

Becoming braver through stanza format exploring intersecting identities beyond autistic.

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Abstract

In this article, I reflect on my professional journey in multiple contexts, in particular when working with autism was new territory for me. I found it more ethical and easier to express complexity through stanza form. I convey the therapeutic journey of in particular two young people I have worked with, and I highlight other themes that I have come across, using generalised case examples. I highlight issues of intersectionality, particularly around gender identity, sexuality, culture and racialised identities. Throughout I relay how I work in an ethical way, opening space to promote intersectional expressions in complexity. I reflect on how finding my stanza voice has helped me express complexities more effectively than in prose, using stanzas.

The steering group for the third Autism and Systemic Practice Conference decided to focus on “intersectionality”, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), to describe a form of double discrimination occurring in a factory in America, where the employer demonstrated that they fulfilled legal antidiscrimination obligations for employing women *and* Black people, despite no Black women being employed.

Crenshaw (1989) highlighted how the US law responded to single identities, so obscuring complexities of experience, with the result that oppressions get multiplied and some groups of people overlooked. This conference sought to highlight how the foregrounding of autism by professionals can override or obscure other identities, and to explore what happens at the intersections of these identities.

In this article, I draw on my experience of working with autism in adult mental health, child protection social work, family therapy in child mental health and adult forensics. After qualifying in family therapy, I felt encouraged to use systemic psychotherapy with autistic people through reading the systemic journal, Context (2016), when it published a special issue about autism.

I made sure that I attended the second conference and it inspired me further. By then I was engaged in long and complex therapeutic work with people showing different degrees of autism. During my masters in family therapy training, I was challenged to inhabit the “not knowing” position as encouraged by Anderson and Goolishian (1992), however in my work, I found myself in the uncomfortable position of being expected to identify autism in people. How to do this while also trying not to be an expert! You can see how this dilemma runs throughout this paper.

To situate myself and to orient you as the reader to perspectives I am writing from, I want you to know that I benefit from White privilege. I am also from a working-class background, cisgendered female, still a rebel dyke. I have never considered myself autistic, although autism runs in my family. I am a qualified social worker, family therapist and systemic supervisor. In all areas of my life, I aspire to be “a fluid and imperfect ally” (Reynolds, 2010).

As time has gone on, my caseload filled up with queer, trans, non-binary, autistic young people. I worked with two young people in particular over a number of years. When I came to write the stories of our work together, the only way that I felt that I could ethically do this was in stanza form. Poetry is not intended to be a modernistic representation of something; it is clear that it is made up by someone and this highlights that it is socially constructed (Gergen, 1985). I have found that writing in stanza form is a way of conveying more about rhythm and feeling in ways that gets beyond the established meaning of individual words. I managed to overcome various ethical requirements in the National Health Service to be permitted to send the poems to the young people and negotiate an agreement to publish them. I have chosen to include their responses as their voices add so much more and I want to honour their contributions. I know that both young people also write deep and moving poetry which they have shared with me over time. I was hoping that they might respond back in poetic form. Instead, both responded in rather a formal way and, on reflection, they perhaps were influenced by the formal way that I set out to gain their consent! I was influenced by the anxieties of the organisation about ethics and consent and so there was a strange incongruence between one type of communication from me and another. Their formal responses highlights how people act into the culture of the space that they are invited in to. Vikki Reynolds (2014) advises practitioners that our ethics must avoid exploiting those we work with so my attempt to communicate ethically - clearly and formally - in the language of the institution took precedent over the ethics of communicating in the language we were using in the therapy.

I also comment on other common situations I face in my work and, in the vignettes that follow, I highlight issues of intersectionality, particularly gender identity and sexuality, whilst also weaving in complexities regarding racism, culture and religious beliefs. I have changed all names to ensure anonymity. As well as intersectionality, this article is how I work with a keen eye on ethics and embracing complexity, focusing on being present with and being alongside peoples’ struggles in a way that allows intersectional expression.

I turn now to the intersection of the experience of being Black and autistic. Where I live in the UK, the term Black includes people who identify as of African or Indigenous descent or heritage and who are subject to intentional and unconscious racism from White Eurocentric institutions and cultures. For White neurotypical professionals like me, I am therefore treading into territories... In a British context, Black people are subject to various forms of racism across all socio-psycho-legal contexts and a Black person’s autism is likely to go unseen while their blackness becomes a single story in the eyes of the police or psychological services (McEwen, 2021).

