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Author(s):

Uthra Devi R.K

Dr C. Jothi

Corresponding Author:

Uthra Devi R.K

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Abstract: *The study explores the evolution of queer language in Young Adult (YA) literature, focusing on the transformation of stigmatizing terms into empowering expressions of identity in Kacen Callender's* Felix Ever After*. By undertaking Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Michel Foucault's concept of power and discourse, the research analyzes how language functions as a tool of both oppression and resistance in the lives of queer individuals. The study uses qualitative textual analysis to examines how Callender's use of reclaimed queer lexicons such as "queer" and "demiboy" enables characters to assert fluid identities and challenge heteronormative structures. The novel demonstrates how identity is performed and renegotiated through language, revealing literature's role in shaping social norms and offering avenues for self-affirmation. The findings underscore that language not only reflects but actively constructs queer experiences, empowering marginalized youth to navigate societal boundaries and define themselves on their own terms. Ultimately, this paper highlights the transformative power of YA fiction in resisting dominant discourses and fostering inclusive, representative narratives for queer readers.*

Keywords: Queer Lexicons, Language and Identity, LGBTQ+ Identity, Discourse and Power, Gender Performavity.

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From Stigma to Empowerment: The Discourse of Queer Language in *Felix Ever After*

Uthra Devi R.K [1] & Dr C. Jothi [2]

Introduction

Language has long been a mirror of social attitudes toward the queer community. Historically, it has both reflected and reinforced marginalization through derogatory expressions. Across time and cultures, openly offensive and coded terms have been used to express queerness words such as faggot, dyke, and queer all of which carry complex histories of stigma and reclamation. As Burn (2000) observes, heterosexual males frequently used terms like "fag" and "queer" as insults, reinforcing heterosexism and the exclusion of queer identities. Yet, through the evolution of queer linguistics, these words have been reimagined as tools of resistance and pride.

Within this linguistic and cultural transformation, Young Adult (YA) fiction has emerged as a vital space for reclaiming queer language. Through character dialogue and narrative structure, YA authors have transformed stigmatizing labels into affirming expressions of identity. This shift not only challenges the dominance of heteronormative discourse but also redefines what kinds of stories and which identities deserve representation. As Nair (2019) notes, queer YA narratives that center affirmation and belonging dismantle the traditional idea that only heterosexual characters are entitled to positive or fulfilled endings. This linguistic transformation aligns with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which views identity as constituted through repeated social and linguistic acts rather than as a fixed essence. In *Felix Ever After*, gender and sexuality emerge not as static categories but as ongoing negotiations enacted through language. Similarly, Michel Foucault's concept of discourse and power reveals how language operates as both a mechanism of social regulation and a site of resistance. By reclaiming and redefining words once used to stigmatize them, queer individuals contest the power structures embedded in language.

From these theoretical insights, this paper explores how Kacen Callender's Felix Ever After reclaims queer lexicons particularly "queer" and "demiboy" as linguistic sites of empowerment. Using qualitative discourse analysis, the study examines how linguistic choices in the novel construct identity, perform resistance, and reshape social belonging.

This paper seeks to answer two key research questions:

[1] Ph.D. Research Scholar in English at Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, India.
[2] Assistant Professor in the Dept. of English, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, India.

1. How does Felix Ever After transform stigmatizing queer language into a source of empowerment?
2. What role does language play in the formation and affirmation of queer identity?

By analyzing Callender's linguistic strategies through Butler's and Foucault's frameworks, this study argues that YA literature not only reflects queer experience but actively constructs it. Language becomes both the medium and the message of self-definitiontransforming stigma into empowerment, and silence into visibility

LIITERATURE REVIEW

Queer linguistics has developed as a crucial interdisciplinary field examining how language constructs, reinforces, and challenges social understandings of gender and sexuality. Foundational scholars such as Leap (1996), Cameron and Kulick (2003), and Motschenbacher (2010) emphasize that language does not merely describe identity but actively produces it. Within queer discourse, linguistic choices—pronouns, self-naming, or reclaimed slurs—become performative acts through which speakers negotiate belonging and resistance. As Barrett (2017) and Galinsky et al. (2013) demonstrate, the reappropriation of stigmatizing language transforms words once associated with shame into expressions of power and solidarity.

