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Writing life as a method of discovery

Abstract:

The death of an aunt, criminal charges against her daughter, and family management of that crisis drove me into research. The charge together with the press coverage of the case brought collective family shame. I wrote first to understand my cousin's plight and secondly to avoid conflict with my father. Most writers draw on experiences shared with or contested by others. Some transform source characters in order to analyse ideas in cognitive mode but at arm's length; others write to bear witness. Life writers frequently write perceivably true accounts. This paper will assert writers right to research experiences that belong to others whilst respecting vulnerable subjects. It relies on Anna Denejkina's proposed model exo-autoethnography – that is writing trauma vicariously suffered through family or personal connections – for the purpose of representing and clarifying complex problems, short-circuiting authorial paralysis, and expanding empathy.

Biographical note:

Gay Lynch is a creative writing academic, working adjunct to Flinders University. She has published *Cleanskin*, a novel (2006) and short stories: most recently, in *Meanjin* (2017), *Westerly* (2017), *Bluestem Journal* (2017), *Meniscus* (2017), *Griffith Review* (2016), *Best Australian Stories* (2015), *TEXT* (2015), and *Sleepers Almanac* (2013, 2015). From 2011 to 2015, she was the Fiction and life writing editor for *Transnational Literature ejournal*.

Key words:

Creative witing – trauma – vulnerable subjects – authorial agency – writing as discovery

Introduction

I found out about the criminal charges against my cousin Clytie (pseudonym) watching the news. Camera-wielding press jostled her. She looked bewildered, stoic, wild-eyed. Twelve months earlier, over nine days, her mother Lydia (pseudonym) had died of dehydration on the floor of their home. The inexplicable press coverage brought immediate confusion to my mother, Lydia's sister, and to my then eighty-nine-year-old father, a conservative church elder who takes seriously his role as head of our family, a paradigm I reject. The news and the aftershocks shook my feminist bones. We all felt a wee bit afraid. I wrote to understand how a shy, eccentric person might find herself responsible for a crime in her late middle age.

Problem solving is part of a writer's process. Knowledge creation, imperative in university creative writing programs, includes the literary and factual truths that writers aspire to discover or recover, even those ostensibly belonging to, or shared with, others; even those that pre-empt a criminal trial. Interviewed by Phillip Adams about telling such stories, Helen Garner proposed:

I don't think that stories belong to people really, particularly when they become the subject of a court case or a trial. I think once they go into a court then they belong to all of us ... A story is a whole lot of disparate chunks of stuff and a writer comes along and picks it up and looks at them carefully and tries to put them together in some meaningful pattern, which will actually relieve the anxiety that people feel in the face of certain painful events (2010).

Here, Garner means 'story' in the broadest sense: life writing, fiction and non-fiction as well as hybrid genres. In the same way, I tried to use writing to create meaning for a family problem that we were barely aware of until it effloresced into a tragedy and ended up in court. However, Garner's determination to write stories reported on in newspapers and discussed in the public domain must be set against the potential impact on families when the accused is one of their own. Fiction, ethnographic and life writing praxes offer methodological tools for inquiry and knowledge generation as well as ethical and legal conventions.

Background

I met my cousin Clytie on rare family occasions. After the death of her father, she and her mother Lydia had been by choice almost completely socially isolated. When Lydia died Clytie reached out to our family because, I think, she found herself overwhelmed by the difficult task of organising a funeral. When some time after the funeral she received a court summons for a case to answer – at first manslaughter and then wilful neglect – by failing to assist her mother after the fall that inadvertently led to death, she dealt with it herself, showing solitary courage in the face of public humiliation. Newspaper headlines were savage. In the immediate crisis of the court order, my elderly parents toyed with the idea of withdrawing their support for her and cutting themselves off. Not being party to the police report, perhaps we all became a little afraid. As a feminist, I saw Clytie's vulnerability and felt my own shame. Over

the years, I had little contact with her. This article argues that writing led me to hypothesise possible reasons why Clytie failed to render assistance to her mother, giving her neither food nor water over nine days, as she lay on the floors of various rooms in their household, reasons that were validated much later in the Supreme Court of South Australia. Equally, this article seeks to understand Lydia and Clytie's trauma and our family's secondary one.