Black and Autistic

Is Black the only identity seen?

Clever autistics seen as White men

I feel for the mother

Knowing somethings not right

Getting her voice heard,

an ongoing fight

Blamed as a parent

for creating trauma

Parenting courses

one after the other

Father treated

As an abuser

Safeguarding discourses

Obscuring the needs

A light bulb went off

Autism diagnosis

Of the son

made father realise

He's like him

Explaining the father's

Controlling behaviour

Mother relieved

Adjust expectations

I sense your wariness

With White professionals

Holding on

to self-respect

In order to deflect
debilitating assumptions
daring to hope
that someone will listen
patiently explaining over again

Do we as Whites, fear retaliation?
For multiple injustices of colonising ways
For if it were us, we'd want retributions
Is this why we automatically assume
Black boys equal "naughty"
Not considering
that autistic reasoning
Flushes out contradictions
Black and Muslim autistic men
Rattling round secure settings
Diagnosis late in life
Does nothing to allay
The deep resentments
Of lives passing away
Kept out of society
Set up to fail
When out of jail
In this context
I'm ashamed to be 'we'

I'm afraid to say that
no matter how hard I tried
My whiteness spoke volumes
wreaking historical pain

Some Black African families
did not trust me
My intention to listen,
I was unable to convey
Perhaps my words
gave my ignorance away
The stigma of autism
perhaps too strong
Cultural assumptions
White Western impositions
Misunderstood values
Spiritual denials
Individualist discourses
Not appreciating
Collective identities
What that really means

Freda McEwen (McEwen, 2021), as a Black mother of an autistic son, helped me understand some of the cultural considerations when she spoke at the 3rd Autism and systemic Practice Conference. As well as racist discourses, she highlights African cultural assumptions about autism, where problems can be seen as a punishment for misdeeds by ancestors and people can get ostracised. So, the stakes are much higher when people are Black *and* autistic as community acceptance can also be at stake. I had not appreciated this enough in proposing the possibility of autism in some of the Black African families I worked with. I find that it is useful when working with Black families where the main focus is on family members with autism, to also speak to the experience of racism, to name my whiteness to indicate that I am ready and willing to talk about racism and recognise the extra burden of racialised oppression.

Intersectionality with Gender and Sexuality

I have often heard the opinion in multi-disciplinary mental health teams about a strong association between autism and questions about gender identity. The underlying, and often deliberately obscured, narratives of professionals seem to subscribe to theories that people are trans as a response to a distorted logical process of feeling unhappy and therefore becoming fixated on gender identity, expecting then that happiness might ensue from a change in gender.

In the course of working with autistic young people, quite a few “came out” about their sexuality and gender identity. Here are some of our stories of working together.

Coming out stories

This is a poem about the work I did with Stan, which I sent to him and his reply is underneath.

How do I do justice

How do I relate

The journey we had

Mine, yours, your mother

In our separate roles

Coming together

As I tried to understand

Make sense

Incorporate into my frame

Your superior intellect

Doing battle with mine

Acquiescing

Poetic ability

Smashing autistic stereotypes

Your autism was not what was hard

It was other’s responses

You appreciated being treated

as a person

Not wholly through the lens

of your diagnosis

We danced with each other

Falling in and out of prescribed roles

Daring to stretch the boundary
Of what is known as ethical practice
Being treated as an expert on yourself
Is a cornerstone ideal of systemic practice
Yet how often do we achieve this?

As I try to tell your, mine and your mother's story
Getting through other professionals' gaze
Worried about what they will say
What will you think about what I write
It can never convey the enormity
Important details get lost in transcription
What will be the impact
Now and forever
To multiple stakeholders
Some things are better left unsaid
What do I want to convey?
A poetic exchange
Feels more honest
Less factual more feeling
Slippery and transient
Moments captured
That can fade away
Or linger viscerally
Transformative none the less
So how will I do this?
What shall I say?

