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# My Story in a Profession of Stories: Auto Ethnography - an Empowering Methodology for Educators

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*Abstract: This paper highlights a distinctive way to research and present issues within education using metaphor and the qualitative narrative methodology known as auto ethnography. Auto ethnographic writing links the personal to the cultural and is recognised as a methodology that combines the method with the writing of the text, which in turn explicates the personal story, or journey of the writer, within the culture in which the investigation, or experience, takes place. Although auto ethnography has not been common within education its value and the perception of its worth is changing. This paper uses auto ethnography to investigate and relate a personal encounter occurring within a particular educational and social context. It also presents a framework for perceiving the rise in consciousness, facilitated by the use of metaphor, as one moves through the 'Landscape of Action' and the 'Landscape of Consciousness', to the 'Landscape of Transformation'.*

## Introduction

In this paper I present to researchers and educators the narrative methodology known as auto ethnography as an alternate way to conduct and present research in education. It is my intention to argue the case for using auto ethnography and to claim that it is an appropriate methodology to use in education. I present an explanation of the methodology and the writing style using my research as an example and explain how I came to realise that auto ethnographic writing and the thinking entailed shifts ones consciousness into what I refer to as the landscape of transformation.

## My Own Struggle With a Research Design

My own struggle to find an appropriate research design is not a unique one. Like many other researchers, attempting to research within the field of one's work, I struggled to find a way to map out, clearly articulate and decide on an appropriate

methodology. In my writing I wanted to paint a picture, which at least unravelled some of the complexities of my research into Pre-Service Teacher Education (PSTE), the use of a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) network and a rural 'Internship', which formed both my research agenda and a major part of my professional and personal life. On one hand I considered myself fortunate that I was able to marry part of my professional work with my research study. However, on the other hand, I perceived that this closeness between my teaching and my research had the potential to be problematic to readers of my research because of a perceived lack of neutrality and objectivity, which is always expected of more traditional research. I wanted to reveal my personal struggling, without feeling a sense of fear and my personal engagement in a journey, in order to convey my understanding of a reality lived, experienced and constructed. Polkinghorne (1997) helped me to grasp an understanding of what I was coming to terms with and to recognise that I could establish a warrant, or reason, for adopting a narrative approach. Polkinghorne claims that, "The narrative provides a more epistemologically adequate discourse form for reporting and assessing research within the context of a post positivistic understanding of knowledge generation" (Polkinghorne,1997, p.7). With this understanding of narrative in mind I began to recognise that the knowledge, which I was constructing - through my own experiences, encounters and interactions with the world - was legitimate. It was my reality that I was a part of, yet also apart from, that I was constructing and, dare I say it, creatively inventing through the narrative text generated using language. Polkinghorne voices this in the following way. "No longer are knowledge statements considered to be mirrored reflections of reality as it is in itself; rather, they are human constructions of models or maps of reality" (Polkinghorne, 1997, p. 7). Without at first realising it I gradually became aware that I was bringing into consciousness my constructed map of reality, through my reading and my creatively crafted text. Patton (2002) also helped me to appreciate the power of personal narrative and how my personal journey was woven into the fabric of a wider world study of the culture that I was researching. "The idea of "story," of personal narrative, intersects with our earlier look at auto ethnography in which the researcher's story becomes part of the inquiry into the cultural phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2002, p. 116). As my understanding of the narrative approach developed I began to recognise that it was an appropriate means of telling my story.

**The Nagging Need to Justify the Telling of My Story**

However, I still had the feeling or need to justify the telling of my story. To resolve this I visited with the 'big guns in research' i.e. the authorities in this narrative / auto ethnographic style. Reading the work of Ellis and Bochner convinced me that, even though I was trying to relate and report my educational research in a different way to the 'norm', I was using a recognised post positivistic approach and, provided that authenticity could be established through the quality of my text, the subjective expression of my reality was appropriate.