Adolescent communities, in particular, represent fertile ground for studying these linguistic negotiations. During adolescence, individuals experiment with gendered and sexual identities, often encountering the constraints of heteronormative discourse. Scholars such as Zimman (2014) and Galupo et al. (2016) note that pronoun choice, gender descriptors, and identity labels are not neutral but index power, self-affirmation, and community inclusion. Zimman (2014) further illustrates how trans individuals reconstruct meaning through talk about their own bodies, showing that identity formation is deeply discursive and context-dependent. Within Young Adult (YA) literature, queer representation has gained momentum both quantitatively and thematically. Authors such as Kacen Callender, Adam Silvera, and Becky Albertalli have expanded YA fiction into a space for linguistic and emotional self-discovery. Scholars including Jones (2020) and Nair (2019) highlight how these narratives serve as cultural tools through which young readers encounter diverse expressions of queerness. However, most studies of YA fiction privilege narrative structure or psychological development rather than the linguistic mechanisms through which identity is constructed. The discursive function of queer lexicons their performative, political, and affective dimensions—remains comparatively underexplored.

This study addresses that gap by focusing on the linguistic dimension of identity formation in *Felix Ever After*. By examining the discursive role of reclaimed identity labels such as *queer*, *demiboy*, and *transgender*, the paper situates YA fiction within the broader field of queer linguistics. It explores how Callender's characters use language to resist normative pressures, negotiate self-definition, and

claim space within a world that often denies their intelligibility. The analysis aims to contribute to ongoing discussions of language, power, and identity by demonstrating that YA fiction not only mirrors but also produces new forms of queer subjectivity through its linguistic texture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded in three interrelated frameworks of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Michel Foucault's concept of discourse and power, and the principles of queer linguistics developed by scholars such as Motschenbacher (2010). Together, these frameworks illuminate how language in Felix Ever After performs, regulates, and redefines queer identity.

Judith Butler (1990) argues that gender is not a stable or inherent identity but the effect of repeated social and linguistic performances. Through daily acts of speech, naming, gesture, and presentation individuals cite and re-cite cultural norms that make identity intelligible. Language thus becomes a primary site where gender is both enacted and contested. *In Felix Ever After,* this performative process is visible in Felix's evolving relationship with self-naming and pronoun use. His hesitation, exploration, and eventual acceptance of the label demiboy exemplify how identity is constituted through linguistic iteration rather than discovery of an inner essence. Each act of naming, questioning, or self-description reaffirms Butler's idea that gender and sexuality are dynamic processes of becoming. Felix's performative language his letters, dialogues, and self-reflections functions as a continual negotiation of who he is within a society that demands fixed definitions.

Michel Foucault (1978) conceptualizes discourse as a system that produces knowledge and exerts power by defining what can and cannot be said about bodies, gender, and sexuality. Language not only reflects power relations but also enforces them by determining which identities are legitimate and which are marginalized. However, Foucault insists that "where there is power, there is resistance." Within *Felix Ever After,* linguistic reclamation becomes an act of defiance against these discursive boundaries. When once-derogatory terms like queer are reappropriated with pride, the characters subvert linguistic hierarchies and reconfigure the very discourse that sought to silence them. Callender's narrative dramatizes this Foucauldian paradox: language is both the medium of oppression and the tool of liberation. By speaking differently by renaming, reclassifying, and redefining queer characters reclaim agency within the structures that sought to contain them.

Queer Linguistics: Identity in Interaction

Queer linguistics, as advanced by Motschenbacher (2010), integrates poststructuralist theory with sociolinguistic analysis. It views identity as interactionally co-constructed, emphasizing how speech acts, pronoun choices, and self-referential discourse reveal both conformity to and resistance against heteronormative language. This approach foregrounds language as performance and identity as a

process, aligning closely with Butler's performativity and Foucault's power-resistance dynamic. Applying this framework to Felix Ever After allows for a fine-grained analysis of how identity labels such as queer and demiboy function as discursive strategies of empowerment. Through close readings of dialogue and narrative voice, the study traces how linguistic choices—self-naming, code-switching, and lexical reclamation produce belonging, challenge hierarchies, and reframe what it means to live authentically as queer.