The moment I met you and your mother
Overwhelmed and agitated

Flooded with restlessness
Not making sense
Providing a space
Different from the psychiatrist
While we worked together
Teasing out
Gradually calming
Frustrations
Sensory overload
Being bullied
Anger justified
Feelings taken
To their logical extreme
A means of expression
So often misunderstood
Layers of meaning
Experiences seeking healing
How to fit in
Maintaining integrity
Neurodiversity
What does it mean?
The seen and unseen
Ridiculous expectations
Convoluting communication
Can't cope

People fear this
Denied opportunity
Excluded from trips
With no explanation

No reassurance accepted
Made their mind up
Better to avoid
Than engage with the turmoil
Feeling how hard it is having to adapt
To a world that is unsuitable
For most human living
Autistic truth telling
compulsion
Exposes these flaws
But get dismissed
As the world carries on
Not wanting to admit
What has been created
Is hurting us all

At first the space
that I tried to create
Made it hard to relate
Unstructured open
No cues to know
What was expected of you
I did not want to cause distress
As we slipped into philosophy
A comfortable territory
Musing exploring
Less personal

Somehow in the general
Messages got through

Validating experiences

Self-esteem grew

In this space

unspeakables got spoken

Mentioned in passing

could have been missed

To eventually reveal

What was hard to express

Gender identity

Was causing most distress

You later spoke of how hard it was

To disclose to a cis-gendered

Your trans identity

Secretly worked through

All alone

To only be revealed

After much internal

deliberation

Too many ramifications

for therapy

Not knowing

what your therapist will think

Diagnosis of autism

is perhaps safer ground

Professional notions abound

On the link between

autistic and trans

Simplistic reasoning

Of logical conclusions

Relating unhappiness
to gender confusions

Makes me wonder

How insulting it is

That such soul searching

Gets thus reduced

In the need to find answers

To that we don't understand

Implications of making life harder

For those questioning gender

Never mind if autistic

Your own gender story description

Showed how much you knew

I thought I knew queer

But you educated my view

Assumptions that adjustment

Is the issue at hand

How wrong can this be

Autism as personality

Autistic pride

Another iteration of being

You and your mother

Had already embraced

Autism as identity

And did not need

Help with acceptance

Did not feel the need to discuss it

This is not denial

As professionals like to label

You as an expert

Articulating your experience

Educating professionals

Inspired me to be bold

To get our therapeutic journey told

An invitational space

Which I tentatively expressed

Immediately you said yes

But professional anxieties took over

Worried about boundaries

The therapeutic relationship

And all that could unfold

Another forum beckoned

With me more involved

On-line felt safer

In your space

With your mother's support

Nearly an adult making your own choices

Felt ethically evolved

All I needed to do

was provide the link

I did not think

You would respond so well

You shone in the forum

Contributing and helping others

A profession highlight

You and two trans in flight
witnessing the beauty
Multiple insights
A special moment
That will live on
Enhancing professional practice
Exploding assumptions
Inviting curiosity
Not as an 'other'
But to collaborate
A real to and fro
Meaningful interaction
Powerful traction
Feels more respectful
Than trying to guess
what comes to pass
distracted by veneers
of what it means to be queer
And autistic
More realistic
Experience multifold
Discrimination all round
Misunderstand
Emergent possibilities
Denied and rebuffed
Accepting space an oasis
Of recognition and trust

Now taking it further
To give a life after

Writing that gets fixed
A moment well lived
That will be appreciated
In the light of time
Careful with descriptions
Doing honour and justice
In a real way
Knowing how it rancours
To read another's version
What they choose to say
Made me look bonkers!
How to convey
What to relay
With purpose
And meaning
That is not stealing
The what that has been
Graciously offered
Not to be confused
With therapeutic insight
More a trust to reveal
Precious moments
Of vulnerability
Allowing transformation
Of us both

This is Stan's response:

To whom it may concern,

Just under a month ago, I was contacted via post by the psychologist to provide consent for Dawn Thibert, who no longer works for your trust, to publish a work she has written

about the work we have done together since 2017. I must sincerely apologise for how much time it has taken me to respond to this request, I hope this gets through and Dawn is able to hear back from me. Her lengthy poem has been nothing short of moving, words fail to succinctly convey how being reminded of my own journey and how far I have come, how I managed to enter adulthood and I am still standing and working hard. I have worked extremely hard and I know I can still push myself. I want her to know that I have turned to private schooling to pursue not only Chemistry A Level but Biology as well on top of the ones I had already achieved. I'm mentioning this as I know she will appreciate hearing the point where I'm at. Frankly, I'm unsure how to express my gratitude and endearment for this piece of poetry, let alone all the work it describes. Once more, I must stress my remorse at not providing a satisfactory response let alone one at all prior to this, even if it did entirely slip my mind in the bustling whirlwind of life.