When I gave an earlier version of this paper at a conference, I requested that no-one tweet about it because, in doing so, they might prejudice proceedings the following day when a judge was handing down her findings regarding Lydia's death, and the charges against Clytie (2017). Although no suppression orders were placed, a legal colleague advised me that anything I said could jeopardise a fair trial for the defendant. A great deal of information is now available on the public record in the form of newspaper and court reports (see, Founten 2016; Prosser 2017; SASC 2017).

Seeking agency

In writing about Clytie and other traumatic events secreted in my extended family history, I sought to turn affect into effect, and to better understand the people involved and their circumstances, but primarily to act – albeit with limited agency. I gave myself permission to write, knowing that sometimes material will transform in unrecognisable ways and at others will stay in back files until I am happy with my effort – or perhaps until other people die or I do. While writing can have a therapeutic effect, this discussion is not about narrative therapy. There is a distinction between therapy and activism, for writer and reader. Like many writers, I act within personal and familial constraints and may not consider complete disclosure safe, but 'I know that when I move deeply into my writing, both my compassion for others and my actions on their behalf increase' (Richardson 2018: 826).

During the more than yearlong wait for resolution, through three court hearings, members of our extended family recoiled at the idea that one of us might be suspected of manslaughter or wilful neglect, at first rejecting charges and then reviving a family narrative which demonised Lydia. My parents knew mother and daughter better than I, but the way that our patriarchal family tightly controlled and suppressed information about the case – ostensibly out of reluctant duty but also out of shame and fear for our safety – drove me to seek to process my own feelings. This article analyses authorial agency, the ethics of writing about vulnerable subjects and creators, and the cognitive process of discovery through writing. I sought the truth of this situation by researching and writing poetry, a story and an essay. The reason for my protagonist's perceived dereliction of care for her mother surprised me, arriving as it often does, by praxis.

'Writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis,' testifies Elizabeth St Pierre and 'writing *is* indeed a seductive and tangled method of discovery' (2018: 827). She uses her writing 'as a method of data analysis by using writing to think' (829), arguing that even when ethics and politics are difficult, 'data collection and data analysis cannot be separated

when writing is a method of enquiry' (831) Over the past eighteen months, I have reflected on the ethical and creative negotiations I made with research, art and family.

Research by praxis

Stephen Banks sees the research benefit of 'narrative in moving from the *what* to the *who* of characters, shifts from representing persons as units in categories to unique existents', a term he borrows from Cavarero (2008: 159, italics in original). I drew deeply on my memories of my relatives as a child and adult and point-by-point fed them in a systematised way into academic research. The answer now seems very obvious. How had we missed it? Clytie was a high academic achiever with an historically poor paid employment record. I looked again at the controlling/protective family environment in which she was raised; I revisited my memories of her childhood, febrile convulsions, repetitive mannerisms, a prancing gait; I considered her lack of social connections outside her immediate family, her aloneness. Her lack of emotion over her mother's traumatic death was not necessarily abnormal. Many people find themselves frozen and awkward in grief. Nevertheless, this behaviour flagged a new avenue for my research. I worked until the early hours of the morning until an astounding idea leapt out at me. Perhaps, I hypothesised, something had been kept a secret from our family for the best, rather than the worst, reasons; perhaps at that time there had been no scientific language to describe it. I needed to further test my idea in writing.

I began to write, imaginatively entering my augmented cousin's life, to speculate on the week before the tragedy, setting up a case for the accused/subject's 'maladaptive risk assessment and response' in failing to care for her mother (Young 2016, qtd. in R v Peake 2017). Academic research, memories and feelings, family recounts of Clytie's parents' funerals and the subsequent visits, and everything I knew about the characters and setting, fed into the telling. Patricia Leavy argues that 'through the use of first-or-third-person narration, fiction allows us to access the interior lives of characters while also providing a context or commentary for understanding their psychological processes' (2013: 44). In my story 'Lydia and Clytie', I structured an imagined and imaginary nine days of small events. Their purpose was to help me understand how such a tragedy could come about and, eventually, should the story be published, to try to elicit empathy for Clytie in readers, as prejudicial and hyperbolic press headlines had not.

