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Mine/His/Hers/Ours/Theirs/+/VoiceS

Reflecting on Polyvocal Research

Writing through Practice

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The first polyvocal text to which I contributed in 2015 took the form of a dialogue in which I presented three aspects of research-creation, each intersected with a written and pictorial intervention by a research-creation practitioner.

This idea comes from an observation that Laurel Richardson had already made 25 years ago about the boring nature of qualitative research reports. This idea comes also from an interest in the performative turn in the social sciences and humanities, particularly the collage which allows, as Butler-Kisber wrote “ Novel juxtapositions and/or connections, and gaps or spaces, can reveal both the intended and the unintended. “ This idea ultimately comes from an ethic of integrity and equality toward those who participate in a writing project.

My polyvocal adventure continued with Cynthia Noury, who will present our third and most recent writing project on research-creation. Before doing so, I will present some considerations on the concept of "voice" in qualitative research writing as an a posteriori theorization.

The « Voice » Question

Voice has been an issue in the social sciences and humanities for more than half a century.

« [...] a range of approaches, including poststructuralism, feminism, and various strands of postmodernism, call attention to the many intrinsic tensions that exist between the voices of researchers and the voices emerging from the data. » (Given, 2008)

« [...] qualitative investigation demands explicit consideration of the power relationships that exist between researchers and their “ subjects.” » (Given, 2008)



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The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods teaches us that as soon as qualitative research was the object of reflexivity, that is, at the turn of postpositivism, "voice" became an issue. Not only the voice of the researcher, but the voice of the people who were the object of the qualitative research and, eventually, the people who participate in the action research or intervention. The main issues were the expression of the researcher's subjectivity for one part and the power relation he/she has with the people who are the object of the research on the other.

In Former [(Post)Positivist] Eras

« [...] the “voice from nowhere / voice from everywhere” [...] the “god’s-eye view” of inquiry.» (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003)

« [...] the “pure presence” of representation.» (Lather, 2007)

- > Impersonal writing : “it is decided” or “the discovery was made.”

« Authors who avoid using the first-person pronoun in academic writing seem to believe that it interferes with the impression of objectivity and impersonality they seek to create. » (Given, 2008)

« [...] to write in the distanced and abstracted voice of the disembodied “I”.» (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011)



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The question of the voice did not even arise, it was the reign of the transcendence, the research was made by itself, as long as the researcher followed rigorously the protocol dictated by the experimental science, imported by the social and human sciences. On the one hand, the research data were quantities, free of the uncertainties linked to symbolic values, and when data were statements, the words that composed them were reduced to categories stemming from a meticulously constructed theoretical framework and were quantified. On the other hand, the results of the sophisticated statistical calculations were speaking by themselves, the researcher only had to write them down, any trace of enunciation having to be carefully concealed. This was the reign of objectivity and abstraction, and this reign continues to this day through the peer review panels that award grants and validate publications that are essential for the researcher's career progression.

Within the Interpretivist Paradigm

« [...] voice can speak the truth of consciousness and experience. »
(Jackson & Mazzei, 2009)

« Writing in the first-person voice involves using the first-person pronoun (I, we, me, us, my, our) to represent your ideas. » (Given, 2008)

« Voice has multiple dimensions: First, there is the voice of the author. Second, there is the presentation of the voices of one's respondents within the text. A third dimension appears when the self is the subject of the inquiry. » (Hertz, 1997)



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This paradigm rests largely on a conception of the knowledge resulting from phenomenology which comes initially for Husserl from the experience which is accessible by a return on oneself, following the epoche, the bracketing of the knowledge of science, then on the embodiment with Merleau-Ponty which grants a great importance to the perceptions, to the feelings and even to the emotions. This is how the "voice" arises, which is the expression of the person by herself, the "I" who does the research, who interprets the collected data. Interpretation is the recognition of the symbolic dimension and of the plurality and diversity of points of view on the world. Rosanna Hertz distinguishes three "voices": that of the researcher who does the ethnography, that of the answers he has collected from the respondents and finally that of the autoethnography where the two positions are combined within the same person.