> When ethnographers like me make texts, try as we may to report and
> represent accurately, we necessarily invent and construct the
> cultures we write about… Your utterances in language cannot
> express anything completely independent of what you're doing

there. When we give up the notion of unmediated reality, we forego the scientists strong claim that he (sic) is discovering something completely outside himself (Ellis and Bochner, 1996, p. 20).

In reading the researchers of narrative and auto ethnography (Denzin, 1997; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Ellis, 1997; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Patton, 2002; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Richardson, 1995; Tierney and Lincoln, 1997; Van Maanen, 1995) I began to understand that the subjective was legitimate and nothing can ever be totally impersonal, or totally independent, of the writer. In realising this my focus as a researcher evolved a little more as I came to understand what could be achieved in using such a personal and powerful tool as auto ethnography.

## So What is Auto Ethnography?

Initially it was the writings of Reed-Danahay (1997), and Ellis and Bochner (2000) that instigated my journey into auto ethnography. Auto ethnography as described by Ellis and Bochner is a genre of writing that "displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739) They claim that the distinctions between the cultural and the personal become blurred as the author changes the focus and moves back and forth between looking outward and looking inward. Ellis and Bochner (2000) make the following claim: "Auto ethnography has become the term of choice in describing studies and procedures that connect the personal to the cultural" (p. 740). Reed-Danahay (1997) suggests that "One of the main characteristics of an auto ethnographic perspective is that the auto ethnographer is a boundary-crosser and the role can be characterised as that of a dual identity" (p. 3). In presenting a history of auto ethnography Reed-Danahay (1997) identifies the many different understandings of the term. She defines her use of the term as the form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text in a similar way to ethnography but the self is embedded.

As I stepped back from my study I began to recognise that the auto ethnographic style was not only an appropriate methodology but also the only way to present, in a meaningful and mindful way, the cultural phenomenon that I was living and researching. In stepping back I also realised that I was changing as an individual and as a researcher as I reflected about my journey into the literature and recognised the wider implications of my research journey. In Patton's words (2002), I used my experiences to garner insights into the larger culture or subculture of which I was a part. At the very centre of my auto ethnographic study resided my own self-awareness and the reporting of my experiences and introspections, as a primary data source. I recognised that I was a subject in my own research and it was legitimate for me to be so. I also came to know that this approach was much more than just an in-depth abstract account of research.

## The Choice of This Methodology for my Particular Study

As I came to know this narrative methodology of auto ethnography I also came to know that this was an appropriate methodological approach for my particular study.

To explain this choice and the linkage of a method and writing style I will briefly outline the intent of my research story.

The initial aim of my research was to present some changes in PSTE and to examine the impact of these changes on student teachers, teachers in the field and university lecturers. As the study progressed I came to realise that I also needed to explore the 'big picture' issues confronting pre-service teacher education and society at large at the cusp of this new millennium. In the early days of my study I was made aware by a colleague that one of the major issues impeding my research preparation was the fact that I was far too close to my study. I was living in my own research space day by day. I was a mover and a shaker within the specific PSTE program and the internship program that I was both orchestrating and researching. I was both part of the lives of the participants and part of the 'case', which I was investigating. My experiences, challenges and interactions with the subjects of my research impacted upon the subjects 'out there' and on myself 'in here' as a researcher. Because of this influence it could be said that I was potentially altering the research environment and manipulating the variables. My recognition of these influences and by working through the issue of subjectivity I gradually recognised the legitimacy of myself as a subject of the research, as well as the researcher of the particular phenomenon that I was researching. This realisation was a significant breakthrough, which in turn led me to what eventually became my methodology and my writing style.

## The Adoption of Auto Ethnography as my Research Approach

In recognising that I was a subject and an object of the research I realised that at the same time I was and could be both an insider and an outsider within the culture that I was investigating. As I focused on auto ethnography I became aware that I was not a "participant observer" (Creswell, 2002). I recognised myself as the ethnographer who tells the account of one's life as an ethnographer and in doing so becomes the self-ethnographer. Reed-Danahay (1997) suggests that voice and authenticity are open to question. Her claim, which I agree with, is to assume that "an auto ethnography is more authentic than straight ethnography and that the voice of the insider can be assumed to be more true than that of the outsider" (p. 3). The ethnographic writer can only relate the story as an outsider.