Together, these three perspectives reveal language as a site of struggle and creativity. Butler provides insight into the performative nature of gendered speech; Foucault exposes the discursive power relations that define and constrain subjects; and queer linguistics bridges the two, offering tools to analyze how these theories manifest in textual language. Within this integrated framework, Felix Ever After becomes not just a story about queer identity but a linguistic performance of self-making and resistance.

BACKGROUND OF THE NOVEL

Felix Ever After follows the story of Felix Love, a Black trans teen who, despite his name, he has never been in love. Even after his transition, Felix continues to question his gender identity, grappling with the complexities of self-definition. The novel captures his journey of self-discovery while he deals with racism, transphobia, and the pressures of fitting in at a competitive art school. When someone publicly outs him and posts his deadname along with pre-transition photos, Felix is forced to confront deep personal pain and explore what identity truly means to him. Alongside this, he navigates complicated friendships, experiences first love, and begins to find strength in his vulnerability. Kacen Callender presents the layered experiences of queer youth, especially within the intersections of race and gender identity. The novel also emphasizes the importance of community, friendship, and family support in affirming queer lives and identities.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative discourse analysis to examine how language in *Felix Ever After* constructs and performs queer identity. The corpus comprises selected excerpts where characters engage in self-naming, pronoun negotiation, and the reclamation of stigmatizing terms such as *queer* and *demiboy*. Each excerpt was chosen for its linguistic and thematic relevance to identity construction. Analysis followed a three-step process: (1) identifying and coding instances of linguistic performance (e.g., self-labeling, hesitation, resistance); (2) interpreting these within their narrative and social contexts; and (3) relating them to Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power. Attention was given to lexical choice, pronoun use, and speech acts that reveal how language mediates power and identity. This approach, grounded in queer

linguistics, highlights how Callender's characters transform oppressive discourse into sites of affirmation, demonstrating that language operates simultaneously as a means of regulation and self-liberation.

Reclaiming Queer Language as Resistance

Language in *Felix Ever After* functions as a powerful site of resistance, where words once weaponized against queer individuals are reclaimed as markers of pride. The reclamation of *queer* exemplifies Butler's notion of performativity, as the repeated and self-conscious use of this term redefines its meaning through empowered speech acts. Once a slur, *queer* becomes an inclusive and fluid identity label that resists binary categories. Callender's depiction of Felix and his peers mirrors Foucault's view that power and resistance coexist within discourse. YA literature plays an important role in this shift, with authors such as Kacen Callender employing queer terminology to promote self-affirmation and empowerment. Callender's narratives empower people to take ownership of their identities, giving young readers a sense of affirmation and belonging. Callender's attention to detail stretches beyond identifying markers, impacting how characters are defined and viewed in *Felix Ever After*. Instead of relying on generic descriptions like black, skinny, colored hair, they use more affirming and nuanced language, such as dark complexion or olive-toned skin or brown skin. The subtle yet significant choice reinforces the idea that representation should go beyond visibility. By crafting narratives that celebrate identity rather than simply categorize it, Callender ensures that queer and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) readers see themselves portrayed with dignity and depth, further strengthening the connection between language and self-empowerment.

Callender provides young adolescents with a space to explore their identities and navigate the complexities of the queer community. They introduced many terms to the young adolescent readers in their books, like nonbinary, gay, lesbian, queer, demiboy, transgender, agender, bigender, transmasculine, transfeminine, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming. They provide language that affirms a wide range of experiences to young readers. This linguistic transparency enables readers to recognize themselves in stories where identity is fluid and self-discovery is embraced. Beyond just defining these identities, Callender's work promotes understanding by depicting how people deal with societal expectations, psychological conflicts, and the process of self-acceptance. The characters' experiences challenge traditional definitions, demonstrating that identity is an ever-changing journey rather than a set condition. Callender's writing acts as both a mirror and a guide, allowing young readers to confidently and clearly navigate the adolescent's own paths.