The Impossible rendering of Other's Voice

« [...] individual voices being made explicit with someone (normally the researcher) interpreting from them an integrated collective account » (Bowden & Green, 2010)

« [...] can any researcher validly claim to have revealed the "true" voice of the researched anyway? In an absolute sense, it is not possible. The expression of voice is idiographic, that is, located in a given time and place. Hence, voice is both dynamic and subjective. What is accessed by the researcher is always a filtered voice. » (Bowden & Green, 2010)



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John Bowden and Pamela Green remind us that it is illusory to think that a voice can render, reveal the "true voice" of other people, because their voices are both irreducibly singular and irremediably "situated" as Donna Haraway has so well shown. The researcher can only interpret them, filter them through his own subjectivity.

Give Voice To

«[...] to people who are marginalized, disadvantaged, excluded, or vulnerable » (Schwandt & Gates, 2018)

« [...] to those who have been silenced by dominant discourses » (Leavy, 2014)

« [...] having readers “hear” their informants — permitting readers to hear the exact words (and, occasionally, the paralinguistic cues, the lapses, pauses, stops, starts, and reformulations) of the informants. » (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011)



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Critical approaches, partly from cultural studies, feminist, queer, colonial, etc. aim at empowering marginalized, excluded or vulnerable people by giving them a voice instead of the researcher speaking for them. There is a renunciation of the researcher's power and the privilege associated with it that is necessary in order not to perpetuate domination. Thus the researcher renounces to correct, to smooth, to make acceptable to the norms of the academy the voice of the persons objects of the research, by including them as it is. This is the beginning of polyvocality.

If the World is messy

« If the world is complex and messy, then at least some of the time we're going to have to give up on simplicities. [...] if we want to think about the messes of reality at all then we're going to have to teach ourselves to think, to practice, to relate, and to know in new ways. » (Law, 2004)

« The need, then, is for heterogeneity and variation. » (Law, 2004)

« Along with this crisis of representation [...], qualitative researchers have recognized the dangerous assumptions in trying to represent a single truth seemingly articulated by a single voice and have therefore pluralized voice, intending to highlight the polyvocal and multiple nature of voice within contexts that are themselves messy and constrained.» (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009)



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Faced with the realization that the world is complex and messy, John Law advocates a change in qualitative research practice. Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei, who have written extensively on voice, recognize the powerlessness of a single voice, even the best trained, the most skilled and knowledgeable, to capture the complexity of a phenomena, it needs the plurality and diversity of voices.

Polyvocality

« Such ways of writing can create spaces for many and varied voices to rub up against each other in interaction and juxtaposition as they whiz around, by and through each other. These texts then become living and moving, changeable, experimental creatures. » (Kohn, 2000)

« [...] polyvocality does not only have to mean resorting to different individual or group perspectives, but can also be applied to make sense of the multiple voices that speak through any individual's lived experience. » (Saukko, 2010)

« [...] creating open texts that include many voices, views, languages in use and thus denying a final authorial resolution. The possibility is that the relative indeterminacy of [such a] text allows a spectrum of actualizations. » (Byrne, 2017)



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Polyvocal writing requires an adapted semiotic where each voice is characterized by a singular typography and a particular layout on the page.

Polyvocal writing is a writing of becoming, a writing that happens, insofar as the voices listen to each other, answer each other, relaunch each other, rocket and bounce, pile up and overlap, polyvocal writing is an experience of life together.

The polyvocal writing can be the fact of only one person. I give two cases of figure. The first one is when the voices cohabit in the same space-time and are those of different personae, for example the voice of the emotions felt, the voice of the child in us and the voice that writes his thesis, which allows differentiated writing: embodied for one, creative for the other and academic for the last. A second case is when the voices belong to different times, for example an initial voice that formulates its thesis project, a second voice that writes its thesis and a last voice a few years later that revises certain aspects put forward during the writing in view of what happened in the field and the reflexivity that one is then able to deploy.