The following is directly pasted from the letter I received stating "YES" to all three conditions which I have read through thoroughly and agreed to. This is so my enthusiastic consent is established with clarity as sentiment and ardour may have clouded my intent in the aforementioned paragraph I had written.

*I consent to Dawn Thibert writing about the work she has done as a therapist with me and that she is going to publish this in a journal. I agree to this. **YES***

*I understand that any written information will be anonymised and that any identifying information will be removed and I understand that I can change my mind and not have this published up until it is submitted to the journal for the final edit (end of February). I understand this. **YES***

*I understand that if I wish my responses to the poem that Dawn has written will be included in the article if I wish. I understand this. **YES***

Yours faithfully,

Stan

Stan said he felt better when he was able to talk openly about being trans. Our work together has changed me as a practitioner to appreciate the strengths and talents that may not be immediately obvious when someone is seeking support. Below is an even stronger experience of seeing the transformation of identified problems dissolving once the young person's trans identity was out in the open.

One young person was not talking at all and had not been attending school, she (at the time) was on the waiting list for an autism assessment. Her (at the time) mother attended family therapy and I paid attention to her mother's story, "paying attention" in Soyini Madison's (2006) terms "is the first form of respect", "paying attention to the 'being with' in body-to-body *presence* with Others". Her mother was initially angry about being referred for family therapy, she had not felt heard and was feeling blamed. In the midst of her talk she briefly mentioned her daughter (as known at the time) questioning sexuality, this could easily have been missed, however I amplified this by talking about sexuality and gender identity in general terms. Perhaps something about my non heteronormative presence and

talking in positive and normal terms about gender identity and sexuality unlocked something. It seemed like overnight she became he, which was embraced by his family, his mother said she always knew but had found it hard to accept. She helped him change his name by deed poll, facilitated a short hair-cut at the barbers and we did a referral to the gender identity clinic. He was talking and engaging and decided he no longer needed an autism assessment or mental health support. In this situation perhaps an assumption about autism overshadowed struggles with gender identity. Perhaps autism was thought of first because he has an autistic brother, where in the multi-disciplinary team there is an assumption about autism being inherited.

It was less clear with Jacob, who attended regular sessions with me, mostly with their mother and occasional sessions with siblings. During the work, Jacob came out as gay and non-binary. Jacob resisted definition and this was reflected in the arguments between the clinical team and the diagnostic team as to whether Jacob was autistic or not. In supervision, I was encouraged to use the "Coventry Grid" (Moran, 2010), a tool used to determine if autism or insecure attachment is the issue. This confused things for me, as I was then being encouraged to look for singular identities, it felt like a choice between attachment issues because of trauma experiences and autism. I referred him for DBT (dialogical behavioural therapy) and was relieved to hear that the DBT team work with people with autism.

We had a long therapy journey together and I felt moved to write about the work in poetic form, which I had sent to Jacob and their mother, which is below and followed by their and their mother's responses.

When I met you

You had the quietest voice

It seemed by choice

I could hardly hear

Repeating "Pardon"

I wanted to know

Was is your view?

Our team thought autism

Assessing team said no

A challenge to that opinion

Waiting to be heard

As my work with you started

You and your mother
Loved working with metaphor
Making bold sculpts
With meaning unfolding
Opening up worlds
Historical trauma
Too young to know
What happened to you
Too many moves
To get your feet on the floor

I thought it progress
But nevertheless
The team to assess
Autism or not
Read my notes
Rejected again
Stereotyping autistics
As not literary
Male driven theory

You've written a musical
And poetry so raw
Many can't connect
With the dramatic verse
Lest they lose their way
In your universe

You love anime
It speaks to your pain

Ethereal and visceral
Imagination unleashed
Chiming with experience
That can't be defined

So, working with trauma
Was what we tried next
Hoping that it would help
You find your voice
Therapeutic school
Drama therapy
Adding to the mix
Not wanting to lose
The space with me
We carried on
Trying my best
To help find a way