My fiction narrative sought to crosshatch Clytie's disordered speech and thinking over the stressful two years of the court processes with my memories of her customary more rational register. I assessed her letter to me after the funeral, in which she failed to express her feelings about the loss of her mother, as consistent with the neurodiversity one might expect of someone on the Autism Spectrum (Robertson 2010). 'In many cases', Banks argues, 'narrative is fundamental to human understanding, selfhood and sociality' (2008: 159). Writing Clytie's narrative allowed me to imagine her disorientation after the death of her lifelong carer and her efforts to continue daily life. For a woman like me, grown but still afraid of her father, this was

not the stretch I anticipated. After her fall, Lydia had forbidden Clytie to call an ambulance. Despite her giftedness in other aspects of her life, Clytie acquiesced. Laurel Richardson argues that if the postmodern impulse distrusts all methods,

having a partial, local and historical knowledge is still knowing ... qualitative writers are off the hook, so to speak ... They can eschew the questionable metanarrative of scientific objectivity and still have plenty to say as situated speakers, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about the world as they perceive it (820).

How could I criticise Clytie for fearing her mother's criticism/ire when I feared the disapproval of my own parent?

Eighteen months later, the Supreme Court of South Australia decreed, on the basis of expert opinion, that my imagined story that signalled to me from behind years of obfuscation had validity. Banks argues that

narratives are used also to diagnose medical conditions, to assess cognitive and social development, to convict criminals as well as to free the innocent, and other practical applications, reflecting an understanding that narrative 'captures' experience as an immediate and true metric (157).

I found myself proceeding cautiously with exegetical writing, waiting until medical experts diagnosed Clytie's gifts and challenges. Court reports underlined positive aspects of Clytie's testimonies: her consistency in giving evidence, considered responses, apparent honesty and sincerity, and lack of defensive behaviour. In 2017, it is better known that compliant girls are under-diagnosed with autism and that '70% of people with autism have either normal or superior intelligence' (Lacrois 2017). This does not mean they can assume duty of care for another. There are many kinds of truths and my hypothesis had not been fully tested. My research by writing would be considered qualitative research at best.

Writing 'Other'

Many of my anxieties in this writing focused on my right to write about legal and criminal matters in which I was not directly involved and that had, in any event, been managed by my father. The biggest problem rested on my right to appropriate or create a story for a shy relative who might like to write her own. When Paul John Eakin asks, 'What is right and fair for me to write about someone else?' (1999: 160), Lyn Bloom responds, saying:

if he were as astute an autobiographer as he is a critic, Eakin would come to understand that when critics begin to write creative nonfiction about their families and deal with the problems-human and technical-that such writing presents, they change their tune (2003: 282).

In this article, Bloom explores her fear that her mother will excommunicate her for telling family secrets and that she may attract family ire for speaking ill of her deceased father (287-8).

I began writing with express purpose: to try to understand Clytie's vulnerable position

in relation to the authority of the court and within our family and, at the same time, keep myself safe. In addition, my thinking was influenced by exo-autoethnography, a model proposed by Anna Denejkina, who describes exo-autoethnography as: ‘the autoethnographic exploration of a history whose events the researcher (author) did not experience directly, but a history that impacted the researcher through familial or other personal connections’ (2016: abstract). Denejkina cautions that autoethnography must incorporate ‘ethics of care’, demanding ‘reflexivity of one’s work, both during and post the research and writing process’ (2016: 4).

As a methodological framework for qualitative research, exo-autoethnography was not a perfect fit for two parallel narratives written in two languages, creative and academic (not unlike a traditional creative thesis and exegesis), but it proved useful for conceptualising my position as a secondary sufferer of trauma. However, such a model enables me, an oldest child with a longstanding, but intermittent relationship with my subject, to analyse the ‘individual and private experience’ of the so-called crime and its victim and perpetrator. Simultaneously, I analyse by proxy my difficult relationship with my father – a kind of metatext for the paper. Boundaries between fiction and life writing have long been of research interest to creative writing academics. I drew on the conventions of both, seeking to apply Arthur Bochner’s wise chiasmus: ‘a good novelist writes like an ethnographer and a good ethnographer writes like a novelist’ (qtd. in Ellis 2004: 331) to my short story and its exegetical companions. An argument could be mounted that the story ‘Lydia and Clytie’ is cross generic and ethnographic fiction.