In short, polyvocal writing produces open texts, without resolution and whose indeterminacy allows a plurality of interpretations.

An Example of Polyvocal Writing

– (Re)Visiting Our Previous Contributions for Research-Creation [as Practice] — A Performative and Polyvocal Writing Project –

(Noury & Paquin, 2020)



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Louis-Claude Paquin and myself (Cynthia Noury) have been doing research collaboratively for many years trying to better understand and document the practice of research-creation in the academia. The article we are using as an example for this presentation is entitled “(Re)Visiting Our Previous Contributions for Research-Creation [as Practice] — A Performative and Polyvocal Writing Project.” The prepublished version was made available online (lcpaquin.com) in the fall 2020.

Article Overview

(Re)Visiting Our Previous Contributions for Research-Creation [as Practice]
Noury and Paquin, 2020

(Re)Visiting Our Previous Contributions for Research-Creation [as Practice] — A Performative and Polyvocal Writing Project

Prepublication version — Fall 2020

Authors

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The project: Revisiting our recent French language contributions to research-creation in order to reach English readers. **The process:** Re/Writing on/as research with a play on polyvocality. **The outcome:** Yet unknown, unfolding by iterations from writing this paragraph to the last, while leaving traces of several of the states and layered voices that were part of this performative journey.

This is where we I start.

INTRODUCTION Louis-Claude Paquin has been a professor at the *École des médias de Université du Québec à Montréal* (UQAM) for 25 years. I (Cynthia Noury) am a communication research-creation doctoral candidate there and he happens to be my research supervisor. Over the last few years, we have been collaborating on many research projects trying to better understand the forms research-creation can take, both theoretically and practically. More importantly, we have been experimenting with ways of articulating research and creation at the heart, as well as at the borders, of “R-C.” Through this article, we will revisit our previous contributions in order to outline a vision in the making of research-creation [as practice] and hopefully push it further as part of a multilayered/polyvocal writing as research collaboration (see [POLYVOCAL WRITING]).¹

CN My first draft will be submitted to Louis-Claude to add up to with only one constraint: keeping it shortish. We’ll bulk it up from there, as layered traces of this process and its temporality will be were left for you to read. We could have chosen other/better strategies for this polyvocal writing project, but this was a practical one as Louis-Claude was busy with other commitments at the time and I felt somewhat more comfortable tackling the bulk of translations awaiting us. Here I started my journey starting at the blank screen before me in all its possibilities, writing from and through theory, but also about the process itself.

[...A few weeks later into collaborative writing...]

LCP What a good idea to reiterate through writing our common, intersecting and singular reflections on research-creation! It’s also enjoyable to get back on the track of polyvocal performativity, which we have put in practice in previous publications.

I was first surprised at the form you gave to the paragraphs of the text: first a framed title and then a square block of text. A protocol. In doing so, you left out propositional writing which is the norm in qualitative research for a cut-out writing, possibly disjointed, which allows you to avoid reconciling divergences. It’s very poststructuralist. I like it.

¹ Accordingly, this article will revisit and translate ideas and segments presented in previous French contributions (both common and individual), with reference to the original publications or works in progress.

5

LCP:



Louis-Claude Paquin is a professor at École des médias de l’Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and a founding member of Hexagram, an international research-creation network in media arts, design, technology and digital culture. After having long taught and studied theories and intensive multimedia creative practices, he teaches epistemology and the methodology of research-creation. His recent work focuses on the cartography of the literature on research-creation, as well as on the singular research-creation practices of Hexagram members. He is currently preparing a book entitled “Face de la recherche-creation: six cycles heuristiques,” as well as working on performative research and its declinations. Many of his contributions are available online under a Creative Commons license (cqpauin.com).

CN:



At the time of writing this article, Cynthia Noury is pursuing a research-creation doctorate in communication (UQAM) dedicated to media street interviewing. She explores the issues related to this practice from both a theoretical and a creative perspective, notably through a series of experimental radio performances. She co-hosts the RED podcast on research-creation (red.hexagram.ca) and has collaborated in several international projects and research groups on this practice, including the development of a Toolkit for promoting responsible conduct of research in research-creation. She is also a lecturer at UQAM’s École des médias and a Hexagram Network member.