Within auto ethnographic writing the author and researcher necessarily reveals his or her hand, or voice, up front. As explained by Ellis and Bochner (2000), "The goal is to enter and document the moment-to-moment, concrete details of a life. That's an important way of knowing as well" (p. 761). Further to this they suggest that "Auto ethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world" (p. 761).

The telling of my particular research journey in pre-service teacher education became very meaningful to me both personally and professionally and has the potential, through my continual writing, to have an impact on the wider educational community. In the telling of my story I am not declaring my emerging knowledge as scientific truth, or as a discovery beyond me, but rather as my creative construction of a reality, which I have lived through. Richardson expresses the view that "all knowledge is socially constructed" and "Writing is not simply a true representation of an objective reality;

instead, language creates a particular view of reality" (Richardson, 1995). Auto ethnographies are this. They are one person's view of reality constructed around and through other people.

## Auto Ethnography As Narrative

Auto ethnography is a narrative form of writing and inquiry and can be seen as a 'way of knowing' established through thinking in one's own person and through the making of judgements, about what will be attended to and what will not be attended to, in the 'here and now'. Pentland (1999) claims that

> the narrative is especially relevant to the analysis of
> organisational processes because people do not simply tell
> stories - they enact them. Narrative data have surface
> features that are useful for description, but explanatory
> process theories must be based on deeper structures that are
> not directly observable (p. 711).

The enacting of the story [research journey] is to me the unravelling of the complexities of the research and the gradual revealing of that which was unknown. Fitzclarence and Hickey (1999) further explain a little of the power of narrative inquiry and the arrival of meaning.

> Narratives provide the sources of meanings that people
> attribute to their experience. Stories not only express
> meaning given to experience but also determine which
> aspects of experience are selected for expression. In this
> sense narrative or story provides the primary frame for
> interpretation of experience (p. 8).

Therefore it would seem to be essential that narrative inquiry, as a revealing and unravelling auto ethnography, be written in first person. Ellis suggests that authors aren't encouraged to write articles in first person (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Malin supports this by declaring that we have now come a long way from the time we felt compelled to refer to ourselves, in third person, as the 'researcher' (Malin, 1999). I prepared my dissertation and now write in the first person as much as possible because I believe that writing in first person brings with it a personal accountability, an active voice, presenting a truthworthy narrative, which contains the pitfalls as well as the strengths. Ellis and Bochner (2000) write:

> By not insisting on some sort of personal accountability, our
> academic publications reinforce third-person, passive voice
> as the standard, which gives more weight to abstract and
> categorical knowledge than to the direct testimony of
> personal narrative and the first person voice (p. 734).

The use of first person active voice brings with it a degree of risk because it exposes feelings, beliefs and attitudes. It also leaves one open to criticism because of a perceived lack of objectivity. However, if the perceived reality of the writer is presented as is, in an open way, i.e. without claims to be the truth, then the story conveys the message, that is the meaning and guides the reader in the construction of the reality.

## Constructing A Reality And Meaning Making

According to Bruner (1986) "there are two modes of cognitive functioning - two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, or constructing reality" (p. 11). Argument and story (narrative) are distinctive ways of ordering thought, experiences, or constructing a reality. As such, although they are both "ways of knowing", they vary greatly in the procedures used for verification. To Bruner (1986) what each seeks to convince us about is fundamentally different. An argument convinces us about what is truth based with an appeal to particular procedures, which have been used to establish formal and empirical truth. On the other hand, a good story convinces us because of its lifelikeness. Metaphor can be seen as one part of story telling that does just this, i.e. it produces lifelikeness. A good story does not establish truth, like an argument, but presents verisimilitude.