But how dare I write about any family member in a traumatic situation? I gave myself initial permission to write for the purpose of gathering information, something that is relatively easy for an academic or, indeed, any writer, working in private; information that may or may not inform further activism. Once data had been gathered, analysed, transformed in both fiction and more conventional lines of argument, further ethical questions arose about my representation of Clytie. Concomitant with this, questions also arose regarding my representation of my father in various other narratives. The intersectionality of Clytie’s vulnerabilities put her at risk. Potentially undiagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, a physically unfit middle-aged woman who had been cared for by her mother, now a sole householder with no close family or support but an inherited income widely advertised in the press, and charged with a crime, she presents as very at risk of exploitation. Now ninety and with failing health, a lifelong patriarch with a frustrated relationship with his oldest child, my father also looks vulnerable on paper.

G. Thomas Couser discusses writers’ responsibility to maintain caution when writing about vulnerable subjects, particularly when those authors have privileged access (2012). My father complained that the crisis was too much for him and for my mother but maintained complete control, acting as her proxy – perhaps with her consent, perhaps at her bidding. He requested my doctor husband receive Lydia’s autopsy report, which was a legal requirement of the manner of her death. He then hijacked it at the front door, in order to withhold it from my mother – we surmised to protect her from unpleasant information about her sister and niece. My father sees duty of care as

a Christian impulse and, in this, is implicitly patriarchal. He sees physical care as the jurisdiction of women in a hierarchical system. Despite this attempt, my husband stepped inside and handed the report to my mother, Lydia's sister. This raised questions of with whom duty of care lies: my husband's for Lydia now deceased; my mother's for her niece; my father's for his entire family; mine for everyone I wrote about, particularly Clytie?

Authors and their subjects share circumstances, sometimes traumatic, as observers, bystanders, victims or perpetrators before the law. Ruth Behar broadens the idea of a vulnerable subject to include vulnerable observer, observed, reader and critic (1996). Even occupying the powerful position of writer, I feel at risk from family fury and attendant self-loathing. I will be perceived by the public to be more socially powerful than Clytie. Couser might fairly describe my 'appropriation of a life story for purposes not shared, understood or consented to by the subject' (2004: 48). All my personas clash: daughter/feminist/humanist/writer. I become paralysed by indecision about key life writing concerns.

On I write.

Initially, my father accepted my mother's decision that she did not need my support at Lydia's funeral because it was small and private and I had been timetabled for a medical procedure at the time it was being held. Nor was there any need for my brother to attend because he works as a 9 to 5 salaried breadwinner. My younger sister could stand in for us. Yet, the following week my father berated me: 'What kind of daughter are you? Attending the funeral was the right thing to do'. During Clytie's crisis he demanded I 'show an interest' but forbade me approaching her. After a second round of television footage of journalists heckling her outside a courthouse while he was absent on a trip interstate, I suggested visiting her. He forbade this by phone.

Whilst I see my parents every week, maintain a cordial relationship with them and, indeed, love them, it is unlikely that I could ever work with my father on this project or any other of this type. One of my children believes that I should thank him for challenging me and for my shaky resilience. I may, nevertheless, independently connect with Clytie through this work. I now have strategies in train and a timeline contingent on peaceful family relations.

Have I ethically drawn on evocative autoethnographic methodology, as described by Denejkina, in going behind my father's back to reinterpret Clytie for my family? Have I sufficient justification for writing? In presenting my neurodiversity hypothesis in appropriate register to my parents, I encouraged them to seek legal representation for her. Denejkina quotes Ellis, Adam and Bochner's assertion in relation to treating 'research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act' (2016: 3). My revelation about neurodiversity and legal responsibility for care, while lightly veiled in non-medical language, provided my parents with a counter-narrative that enabled them to overcome shame and to offer support for Clytie. My father then dutifully maintained weekly phone calls with her and persuaded her to make an appointment with a doctor. He liaised with a fortnightly cleaner. Even now, he finds Clytie difficult

to manage and decipher: she avoids answering his questions, fails to follow his instructions – such as not to go out after dark – spends more money than he approves of, and seems oblivious to her mother’s passing.