Both pictures come from Olivier Gélian Richard’s research-creation project *Photo(s) d’idéologie* (2017).

(Re)Visiting Our Previous Contributions for Research-Creation [as Practice]
Noury and Paquin, 2020

CN Writing this paragraph made me realize that we had inadvertently used the “what is” formula to describe research-creation in this text and others previously. How can we go beyond this kind of automatism and work with this paradox, productively? In this instance, I chose to reuse it voluntarily, marking all occurrences in dark green and, eventually, playing with them.

Cartography Part 1

CARTOGRAPHIC FRAMEWORK We thus adopted an inverse epistemic posture, inspired by poststructuralism, and chose to display the diversity of theoretical perspectives on research-creation on the same plane, presenting them as a “cartography” to preserve their singularity (Paquin et Noury, 2018a). After “mining” into a large body of texts looking for different occurrences (e.g., research-creation, artistic research), we selected relevant excerpts, gathering them around clusters of issues emerging from the literature, our own backgrounds and personalities as “cartographers” knowledgeably influencing this process. We allowed various maps to emerge from the data we had in front of us, organizing multiple, and sometimes conflicting, theoretical visions of research-creation rather than constraining them (see *Figure 1* as an example). Thus, “living and thinking as a cartographer require[d] us to renounce the categories of essence in order to promote an analysis that is sensitive to both the immanence and contingency of reality” (Sibertin-Blanc, 2010, p. 229).²



Figure 1. Map of French language research-creation literature produced in March 2018 as part of the “Research-Creation Cartography” project.

² Our translation, the original citation is: “[...] vivre et penser en cartographe impose de renoncer aux catégories de l’essence, pour promouvoir une analyse sensible à la fois à l’immanence et à la contingence du réel” (Sibertin-Blanc, 2010, p. 229).

11

LCP: In my teaching with postgraduate students, I use heuristic map exercises recurrently, giving way to a great variety of results.



Kesso Salmer (2015)



Margarita Medina Fernández (2016)



Florence Vicker (2017)

