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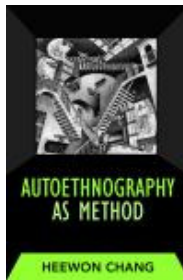
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**Autoethnography as Method**

[Heewon Chang](#)

230 pp. / 6.00 x 9.00 / Mar, 2008

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This methods book will guide the reader through the process of conducting and producing an autoethnographic study through the understanding of self, other, and culture. Readers will be encouraged to follow hands-on, though not prescriptive, steps in data collection, analysis, and interpretation with self-reflective prewriting exercises and self-narrative writing exercises to produce their own autoethnographic work. Chang offers a variety of techniques for gathering data on the self—from diaries to culture grams to interviews with others—and shows how to transform this information into a study that looks for the connection with others present in a diverse world. She shows how the autoethnographic process promotes self-reflection, understanding of multicultural others, qualitative inquiry, and narrative writing. Samples of published autoethnographies provide exemplars for the novice researcher to follow.

" Chang offers new researchers and novice anthropologists an excellent starting place. Her book can facilitate the journey for those exploring research practices and deciding how, and in what capacity, to intentionally center themselves in their work. Chang's writing style is clear, and her tone makes the book accessible to nonacademics. Chang clearly expresses the conceptual and methodological understanding of the self as a window into cultural experience, and the self-transformative power of this process. "

- Kate Mullin, Qualitative Health Research

*"In keeping with the broad view of autoethnography espoused in the book, Chang provides a brief description of a wide variety of data collection techniques, including strategies for collecting personal memories, conducting self-observation, and gathering 'external' data (such as interviews and textual artifacts). The methods chapters cover a lot of ground, blending strategies for autobiographical recall and reflection with more traditional qualitative social science methods. One relatively unique feature of this book is a set of 'writing assignments' included in the methods chapters, designed to facilitate the collection of self-data and self reflection—and supplemented by nearly 50 pages of appended examples at the end of the book. "*

- Leon Anderson, Qualitative Research

*" Richly nuanced and shedding new light on the varied and often quite fluid ways in which self and others connected to self interact, connect, and disconnect within the realm of culture, Chang's text invites researchers to include themselves as a research focus and to consider autoethnography as a tool to explore their own perspectives and to arrive at a deeper understanding of others. Those who are willing to take the first step will find a treasure trove of writing exercises and specific strategies to choose from. The result might be a short reflection on a single topic or a book length study that interprets one's life experiences from a cultural perspective. Autoethnography not only offers a way to make sense of one's own life, but it also has the potential to illuminate key themes and common understandings that can lead to a deeper appreciation of the diversity and complexity of human interaction. "*

- Carol Kennett, International Journal of Multicultural Education

*"Heewong Chang's Autoethnography as Method is a superb introduction to the genre for qualitative researchers. Chang foregrounds the work by eloquently describing the complex interrelationship between culture and identity, then provides intriguing ways of reflecting on and exploring one's self through memory work, introspective analysis, and evocative writing. Chang demystifies the processes of creating autoethnography by providing readers clear guidance, rigorous expectations, and poignant examples from her own life story. This book is essential reading for both novices and seasoned researchers in the field."*

- Johnny Saldaña, Arizona State University

*"This book is written by a competent ethnographer who has studied the role of the self in research, and the relationship of self to culture, and desires to provide that knowledge to those who want to include the self in their ethnographic research. This book will be useful for*

*ethnographers who work from a traditional realist perspective and who want to reflect on personal experience in a systematic way. It is especially helpful for those who desire a methods cookbook to guide them. It thoroughly and insightfully covers all the steps for doing the kind of cultural analysis that includes experiences of the self that Chang advocates."*

- Carolyn Ellis, Biography

*"The author's writing is so clear and accessible that her first chapters could easily be used as an introduction to the entire self-narrative phenomenon. Beyond Chang's excellent overview, her specific intention is to provide a guidebook on how to conceive and construct a viable autoethnographic study, with detailed sections successively focusing on initial planning, data, collection, management, analysis, and interpretation. In the process she provides a usable bibliography, practical exercises, a schematic chart for visually organizing a self-study and a model example of an autoethnography. Useful as both an overview of a widely far-flung field and as a workbook for constructing a personal autoethnography. Highly recommended."*

- CHOICE Magazine

# Autoethnography

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Autoethnography** is a form or method of social research that explores the researcher's personal experience and connects this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings.<sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup> It differs from ethnography—a qualitative research method in which a researcher uses participant observation and interviews in order to gain a deeper understanding of a group's culture—in that autoethnography focuses on the writer's subjective experience rather than the beliefs and practices of others. Autoethnography is now being widely used (though controversial) in a variety of academic disciplines such as performance studies, anthropology, sociology, and communication, and applied fields such as management studies.