After the passage of time, the Supreme Court handed down their final judgment and all this anxiety seemed redundant. Clytie was referred to the state Board of Governors for guardianship, a light supervision whereby they manage her trust fund and she phones if she requires support but otherwise leads an autonomous life. They can, however, revoke her supervision and certify her. She has never been considered a risk to the public. Nevertheless, Couser’s cautions about vulnerable subjects need to be acknowledged. Publishing my research could increase the vulnerability of the subjects in my story. Without collaboration, Couser suggests, ‘harm can be done to the subjects’ privacy, to their reputations, even to their integrity as individuals’ (2004: 42). My father and Clytie are computer literate. Readers may infer the real-life subjects of my fiction and bring this to their attention. This discussion is even more explicit. One of the anonymous peer reviewers of an early version of this paper asserted strongly that the paper ‘represents the author’s father in a negative light and brushes on family member’s reaction to the story’ and asked, ‘Has consent been sought for referring to other family members and their reaction to the story?’ They also suggested that I, as author, should ‘ensure that they understand the risks of describing their father in negative ways when he will be clearly identifiable to readers of the paper’ (Anon). But frequently in life writing, subjects are named or described with little ambiguity: in particular, family members, especially parents (Hanscombe 2017; Smith 2012).

Bearing this in mind, I return to thinking about exo-autoethnography. I am a secondary victim of Clytie’s trauma because my feminist and humanist conscience tells me to act but I am challenged by my inability to work with my father. This paradox cripples me. I look to Leavy for theoretical modelling, when she argues that some fiction-based research is well suited to ‘three primary goals of social research’ that she describes as:

1. portraying the complexity of lived experience or illuminating human experience (linking the particular and the universal, or micro and macro levels);
2. promoting empathy and self-reflection (as a part of compassionate, engaged or social justice approach to research); and,
3. Disrupting dominant ideologies or stereotypes (including building critical consciousness and raising awareness) (2013: 52).

I have space here only for the briefest discussion on these matters. ‘Lydia and Clytie’ gives strength to a resilient fictional character, gifted in unique ways: its subject someone I had not really known, but would like to in the future. She proves incapable of standing up against her mother even to save her life. Writing that story and this article helped me reflect upon my own weakness as an adult woman afraid of upsetting, and being upset by, her father, and as a writer with the selfish impulse to publish work about someone that she had wanted to support. Despite her lack of domestic skills, my protagonist feeds and clothes herself for a week and continues with her volunteer work, an important part of her identity and her only social outlet. In

this portrayal, I hope I have represented her complexity, disrupting ideas about neurodiverse people's perceived lack of independence and emotional strength. Should I publish 'Lydia and Clytie' perhaps the protagonist constructed from my ethnographic research will invite empathy? Perhaps my hundred or more hours spent wrestling with three works in different genres will in some small way contribute to our understanding of the complexity of these lives?

Leavy reminds us that writing fiction does not prevent a writer drawing on social and cultural theory to create thematic links, particularly in relation to the representation of disadvantaged people (2013: 51). Had I more room herein, I could more precisely elucidate how literary theory, for instance, enabled me to incorporate irony and black comedy in the work, creating empathy. My story references the playful language in Tim Burton's film *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) and, indeed, the primary text from which his derives. That narrative brings my protagonist joy. How clever I found her and, despite her confusion, how ethical, kind and funny. I began to remember that I knew this. The story I uncovered also shows that a mother protecting her child from the public scrutiny of mental illness can place her own safety at risk and that a death, ironically, can arise from good intentions. Tragedies often spring from complex family settings. Sometimes, I believe, the only thing left to do is create art.

As a feminist and humanist, I recognised my relative's vulnerability and feel an acute anxiety about doing her further harm. Couser considers the question of a subject's autonomy an important but vexed one. While arguing that 'ideally, the subjects of life writing should have the opportunity to exercise some degree of control over what happens to their stories, including secrets and private information', he also acknowledges a writer's professional autonomy and separation from their subject (2004: 19–21). I have asserted my right to write, creating further tension.

Conclusion

Proximity to trauma can make a tale both easier and harder, to tell, but writers nevertheless feel compelled to write. Through writing, I discovered that a criminal charge depends on untested assumptions about the accused responding inappropriately to dangerous situations, being fit to stand and, concomitant, having a case to answer. I also discovered that writers have the right to write, especially if it is their vocation. In some cases, writers write to save their sanity, in some cases their lives. In 2002, for instance, Nobel Prize winner Imre Kertész believed writing prevented his suicide (2013: 231).

