanic-American countries in the *Festivales de Cante de Poetas* of Villanueva de Tapia (Málaga). He is a regular participant in the gatherings of poets of Rute, Zambra, Iznájar, Loja, Montefría, Algariñejo, Huétor-Tájar, Lucena and Achidona.

Recently, *El Carpintero*, *El Caco*, *Chaparrillo* and *El Lojeño* have made a new live recording, still unedited, in the company of other poets:

Dominguillo, Lojilla, Lizana, Petaca o Tomizo.¹¹ Without a doubt, in the years of 1950 to 1970 the two great Genil Poets that triumphed with their voices and their verses were *Pedro Rama* (pronounced *Pedrorrama*) and *Jose Ruiz El Cvila*. There was no comparison to his success along the left and right margins of the Genil River, respectively: *Pedro Rama* was born in El Adelantado de Iznjar (he died in the year 2003 as an Andalusian immigrant in Navarra); *El Cvila*, native of Los Juncares (another village of Iznjar as well), —had to emigrate to the province of Sevilla, where he currently resides after the construction of the Dam of Iznjar in the flow of the Genil.

What we propose with the collection Fonoteca del Genil is to contribute to the Project conducted by the Archivo Lingüístico Digital de Andalucía (ALDA), which comes to life with this valuable digital sound archive (a vast audiovisual digital archive of the live performances). In our judgement, with these materials but above all with the archive of the performances we will contribute to saving, investigating and divulging a little known, almost forgotten yet alive, part of the oral-musical patrimony of Andalusia.

As for the genealogy and history of these poets, it is easier to verify the artistic name and gather together some of his verses, etc., before turning for insight to his name and surnames or the biography and the personal character sketch. All of these personal characteristics are normally adorned with popular legends relative to the poet being bohemian, his openness towards others, his solidarity, his miserable living conditions, etc.

From the linguistic perspective, the five-line stanzas of the poets of the Genil are characterized by a refined dialectal archaism that is consistent with the archaic *repentista* poetic tradition. As much from the phonetic point of view as morphosyntactic and lexical the five-line stanzas participate in the Andalusian roots typical of the region that we have studied in other places (*seseo*, phonetic neutralizations, aspiration of the implosive –s, phonologised vocalic opening, conservation of the ancient aspirated medieval /h/; verbal forms not used in modern Spanish, arabisms that have endured in the region; local expressions, etc.)¹² It proves that rural speech resists the pressures of linguistic stan-

¹¹*Los poetas del Genil: Mano a mano*, Edition of M. Galeote, Col. Fonoteca del Genil, vol. 2, Ediciones ALDA (in print).

¹²See M. Galeote, *El habla rural del Treviño*, op.cit.; “¿Lxico rural del treviño de Crdoba, Granada y Mlaga”?, *Revista de Dialectologa y Tradiciones Populares* XLV (1990), 131-168; *Hablas cordobesas y literatura andaluza*, *Actas de los Primeros Cursos de Verano de la Subbtica* (Iznjar, Crdoba, 1994), University of Granada, 1995; “Terminologa dialectal del cultivo olivarero tradicional en el centro geogrfico de Andaluca”, in M. Galeote (ed.), *Crdoba lingüística y literaria*, Iznjar (Crdoba), 2003, 17-40.

andardization and socioeconomic development, locked within the five-line stanzas of the poets. Given the rural themes of these compositions, the disputes are frequently concerning agricultural life. Consequently it can be affirmed without error that the rural characteristics of the five-line stanzas begin to fossilize, separating them from idiomatic reality. The dialectical polymorphism of the region around the Genil, is a result of the convergence of diatopic and diastratic isoglosses that separate different Andalusian linguistic areas: besides the Castillian archaisms of olive terminology, for example (*haldudo* "olive tree with hanging branches", *zaranda* "olive sieve"), there are documented modern creations (*guitarrilla* "machine to knock down the olives"), including arabisms (*almazara* "oil mill", *azahar* "olive blossom") in addition to typically Andalusian formations (*alero* "long pole", *alameño* "variety of olive tree", etc.) or metaphorical designations (*frailear* "to cut down", *yorón* "olive tree with hanging branches").

This is the rural poetic language that distances itself from colloquial language and presents itself in manners, expressions and archaic forms of speaking that make it difficult for the younger generations to understand. They do not comprehend the sense of humor, irony or satire of the verses. In this way, poets like *Chaparrillo* (an authentic innovator) have initiated a renewal process of the poetic language and are gaining greater success among the public of the region.

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