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## Autoethnography as a qualitative research method

### Definition

According to Maréchal (2010), “autoethnography is a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing” (p. 43). Another well-known autoethnographer, Carolyn Ellis (2004) defines it as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (p. xix). However, it is not easy to reach a consensus on the term’s definition. For instance, in the 1970s, autoethnography was more narrowly defined as “insider ethnography,” referring to studies of the (culture of) group of which the researcher is a member (Hayano, 1979). Nowadays, however, as Ellingson and Ellis (2008) point out, “the meanings and applications of autoethnography have evolved in a manner that makes precise definition difficult” (p. 449).

### Epistemological/Theoretical ground

Autoethnography differs from the traditional ethnography, a social research method employed by

anthropologists and sociologists, in that it embraces and foregrounds the researcher's subjectivity rather than repressing it. While ethnography tends to be understood as a qualitative method in the 'social sciences' that describes human social phenomena based on fieldwork, autoethnographers are themselves the primary participant/subject of the research in the process of writing personal stories and narratives. However, the line between ethnography and autoethnography is not clear. Autoethnography "as a form of ethnography," Ellis (2004) writes, is "part *auto* or self and part *ethno* or culture" (p. 31) and "something different from both of them, greater than its parts" (p. 32). In other words, as Ellingson and Ellis (2008) put it, "whether we call a work an *autoethnography* or an *ethnography* depends as much on the claims made by authors as anything else" (p. 449).

In embracing personal thoughts, feelings, stories, and observations as a way of understanding the social context they are studying, autoethnographers are also shedding light on their total interaction with that setting by making their every emotion and thought visible to the reader. This is much the opposite of theory-driven, hypothesis-testing research methods that are based on the positivist epistemology. In this sense, Ellingson and Ellis (2008) see autoethnography as a social constructionist project that rejects the deep-rooted binary oppositions between the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others, art and science, and the personal and the political (pp. 450-459).

Auto ethnographers, therefore, tend to dismiss the concept of social research as an objective and neutral knowledge produced by scientific methods, which can be characterized and achieved by detachment of the researcher from the researched. Autoethnography, in this regard, is a critical "response to the alienating effects on both researchers and audiences of impersonal, passionless, abstract claims of truth generated by such research practices and clothed in exclusionary scientific discourse" (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 450). Anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997) also argues that autoethnography is a postmodernist construct:

The concept of autoethnography...synthesizes both a postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question. The term has a double sense - referring either to the ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest. Thus, either a self- (auto-) ethnography or an autobiographical (auto-) ethnography can be signaled by "autoethnography." (p. 2)

Also, doing autoethnographic work, many researchers attempt to more fully realize the idea of reflexivity by which the researcher can be aware of his/her role in and relationship to the research. An autoethnography is a reflexive account of one's own experiences situated in culture. In other words, in addition to describing and looking critically at one's own experience, an autoethnography is also a cultural practice. For example, Stacy Holman Jones (2005), in *(M)othering loss: Telling adoption stories, telling performativity*, talks about her own experiences with infertility and adoption as they are linked to cultural attitudes about transnational adoption, adoption, infertility, and how we talk about these issues at different moments in time. She does so in order to understand her own story but also to change some of the perceptions around these issues.

## Types, areas, and approaches of autoethnography

Since autoethnography is a broad and ambiguous "category that encompasses a wide array of practices" (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, pp. 449-450), autoethnographies "vary in their emphasis on the writing and research process (*graphy*), culture (*ethnos*), and self (*auto*)" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). According to Ellingson and Ellis (2008), autoethnographers recently began to make distinction between two types of autoethnography; one is analytic autoethnography and the other is evocative autoethnography.

Analytic autoethnographers focus on developing theoretical explanations of broader social phenomena, whereas evocative autoethnographers focus on narrative presentations that open up conversations and evoke emotional responses. (p. 445)

A special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (Vol 35, Issue 4, August 2006)[1] (<http://jce.sagepub.com/content/35/4>) contains several articles on the diverse definitions and uses of autoethnography. An autoethnography can be analytical (see Leon Anderson), written in the style of a novel (see Carolyn Ellis's methodological novel *The Ethnographic I*), performative (see the work of Norman K. Denzin, and the anthology *The Ends of Performance*) and many things in between. Symbolic interactionists are particularly interested in this method, and examples of autoethnography can be found in a number of scholarly journals, such as *Qualitative Inquiry*, the *Journal of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interactionism*, the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, and the *Journal of Humanistic Ethnography*. It is not considered "mainstream" as a method by most positivist or traditional ethnographers, yet this approach to qualitative inquiry is rapidly increasing in popularity, as can be seen by the large number of scholarly papers on autoethnography presented at annual conferences such as the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, and the Advances in Qualitative Methods conference sponsored by the International Institute of Qualitative Methodology. The spread of autoethnography into other fields is also growing, and a recent special issue of the journal *Culture and Organization* (Volume 13, Issue 3, Summer 2007) explores the idea of organizational autoethnography.