Difficult stories need to be told. Writing can be both cathartic and dangerous; it can expand empathy or cause further trouble for writer and subject. Writing may be the only tenable way forward for a reader or writer during traumatic times. Addressing injustice through writing but with ethical caveats or with specific creative strategies, can create agency for the writer, clarify issues of truth, and provide a moral way forward in difficult situations, including those involving crime. As a feminist defending my relative, I might imagine myself an activist overturning patriarchal power or dysfunctional family values that posit victim/survivor responses as

disruptions to traditional projects, but the truth is always more complicated. I may gain agency through writing because working with a patriarch is impossibly destructive.

Jeannette Winterson reminds us that:

There are stories that you can write, and there are stories that you can't write. And, in the end, you write the ones that you can, and that allows you to bear the ones that you can't. There's nothing, I think, particularly upsetting about that – it's simply a strategy of survival. And it's also how we allow ourselves agency in the world, instead of being completely overwhelmed by the things that happen to us. We are, by the writing of that story, by the way that we tell what's happened to us, giving it back to ourselves instead of being powerless within it (Winterson 2010).

If writers have no stake in a narrative, what right have they to tell it? If they do, no matter how hard they try to be fair, their account will offer only a singular perspective, at best biased, at worst vicious and libellous and always indiscrete. Winterson made me cry. With characteristic grace and restraint, she shows us how to tell 'because unhappy families are conspiracies of silence. The one who breaks the silence is never forgiven. He or she has to learn to forgive him or herself' (2011: 9). Not everyone agrees. Robin Hemley cautions a writer pitching a story that:

Frankly, no story *needs* to be told. A story is not a concrete thing – not something you can bring home like a baby from the hospital, feed it, nurture it, and then send it out into the world where it can be told ... it's not a story. It's a life (1994: 168).

The cognitive writerly process of analysing and understanding how inexplicably bad things happen, their impact on all characters and on hypothetically real people, directly involved and peripheral, creates empathy in the writer and, potentially, in those readers who engage with the work.

My need to write the story of a relative's criminal charge was precipitated by my inability to cope with my father's management style. Secrecy and shame, exclusion, protection and control have been well canvassed as subjects by life writers and their theorists. Many of us lack courage to break confidences, and yet failure to act simultaneously protects perpetrators and prolongs victims' suffering. Leavy quotes Francis Bacon: 'Truth is so hard to tell, it sometimes needs fiction to make it plausible' (2013: 259). This discussion argues that writers transform experiences shared with others because it is part of their creative praxis: to wonder why, to hypothesise, to test and re-test and rethink being human.

My hypothesis about the defendant's culpability, now validated by the handing down of a Supreme Court judgment, has generated compassion in our family for two relatives. The law took its time and magnified a trauma. Family members acted as they thought best in complex circumstances. While my early attempts to reach out to Clytie were discouraged by my father, I am hopeful that he may soon be more receptive to my involvement, perhaps because of his deteriorating health and subsequent inability to drive into the city. In the meantime, a male cousin has reached out to Clytie. What is my responsibility now, to my vulnerable subject? Twelve

months ago, my own family and commuting commitments became less onerous and I felt I might better support her and enjoy her company. We have interests in common. I had waited so long to find conviction and courage. On I wrote. Now an interstate move is imminent for me. Is it fair to disturb her and then leave, after she has shaped an independent life? Can I bear my father micromanaging Clytie's and my relationship by weekly phone call with all attendant criticism?

Not all uncovered or reimagined truths will, moreover, be welcome or uncontested. Responses to Garner's non-fiction books in which she interrogates unpopular crimes show the fervour of public interest. Readers like to know what they are reading: about the truths on which the writer is fixated. I conclude that when the time is right, even when aware of the capacity to do harm, writers may proceed to publication for complex professional or creative reasons. Researching this article helped me understand that I am not alone in experiencing ethical dilemmas or in experiencing writerly guilt, fear and self-loathing. But my discovery that Clytie could not be made culpable for failing to care for her carer, as a result of her autism and her family's unusual dynamic, may have saved her some additional distress as the courts made slow progress in reaching a similar but more expert conclusion.

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