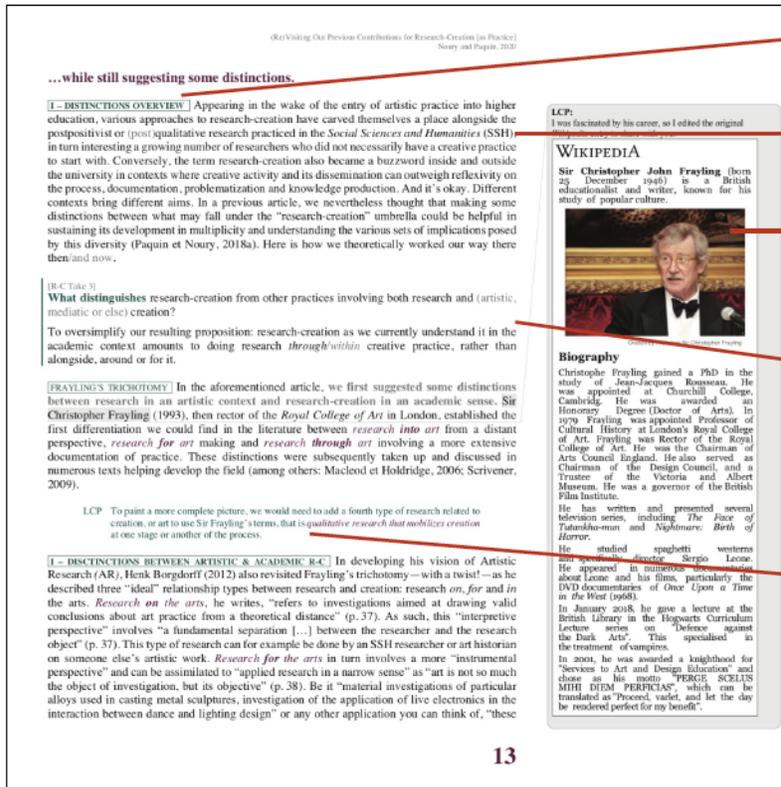


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Having both published on research-creation for over five years already—mostly in French—we decided to write an English article providing an overview of our work. I took charge of writing the first draft of the text after we loosely discussed what we wanted to include in it. As I was already used to performative research and writing, I naturally included traces of the research and writing process within the article. I first wrote the main body of the text in a standard paragraph form, but then started opening up spaces for reactions and dialogues, directly asking questions to Louis-Claude.

When he got back to me, he had used Word’s comment function filling up the margins of the pages with complementary information, examples from students illustrating what we were talking about, images, etc. From there, the text evolved and became this nice experimental polyvocal “monster” or “creature” that Louis-Claude referred to earlier on. It is now a 57-page text, that we think is really interesting... but quite hard to publish—as you could guess—because it goes outside every possible guideline you could imagine.

Some Notable Features



Section tags

Regular paragraphs

Margins used as a space to provide examples

"Takes on R-C" progressively complexifying the main concept developed in the text

Dialogues between the authors



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Here is a caption of page 13 in order to illustrate some notable and unusual features of the article. First, you notice a Wikipedia entry in the margin that Louis-Claude recreated to present an interesting author with regards to our work. It also acts as a sort of allusion to what people would spontaneously do in the course of reading an article that is Googling multiple elements to find out more. The right margin is also used as a space to provide examples and open up the reflection throughout the article.

As in regular articles, we have subtitles, but we also have section tags for each paragraph for easier thematic navigation.

In this paper, we are trying to better understand and explain research-creation without defining it. This goal is part of our larger research endeavour to understand research-creation in its complexity—that is as a set of diverse singular practices—rather than trying to encompass it in a single and limiting definition. As such, what we did in the text was to provide successive "takes" on research-creation to show how our understanding of it progressed throughout our reflexive journey. In the end we provided a "final" take on research-creation that is still very open and by no means a definition.

In green, we also have some dialogues that ended up getting inserted in the text. In these, we discuss about the writing and research process, sometimes disagree about things between ourselves or with the authors, ask for clarifications, raise questions or limitations, etc.

Polyvocal Layers I

©(Visiting Our Previous Contributions for Research-Creation [in Practice])
Noury and Paquin, 2020

R-C LITERATURE MAPS Over a two-year period (2017-2019), we produced five working literature maps on *recherche-création*, *Artistic Research*, *Practice-Based Research*, *Practice-Led Research* and *Practice-as-Research* as part of the "Cartographie de la recherche-création / Research-Creation Cartography" project.⁹ Along this journey, we identified and mapped many issues addressed in the literature, including the characteristics and nature of the knowledge produced, the theory/practice articulation, the methodological and evaluation challenges, the epistemological posture adopted by researcher-creators, the documentation, publication and dissemination of the works, research ethics, etc. The maps were presented in PDF format as well as printed on large scales posters which were brought out to events as to offer an opportunity for physical engagement with their scale. This was our first attempt¹⁰ at putting in practice a cartographic scheme revealing:

"[...] a 'spatialized' and 'spatializing' way of thinking [...] a way of thinking about irreducible differences rather than unification under principles and laws; a way of thinking that grasps phenomena only by their multiple ways of dispersing themselves in external relationships, and not by bringing them together in the interiority of an essence; a way of thinking that affirms the distribution of distances and the coexistence of heterogeneity rather than their subsumption under relationships of identity" (Siberin-Blanc, 2010, p. 225).¹⁰

LCP: The idea of "cartography" first came to me from research funded by *Hexagram* for the visualization of information in 2D and 3D spaces (2001). I since retained the maps' property of displaying a large amount of information on the same plane to facilitate the establishment of links, which is less easily given with the "linearity" of discursivity. I should also point out that this identification of themes throughout the literature was done in the way of "grounded theory" (Glaser et Strauss, 1967/2010), i.e., in an emergent manner based on the excerpts chosen and the reading that was made of them, without recourse to a previously constructed theoretical framework.