Another significant aspect of Callender's *Felix Ever After* is how it reflects the evolving societal attitudes toward queer identities. The novel highlights how terms that were once used to degrade the queer community are now being reclaimed with pride and acceptance. And how history disgusted

community one is now changing slowly to socially accepted pride. A moment that captures this shift occurs when Felix and Ezra are on the metro together. Noticing an older man asleep nearby, they playfully decide to put on a show by holding hands and leaning on each other, expecting a disapproving reaction. However, to their surprise, the man wakes up and smiles warmly, showing them support instead of judgment. When he says, "I have a grandson who's gay. Also, you two seem like very nice gay boys" (Callender, 2020). The term gay was once used to ridicule men, but over time, it has been reclaimed and embraced as a symbol of pride and identity. This unexpected moment underscores the gradual changes in societal perspectives. While prejudice still exists, acceptance is growing, allowing queer individuals to express themselves more freely without constant fear of hostility. Through dialogue and self-naming, the characters reshape linguistic boundaries that once confined them, proving that speech is not merely expressive but constitutive of social reality.

Power, Discourse, and Intersectionality

Foucault's theory of discourse illuminates how linguistic practices regulate social hierarchies even within marginalized communities. Felix experiences transphobia and racism from both heterosexual and queer peers, revealing how language enforces exclusionary boundaries. There was a time when being queer meant living in secrecy. The clubs and pubs weren't just places to gather but became the life blood for queer people. People who cannot express themselves publicly due to legal issues make clubs grow and build their community stronger. Decades of activism, courage, and defiance carved a path forward. Today, Pride marches fill the streets with color and celebration, honoring those who fought for the right to live openly. Every flag raised, every hand held in public, and every fearless expression of identity is proof that what was once hidden in the shadows now shines in the light. In *Felix Ever After*, the importance of Pride is emphasized throughout the entire month, reflecting the growing acceptance and solidarity within the queer community. People openly support one another, creating a welcoming space for those newly embracing their identities. They celebrate Pride Month with colors and flags to represent their liberty and rights in this society. However, discrimination is still in the queer community. While language can be empowering, it can also create divisions and exclusions within the community. For instance, bisexual and transgender individuals often face erasure or discrimination within LGBTQ+ spaces due to the limitations of existing linguistic frameworks (Henningham 75). This highlights the complex interplay between language, identity, and power dynamics even within marginalized communities. Callender addresses the layered discrimination faced by individuals who exist at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, particularly Black trans queer people. While queer serves as an umbrella term for individuals of diverse sexualities and gender identities, the reality within the community is far more complex. Discrimination does not just come from outside forces; it also exists within the queer community itself. Just as society marginalizes queer

people, there are divisions within the community where white queer individuals often hold privilege over queer people of color, and trans individuals frequently face exclusion from gay and lesbian spaces.

Felix Ever After targets Felix for being Black and transgender, therefore adding to the weight of several marginalizations. When his personal social media account is hacked and he finds transphobic and racist comments from a white gay classmate, his vulnerability becomes shockingly clear. This act of cyberbullying done by someone who is also part of the queer community highlights a terrible reality of oppression can exist inside the queer community as much as outside of it. The attack exposes rather how racism, transphobia, and other hierarchies of power may function even among persons who are themselves marginalized, therefore shattering the myth that gay venues are automatically secure for all. Leah, a white lesbian, stands out as someone who recognizes these injustices and actively calls them out, demonstrating how some members of the community step forward to support one another during such attacks. When she says,

You're used to being a white guy in Brooklyn, used to always getting your way—fuck, I don't care that you're gay, because people like Felix are queer and trans and Black, and they have to deal with so much more bullshit than you or me. And okay, yes, you are marginalised for being gay, but instead of being a fucking ally to other marginalised people, people even more marginalised than you, you buy into racist and patriarchal bullshit and act like you're above them because you're the white guy, and you act like they're taking your space.(calendar, 2020, p.322)

Leah uses her words to explicitly challenge the privilege some people still have, especially in underprivileged areas. She questions the idea that queerness by itself makes one incapable of continuing damage. Leah's defense of Felix emphasizes a more general issue throughout the book for the value of intersectionality. Being queer is not a single experience of one's ethnicity, gender identity, and class all interact to define how oppression is felt and negotiated. Being Black and trans for Felix means he deals with layers of prejudice others in the queer community might not really appreciate or recognize. This magnifies the emotional labor and resilience needed of him. He has to strive harder to feel safe, to claim space in a world always trying to obscure him, and to find belonging. This chapter in the book deftly shows how "double burden" experienced by underprivileged individuals inside underprivileged areas is often Leah reminds us that allyship has to be active and deliberate since she is cognizant and ready to speak up. Claiming queerness is insufficient; one also has to face the structures of privilege and oppression that endure inside it. Felix Ever After asks readers to consider their own place among crossing identities and to support individuals whose issues are more significant, even in shared environments.