You plucked up courage
To tell me you are gay
Worried what I think
Surprised at that
I thought my being
Exuded queer positivity
But how would you know
Not wanting to judge
My lack of transparency
Was causing a fudge
I made it clear
I am positive re queers

Allaying your fears
Helping your mother
In religious quandary
Caught in between
The bible and her child
Hoping it's a phase
Thinking it's a craze
Of this generation
Non-binary definition
Shatters conception
Of taken for granted binaries
Of gender identification
Dead naming
Your mother yearning
for her daughter
Family rejections
Blaming
Shaming
Gender identity
not a problem for you
However,
the school thought
a referral was needed
To a specialist service
Raising your mother's fears
That irreversible actions get taken
That could be mistaken
For expressions of trauma

As your voice got stronger

And more able to shout
Development on-going
Slamming the door
And walking out
Celebrating teenage behaviour
this is not pathology
We all adjusted
To the emerging you
Pride in identity
Mother brought along
Celebrating queerness
Also, in song
Your musical voice
A surprise to hear
Capturing your talent

Yet the self-harm continued
Particularly in school
And nobody knew
How to help you get through
I tried questionnaires
From the Coventry grid
Score high for autism
As well as attachment
Could it be both?
Even the referral for DBT
Was not enough for
A specialist sixth form
To accept they could manage
Your on-going self-harm

A diagnosis of autism
Was giving a name
To locate your distress
And expression of your pain
This could unlock the door
To further resources
You had by now embraced
Being autistic
Not wanting to change
Who you are
I wondered if I should
Have realised sooner
Your mother always knew

Good Evening,

This is just a quick response to Dawn Thibert's work about Jacob and just to say that they give their consent for the work to be published in a journal.

They do understand that any written information will be anonymised.

Typical Jacob has responded about the written work by saying, they don't know how to respond as it's Dawn's point of view so whether or not they think it's right or wrong it doesn't matter but they did enjoy the poem.

I loved the poem it told our story so very well.

Thank you,

Kind regards

Jacob's mother

For Jacob, there was also the intersection of culture and ethnicity. Jacob's mother is of Black African Caribbean descent and Jacob's father White Irish, although disconnected from the family. Jacob's wider maternal family found it hard to accept Jacob's sexuality and non-binary status. The family have strong Christian religious beliefs, which perhaps have helped oppressed communities or cultures cope with the effects of slavery and colonialism, as well as the pain of oppression. Furthermore, a number of Caribbean countries have continued to criminalise homosexuality until relatively recently.

My Coming Out

Dilemmas about coming out apply to me as well. I have identified as heterosexual, then bi-sexual, then lesbian (dyke), then unsure, now lesbian and certainly not heterosexual. I used to be an out and proud lesbian, however I stopped coming out after feeling judged by a supervisor at work and on becoming a mother, where I did not want my sexuality to create problems for my child. I struggled to define myself and it was a revelation when I realised that I did not have to decide exactly what I am, I can just relay my sexuality story. I have found the younger generation's embracing of non-binary identities helpful. I was only open about my sexuality to clients in my work in adult mental health, which I comment on in a chapter I wrote about improving access to women in the day centre I worked in (Thibert, 1998). Since working with children I have not felt encouraged to be out, nevertheless, I assumed that the way I do, being a woman, would indicate non-heteronormativity. This might have operated on a subliminal level, however my not being open about this has meant that this was not clear.

I was left even more uncertain about coming out when a Trust policy prohibited personal disclosures by staff to the people we work with. It took me aback when Jacob was worried about how I had reacted to them coming out as gay to me, and Stan disclosing that he found it hard to tell a cis-gendered woman that he was trans. I wish that I was able to be more out and open with them. Liz Day, at a supervision conference in 2020, said that we do damage to gay people if we, as therapists, are not out to our clients. However, I have also had the experience of parents trying to coach their child out of gay or trans feelings and expecting me to support their endeavour. On occasions, parents have become suspicious about my intentions when I challenged this and on one occasion, withdrew their child from therapy. I am sure that they would not have allowed me to work with the child at all if they knew that I was gay. These are difficult dilemmas and I decided to at least "come out" to my team and release myself from having to self-censor everything I was saying and be more myself. I am reminded of how many mental health professionals are discouraged from bringing all of themselves into their workplaces as parts of them are likely to be regarded as detrimental to the work as opposed to be of potential use.