As for the "materiality" of the maps produced, I insisted on also printing them in real size format to create a reversal of perspective where the operations normally happening on the screen through the interface – like zooming in and out – would instead be done with the body, by moving towards or away from the surface. I imagined those maps as the support for walking conferences where the presenter would move in and between the different maps followed by a group, like in a museum.

CN: However, space, layout and organizational considerations with regard to the conferences we attended at the time limited our experiments on that front. While we have been taken by other projects and not so active with the maps lately, it is not excluded we might mobilize the cartography method again as it is a great way of exploring a topic or field, while leaving room for emergence, discovery and for multiple meanings to come forth and, eventually, dialogues.

⁹ These working maps, as well as many of our publications, are available online under Creative Commons license, see: <http://lcpaquin.com/carto/CC/index.html>. A description of the "Cartographie de la recherche-création" project and its many components is also included. We wish to thank Jean-François Renaud, professor at the *École des médias* (UQAM), for beautifully designing the finished maps.

¹⁰ Our translation, the original citation is: "[...] une pensée 'spatialisée' et 'spatialisante' [...] une pensée des différences irréductibles plutôt que de l'unification sous des principes et des lois ; une pensée qui s'appréhende les phénomènes que par leurs manières multiples de se disperser dans des rapports extérieurs, et non en les rassemblant dans l'intériorité d'une essence ; une pensée qui affirme la répartition des distances et la coexistence des hétérogènes plutôt que leur subsumption sous des rapports d'identité" (Siberin-Blanc, 2010, p. 225).

12

1) Plural voices from our previous writing

2) Plural voices from the authors cited

3) Louis-Claude's voice in dialogues

4) Cynthia's voice in dialogues



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Even though our reflection on polyvocality took more theoretical dept afterwards, we were already thinking about the different voices at play as we were writing. We outlined seven voices in the text at the time of writing:

- 1) We have the plural voices from our previous writing in French that we are sometimes translating, quoting and adapting.
- 2) We have the plural voices from the many authors cited.
- 3) We have Louis-Claude's voice in the dialogues.
- 4) We have my voice in the dialogues.

We also have our distinct voices that are kind of melting in the main paragraphs as readers can't really distinguish who has written what.

Why did we adopt polyvocal writing?

- ...To open up our own thinking.
- ...To dialogue among ourselves and with the authors.
- ...To illustrate and exemplify.
- ...To diverge and digress.
- ...To let our theoretical influences permeate our writing.
- ...To perform research (in the open).
- ...To make the research process and its temporality visible.
- ...To speak and let others speak in their own words.
- ...To share and undermine our authority as writers.
- ...To experiment, think and do research differently.
- ...To open up new interpretation and meanings for readers.
- ...To **HAVE FUN!** (Because research should be.)



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So, finally, why did we adopt polyvocal writing? You can see a long list of reasons on the slide. We knew some of those things before starting the project, while others were figured out during the process.

First, we adopted polyvocality to open up our own way of thinking and writing. To dialogue among ourselves and with the authors. To illustrate and exemplify. To diverge and digress beyond what it is easy to fit in a nice little formatted paragraph. To let our theoretical influences permeate our writing. To perform research in the open, making the research process and its temporality visible. As such, in our dialogues, we even reflect on things we once wrote and don't agree with so much anymore. We think it's especially interesting to include that. You know, sometimes you publish a text and a few years later you think: Wow, did I really write that? Well, those performative texts allow for spaces that make visible the changing, evolving and sometimes conflicting reality of research.

We also adopted polyvocality to "speak" and let others "speak" in their own words. As such, we had everyone approving their quotes used in the text. We also did this to share and undermine our authority as writers. To experiment, think and do research differently and most importantly to open up new interpretation and meanings for readers. As mentioned earlier, there is no final resolution in this article and we leave space for people to agree or disagree with us, add their own ideas to ours, raise more questions, etc.

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