Language, Media, and Visibility

The novel also foregrounds the sociolinguistic influence of media representation. Every TV show and book represents the blonde white girl who often deserves to have a happy-ending love story. Ironically, only a few TV shows represent the gay community in a well- educated way; however, those gay characters were played by the heterosexual actors. Many shows often portray the queer community in an improper manner. Heterosexuals often believe that creating gay content and portraying queer people happily in love will influence straight individuals. Instead, mainstream media frequently depicts the queer community as frivolous, unsuccessful, or desperate for sexual encounters, reinforcing harmful stereotypes rather than representing their lives authentically. When Marisol says, "And then there was that article saying that queer TV shows are making more people gay. I never saw a single TV show with a gay person until, like, last year . . . The shows aren't making people gay. They're just making people realise it's even . . . I don't know the possibility. It's like we're all brainwashed from the time we're babies to think we have to be straight." (Callender 80). Marisol's words highlight the profound impact of representation of how the absence of queer visibility in media reinforces the idea that being straight is the only option. This aligns with Foucault's argument that knowledge and visibility are forms of power: representation makes new identities thinkable. Without seeing themselves reflected in stories, many queer individuals grow up feeling isolated, unaware that their feelings are valid and shared by others. The problem isn't that queer media influences sexuality, but rather that it challenges the deeply ingrained notion of heterosexuality as the default. By portraying diverse identities and experiences, queer narratives offer a sense of recognition and affirmation, allowing people to explore who they are beyond societal expectations.

Getting support from a community center is not an easy step to do. Asking for help might be difficult for an adolescent who is struggling with their identity and feels overwhelmed by social labels. Felix's first visit to the center does not go well; overwhelmed by uncertainty, he flees. However, his second visit provides a sense of clarity. A discussion on how white queer people frequently privilege themselves while marginalizing others, as well as the larger conversation about why identity matters, helps him get a better knowledge of himself and the complexities of the queer community. Which helps him figure out how he has to identify as himself. Felix realises he is a demi boy (A person who identifies as mostly or partly male). Acknowledging his identity makes him confident, when he says, "The confidence spread through me. I know that this is right. It's kind of amazing that there is a word that explains exactly how I feel, that takes away all of my confusion, questioning, hesitation." (Calendar 278). Felix avoided social gatherings because he felt out of place and struggled to fit in. However, discovering his identity and embracing his label gave him a sense of confidence and self-assurance. For a long time, he wrestled with uncertainty, feeling caught between cultural standards and his own emotions. However, learning the word demiboy offers him a sense of validation and proof that his

emotions are genuine and that he is not alone. Language becomes a powerful instrument for self-acceptance, allowing him to overcome the doubts that previously held him back. With his newfound confidence, Felix begins to embrace his identity more openly, moving into the world with a more solid sense of self.