Autoethnography in performance studies acknowledges the researcher and the audience as equally as important to the research. Portraying the performed 'self' through writing then becomes an aim to create an embodied experience for the researcher and the reader. This area acknowledges the inward and outward experience of ethnography in experiencing the subjectivity of the author. Audience members may experience the work of ethnography through reading/hearing/feeling (inward) and then have a reaction to it (outward), maybe by emotion. Ethnography and performance work together to invoke emotion in the reader.

Higher education is also featuring more as the contextual backdrop for autoethnography probably due to the convenience of researching one's own organisation (see Sambrook, Stewart, & Roberts, 2008; Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009; Doloriert & Sambrook, 2011). Such contributions explore the autoethnographer as a researcher/ teacher/ administrator doing scholarly work and/or as an employee working in Higher Education. Recent contributions include Humphreys' (2005) exploration of career change, Pelias' (2003) performance narrative telling of the competing pressures faced by an early career academic and Sparkes' (2007) heartfelt story of an academic manager during the stressful Research Assessment Exercise (2008). There are several contributions that are insightful for the student autoethnographer including Sambrook, et al. (2008) who explore power and emotion in the student-supervisor relationship, Doloriert and Sambrook (2009) who explore the ethics of the student 'auto'reveal, Rambo (2007) and her experiences with review boards, and finally Doloriert & Sambrook (2011) discussion on managing creativity and innovation within a PhD thesis.

Another recent extension of autoethnographic method involves the use of collaborative approaches to writing, sharing, and analyzing personal stories of experience. This approach is also labeled "collaborative autobiography" (Lapadat, 2009), and has been used in teaching qualitative research methods to university students.

Autoethnography is also used in film as a variant of the standard documentary film. It differs from the traditional documentary film, in that its subject is the filmmaker himself or herself. An autoethnography typically relates the life experiences and thoughts, views and beliefs of the filmmaker, and as such it is often considered to be rife with bias and image manipulation. Unlike other documentaries, autoethnographies do not usually make a claim of objectivity. An important text on autoethnography in filmmaking is Catherine Russell's *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Duke UP, 1999). For Autoethnographic artists, see also

Jesse Cornplanter, Kimberly Dark, Peter Pitseolak, Ernest Spybuck.

## Autoethnographer as a storyteller/narrator

In different academic disciplines (particularly communication studies and performance studies), the term autoethnography itself is contested and is sometimes used interchangeably with or referred to as personal narrative or autobiography. Autoethnographic methods include journaling, looking at archival records - whether institutional or personal, interviewing one's own self, and using writing to generate a self-cultural understandings. Reporting an autoethnography might take the form of a traditional journal article or scholarly book, performed on the stage, or be seen in the popular press. Autoethnography can include direct (and participant) observation of daily behavior; unearthing of local beliefs and perception and recording of life history (e.g. kinship, education, etc.); and in-depth interviewing: “The analysis of data involves interpretation on the part of the researcher” (Hammersley in Genzuk). However, rather than a portrait of the Other (person, group, culture), the difference is that the researcher is constructing a portrait of the self.

Autoethnography can also be “associated with narrative inquiry and autobiography” (Maréchal, 2010, p. 43) in that it foregrounds experience and story as a meaning making enterprise. Maréchal argues that “narrative inquiry can provoke identification, feelings, emotions, and dialogue” (p. 45). Furthermore, the increased focus on incorporating autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry into qualitative research indicates a growing concern for how the style of academic writing informs the types of claims made. As Laurel Richardson articulates “I consider writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about a topic...form and content are inseparable” (2000, p. 923). For many researchers, experimenting with alternative forms of writing and reporting, including autoethnography, personal narrative, performative writing, layered accounts and writing stories, provides a way to create multiple layered accounts of a research study, creating not only the opportunity to create new and provocative claims but also the ability to do so in a compelling manner. Ellis (2004) says that autoethnographers advocate “the conventions of literary writing and expression” in that “autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot” (p. xix).