From Curiosity to Collaboration

When I started working with autism, I was "curious", a particular way of being interested, in an open-minded way, the concept developed by Cecchin (1987). "Curiosity", was Cecchin's response to criticism of the concept "neutrality", a key systemic idea from the Milan team along with hypothesising and circularity (Selvini Palazzoli, Cecchin, Boscolo and Prata, 1980). On reflection, my curiosity had an othering feel, "not like me", and as I progressed with engaging with autistic young people, my sense of othering lessened, and my stance became more collaborative.

In this article, I am grappling with my struggles about being expected to identify autism and how intersections of cultural, racialised and LGBTQI+ identities affect this. This is a stanza about my dilemmas about spotting autism.

This pre-occupation with 'what is it?'
Classifying objectively as if we can know
Once identified, slipping from our grasp
As nothing is static, things move pretty fast

And, so my dilemma, in giving a name
To a collection of characteristics
That defy stereotypics
Yet identity as togetherness
Makes us feel less alone
As, said by a girl I tried to engage with
"I feel more autistic, since diagnosis"
Suggesting a movement
Acting in to spaces
Performative becoming

Another has said her autism is obvious
No need to explain
Move beyond definition
What does it mean?
More often others' reactions
Was what hurt the most

Defying defining
More comfortable in
Non-binary identity
Resisting other's descriptions
Of what they're feeling inside

Another said

She'd rather be dead

Than be autistic

No further discussion

Was to be had

Another life-long label

On top of the others

Alienating families

More "disorders" damming

Hopes of redemption

Autism as explanation

Powerful pull

To explain the unexplainable

Shortcut understandings

Different logical thinkings

So, here's my dilemma

To label is to other

Do I have that right?

However, "not knowing"

Leaves me in a plight

But not recognising autism

Does a disservice

Years of struggle

Of feeling misunderstood

Logical objections

Seen as "non-compliance"

Now my mission
Is raising awareness
Autism as diversity
Something to be proud of
Talents and abilities
Shrouded by complicity
In pathological perception

In this poem, I show how I resist the institutional insistence to know and name, to focus on the first order ontological question of “what is it?” and justify the response by answering the 1st order epistemological question, “how do I know?” (Salter, Kebbe, & Simon, 2021, pp. 68-70). Karen Barad suggests, “...what we need is something like an *ethico-onto-epistemology* – an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being - since each intra-action matters...” (2007, p. 185). My poetic reflections seem to be pointing towards Barad’s ethico-onto-epistemology as a kind of 4th order poetic way of knowing through reflecting-doing-listening in context-responding which happens in an entangled way that poetry can speak to better than the prose of everyday communications and reports.

Conclusion

What I hope to convey is
How I work in a way
That opens up space
For multiple beings
All the dilemmas
Contradictions and pressures
Resisting the pull
To follow well-trodden paths
That lead to blind alleys
Compounding confusion
Imposing identities
That do not fit

I need to resist

Singular identity descriptions

Embrace complexity

Of intersectionality

It's not just diversity

Power is at play

Multiple nuances

Dialogical twists and turns

I need to be brave

Travel new territories

Trust in my clients

To find their journeys

One word from me

Can disrupt this mission

Owning my power

To help clear visions

I can't assume

my good intentions

will come through

Careful explanations

Mean more to you

Finding my voice

In stanza form

Is a revelation

A liberation

From tyrannies

Of convention

That constrain

Losing feeling

Acknowledgements

I would like to honour those who have helped me find my stanza voice which I am developing into my poetic methodology. I am inspired by Freda McEwen's (2020) use of stanza to express multiplicities including bringing up an autistic son in a global pandemic and also Gail Simon, who includes stanzas in much of her writing, for example, "some *Denkzettel*, thought notes" (Simon, 2020, p. 1-17). I have been deeply moved by the poems that Stan and Jacob have shared with me, which they and I wanted to display in the waiting room. It shows how powerful poetry can be, as this was not permitted, worried that others could be upset by the "dark" themes. I am also deeply grateful to Dr Thivia Ragunathan who further developed my poetry voice using poetry prompts in an expressive writing group we both ran, publication forthcoming.

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