Naming and Labeling as Empowerment

Labeling plays a significant role in the formation of queer identity. Within the queer community, identity is not fixed or singular but it is layered, dynamic, and deeply personal. Labeling, often viewed as restrictive, becomes a source of agency in *Felix Ever After*. When Felix adopts the label *demiboy*, he gains a vocabulary that aligns with his lived experience. This linguistic act demonstrates how naming oneself, as Butler asserts, is a performative gesture that produces identity. It also reflects Foucault's view that discourse can generate new possibilities of subjectivity within systems of constraint. Research underscores the wide range of ways individuals conceptualize and describe their sexual and gender identities (Galupo et al. 110; Hammack et al. 180). While some individuals find comfort in umbrella terms like *queer*, others gravitate toward more specific labels such as *bisexual*, *pansexual*, or *genderfluid*, which better reflect the nuances of their lived experiences (Mitchell et al. 250). Choosing a label becomes a form of self-assertion of an affirmation of one's truth. It's not merely about naming oneself but it's about making meaning and forging connection. Felix's journey in *Felix Ever After* captures this transformative process. His discovery of the term *demiboy* marks a turning point in his emotional growth, as he begins to feel seen and validated by the language that finally fits. That moment illustrates how language can be healing. It becomes a mirror through which individuals recognize themselves. At the same time, not everyone shares the same relationship with labels. Ezra, for instance, takes a more fluid approach. He believes that identity exists with or without a label that putting a name to it does not change who someone is. His stance challenges the assumption that everyone must articulate their identity within defined categories. For some, freedom lies in ambiguity, and that too is valid.

Leah, on the other hand, emphasizes the social and political power of labels. She notes, "They connect us. They help create community . . . If the world was perfect, maybe we wouldn't need labels. But the world isn't perfect, and the labels can really be a source of pride especially when we got to deal with so much crap. I'm really freaking proud to be lesbian" (Callender 82). Her perspective reflects how labels extend beyond individual affirmation they become collective tools of solidarity. In a world that often marginalizes queer identities, labels allow people to claim visibility and dignity. They become a form of resistance, challenging systems that have historically tried to erase or silence non-normative identities. By realizing that queerness is a constellation of many lived experiences rather than a single, homogeneous story, labeling also enhances the queer vernacular. It spans a broad spectrum of identities

such as nonbinary, asexual, genderqueer, demisexual, agender, two-spirit, and many more each giving voice and visibility to those who have historically been left anonymous or misinterpreted. These labels give people the words to express their identity in ways that feel truthful, genuine, and positive. Finding the correct name can be a flash of insight and release for many, providing not just a feeling of self but also a link to a greater community of individualshavingsimilarexperiences.

By allowing room for nuanced and fluid identities that challenge strict binaries, this always expanding lexicon promotes inclusivity. It helps destroy the idea that queerness has to fit only a small range of labels. Rather than being distorted or deleted by prevailing cultural narratives, it upholds the liberty of people to define themselves on their own terms. Labeling becomes thus a necessary act of self-determination. The changing conversation on gender and sexuality reflects this move toward flux and subtlety. Modern studies reveal that identity is dynamic which shaped by institutional, relational, and cultural elements and not a fixed attribute (Toft et al. 20). The growing range of identity designations indicates, as Russell et al. (2023) note, a more general society movement toward authenticity and personal empowerment. These designations represent the changing consciousness of every age; they are not set or definitive. Labels ultimately record rather than only define. They preserve tales of resistance, resiliency, affirmation, and pride, therefore creating a living record of queer life. Every term turns into evidence of the continuous fight for acceptance and the continuing potency of self-naming.

CONCLUSION

The discourse of queer language in *Felix Ever After* transforms linguistic stigma into affirmation, demonstrating that words are not passive reflections of identity but active instruments in its creation. Through the frameworks of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, this study shows how language functions simultaneously as a mechanism of regulation and a medium of liberation. Butler's theory of performativity illuminates Felix's process of self-naming and pronoun negotiation as performative acts that constitute identity through repetition and rearticulation. Foucault's concept of discourse and power explains how these linguistic acts resist the heteronormative and racial hierarchies that define who may speak and be heard.

Kacen Callender's novel situates language at the heart of queer becoming. By reclaiming words like *queer* and *demiboy*, the text exemplifies how speech can undo stigma and generate new modes of belonging. The intersectional dimensions of Felix's experience his Blackness, queerness, and trans identity further reveal that empowerment emerges from navigating multiple sites of marginalization rather than transcending them. *Felix Ever After* demonstrates that language is not only descriptive but world-making. It constructs possibilities for visibility, care, and resistance, showing that the act of naming oneself is an act of reclaiming power. In this sense, YA literature becomes more than

representation it becomes a discursive space where identity is continually performed, contested, and redefined. Future research might extend this analysis to multilingual or digital contexts, exploring how queer lexicons evolve globally across cultures and platforms, further affirming language as the living archive of queer resilience.[*]

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