According to Bochner and Ellis (2006), an autoethnographer is “first and foremost a communicator and a storyteller.” In other words, autoethnography “depicts people struggling to overcome adversity” and shows “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles” (p. 111). Therefore, according to them, autoethnography is “ethical practice” and “gifts” that has a caregiving function (p. 111). In essence autoethnography is a story that re-enacts an experience by which people find meaning and through that meaning are able to be okay with that experience. A prime example of autoethnography occurs when a family member or someone close to the family dies. In this painful experience people often wonder how they will go about living without this person and what it will be like. In this scenario, especially in religious homes, one often asks “Why God?” thinking that with an answer as to why the person died they can go about living. Others, wanting to be able to offer up an explanation to make the person feel better, generally say things such as “At least they are in a better place.” or “God wanted him/her home.” People, who are never really left with an explanation as to why, generally fall back on the reason that “it was their time to go” and through this somewhat “explanation” find themselves able to move on and keep living life. Over time when looking back at the experience of someone close to you dying, one may find that through this hardship they became a stronger more independent person, or that they grew closer to other family members. With these realizations, the person has actually made sense of and has become fine with the tragic experience that occurred. And through this autoethnography is performed.

## Evaluating autoethnography

## Resonance

Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, professor of ethics and education, defines resonance as “the sense of commonality existing between an audience member’s life-experience and [. . .] the teller’s narrative” (32).

When discussing writing, in Robert Coles' *The Call of Stories*, William Carlos Williams said, “[T]he more palpable the connection between the story and the reader’s story, the better the chance that something will happen” (120). For Williams, it was his own experience as a doctor that gave him his insight regarding the power of story. He felt that a story could reach and affect listeners/readers when the story resonated with them: “When I try to get them [patients] to take medicine or change their habits, I use my own life for a while; I tell them about my medical problems, or my wife’s, or I tell them about others I’ve treated, their struggles” (105).

It isn't possible for every story to resonate with every member of an audience, to hold true in every case, yet autoethnographic research does aim for validity and generalizability.

## Validity and generalizability

Carolyn Ellis writes, “In autoethnographic work, I look at validity in terms of what happens to readers as well as to research participants and researchers [. . .] our work seeks verisimilitude ” (124).

For Ellis, autoethnographic research seeks generalizability not just from the respondents but also from the readers (195) and intends to open up rather than close down conversation (22).

## Narrative truth

“When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. These truths don’t reveal the past ‘as it actually was,’ aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences” (Devault 261).

## Contribution on social change

The benefits of autoethnography are the ways in which research of such a personal nature might give us insight into problems often overlooked in culture—issues such as the nature of identity, race, sexuality, child abuse, eating disorders, life in academia, and the like. In addition to helping the researcher make sense of his or her individual experience, autoethnographies are political in nature as they engage their readers in important political issues and often ask us to consider things, or do things differently. Chang (2008) argues that autoethnography offers a research method friendly to researchers and readers because autoethnographic texts are engaging and enable researchers to gain a cultural understanding of self in relation to others, on which cross-cultural coalition can be built between self and others.

## Critiques of autoethnography

Some qualitative researchers have expressed their concerns about the worth and validity of autoethnography. Robert Krizek contributed a chapter to *Expressions of Ethnography* (<http://www.sunypress.edu/details.asp?id=60804>) in which he expresses concern about the possibility for autoethnography to devolve into narcissism. Krizek goes on to suggest that autoethnography, no matter how personal, should always connect to some larger element of life. Nicholas Holt's *Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story* ([http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/2\\_1/html/holt.html](http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/2_1/html/holt.html)) describes the

potential difficulties associated with evaluation of autoethnographic works. While advocating autoethnography for its value, Chang (2008) warns autoethnographers of pitfalls that they should avoid in doing autoethnography: "(1) excessive focus on self in isolation from others; (2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation; (3) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source; (4) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; and (5) inappropriate application of the label autoethnography" (pp. 54).

## Notes

- <sup>^</sup> Maréchal, Garance. (2010). Autoethnography. In Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos & Elden Wiebe (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of case study research* (Vol. 2, pp. 43-45). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
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Stacy Holman Jones

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## Extract

Autoethnography is a theoretical, methodological, and (primarily) textual approach that seeks to experience, reflect on, and represent through evocation the relationship among self and culture, individual and collective experience, and identity politics and appeals for social justice. In investigating these relationships, autoethnography fuses personal narrative and sociocultural exploration. Autoethnographic inquiry and writing has long been practiced by journalists and novelists, historians and biographers, travelers and journal writers. However, development of the theoretical, methodological, and textual concerns and conventions of autoethnography among researchers and scholars in the human disciplines is more recent. Autoethnography, as the term suggests, is closely aligned with ethnography, which in turn is most notably associated with anthropological explorations of cultural practices beginning in the twentieth century (though ethnographic writing dates to the sixteenth century and perhaps earlier). Such explorations focused on cultures as whole systems, subsuming individual and personal experience within larger, often monolithic structures of kinship and interaction. As practitioners of ethnography began to question the possibility and politics of western writers and scholars' claims to objectively and authoritatively investigate and represent exotic "others," ethnographic ... [log in or subscribe to read full text](#)

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## Autoethnography Exercise

Autoethnography is your view of your own Cultural background and the values and interests that come from it. It is important to what we will call “positioning” in terms of the country-specific culture we

experience in a short-term course abroad. Positioning refers to the perspective, or lens, that each of

us brings to our observations and interpretation of another culture. From knowing our position vis-à-vis another culture, we can better be aware of how our views and backgrounds might affect what we see and the way we interpret what we see.

Please write on the front and back of this page about your own cultural background, using the following areas as a guide:

E~1 Your religious background; how important it is to you; values from that background.

i~1 Your cultural/ethnic background; how important it is to you; values from that background.

i~1 Rituals or traditions that you celebrate as part of your culture or your family. Describe what is important to you about this tradition or custom, and why?

J~1 Do you belong to some cultural or social group that you strongly identify with? i~1 Political leanings: do you have strong feelings about certain political issues?

i~1 What values do you have that you think are part of U.S. history and culture? How strongly do you feel about these values? What do you do when these values are attacked?

i~1 Your lifestyle: in what ways do you think your lifestyle is “typically American?”

i~1 Interests and hobbies: course-specific ideas, such as have you ever studied art, dance, theater or film, or performed in a play or dance or attended performances?

i~1 Brainstorm words and phrases that would describe your likes and dislikes, your identity, or your values.

£1 Have you ever experienced prejudice against who you are, or against a group to which you belong?

£1 What are your favorite American stories?

### Course- and Country-Specific Example: Egypt

£~1 Without thinking too much, write down all the words and phrases you have associated with the Middle East, Egypt, Arabs, and/or Muslims. These may be from media, movies, books, or your own personal experience.

i~1 What background do you have in Middle Eastern history or culture?

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# auto-ethnography

- Posted by [Christina Houen](#) on May 17, 2010 at 10:00am
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In my writing, I use auto-ethnography as my methodology. I look at the lives of others, in the culture they are embedded in, through the lens of my own life and experience. For instance, in my PhD thesis, titled: *The origami of desire: unfolding and refolding the desiring self (f)*, I used my own life experience in an exploration of desire, in the Deleuzian sense of the force that informs all life. I wove in a study of medieval Heian Japanese women's writing, because the extraordinary body of writing created by these court women in a polygamous, hierarchical society, explored the themes of desire, love, loss and longing. Many of their works, including the world's first psychological novel, *The Tale of Genji*, outshone the writings of the powerful men who controlled their lives, and are still read, translated and adapted today.

If you write auto-ethnography, or are interested in it, I'd love to hear from you.

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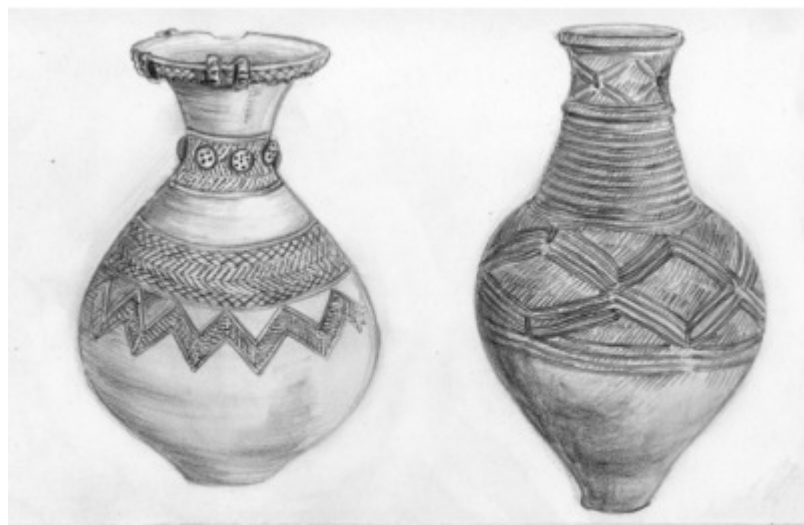
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