During my pondering investigations I found the work of Janesick (1990), an ethnographic qualitative researcher, who used the "metaphor of dance" to capture the essence of qualitative research design. She uses the "metaphor of dance" to discuss qualitative research because of her personal love of the art form of dance and the power of metaphor. "Because dance is about lived experience, it seems to me the perfect metaphor for qualitative research design" (Janesick, 1990, p. 209). I appreciate this viewpoint held by Janesick because the qualitative researcher in using metaphor is ordering thoughts, experiences and is constructing a reality about lived experiences rather than using particular procedures, to generate or establish formal and empirical truths.

## The Use Of Metaphor In My Writing

In a similar way to that of Janesick (1990), I chose to use a metaphor to guide the telling of my research, my lived experience, into Pre-service Teacher Education, an Internship and the use of a Computer Mediated Communication network. The metaphor that I used is a 'journey metaphor' centred on the journey of a mountain stream. I decided to use metaphor because of its power to bring new things into consciousness leading to initially unperceived understandings and knowledge. It is my understanding that metaphor has the power to take us to where we have not been, or ever perceived we could go. Metaphor, because it generates lifelikeness, seems to have the power to move a human being to new levels of consciousness and perception as the various parts of a journey story unravel, are investigated and pondered.

## The Journey Metaphor

The full importance of the 'Journey metaphor', which Lakoff (1999) describes as a complex metaphor, when applied to lived experiences, can be understood more fully when the entailments, or essential components, of the journey metaphor are

recognised. The following entailments can be seen as the consequences of our commonplace cultural knowledge about journeys.

- A journey requires planning a route to your destinations
- Journeys may have obstacles and you should try to anticipate them
- You should provide yourself with what you need for your journey
- As a prudent traveller, you should have an itinerary indicating where you are supposed to be at what times and where to go next
- You should always know where you are and to where you are going next

(Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 62).

However, my use of the 'journey metaphor', which I will describe below, moves beyond this commonplace cultural knowledge about journeys. It is my belief that in this post modern digital world, in education in general, and in pre-service teacher education in particular, that it can no longer be assumed that a route can be completely planned to a particular destination. It is not necessarily possible to be prepared for all the obstacles, know what to pack, know the end-point, or know what will happen along the way. However, planning and preparation is still important, there are some obstacles that can be anticipated and it is possible to choose a direction to take, even if only initially. Part of the reason that I embrace metaphor and the journey metaphor in particular, is that the use of the 'journey metaphor' provides an essential ingredient of effective research. That ingredient is the concept of freedom. I did not know where I would end up at the end of my journey and I did not know what I would discover through my explorative inquiry. I wanted to be open enough to discover what was out there and within me, revealed through my thinking and through my judging, conducted in freedom with a sense of personal and professional responsibility. "Such metaphors are capable of giving us a new understanding of our experience. Thus, they give new meaning to our pasts, to our daily activity, and to what we know and believe" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 139). Therefore rather than be a seeker of truth I have been a seeker of new understandings. Rather than conduct research to confirm what I thought I knew, I conducted research to find out what I did not know and in doing so reached a new level of consciousness and learning. Perhaps then the most valuable entailments of the 'journey metaphor' are the relating of a journey, the construction of a reality and the revelation of new understandings.

It is with regard to my reflection and construction of a reality, within the particular context of PSTE, that my journey is situated. Wolcott in describing his use of story presents the need for the anthropologist to illustrate the events bounded by time and circumstance. "The effective story should be 'specific and circumstantial,' but its relevance in a broader context also should be apparent. The story should make a point that transcends its modest origins. The case must be particular, but the implications broad" (Wolcott, 1983, p. 108). The narrative of my research journey attempts to convey the broad implications – the big picture issues – emerging from the specifics and circumstances of a particular program.

**The Construction And Application Of My Metaphor**

I chose to use the 'journey metaphor' because of the power of metaphor to facilitate understanding and assist in the 'mapping of the territory' exercise. As Lakoff

(1980) states, "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5). My research metaphor, as presented below, is multi-layered with the parts of the metaphor guiding the telling and the thinking behind the various parts of my narrative and personal research journey. As such, the metaphor is as Lakoff describes, "pervasive in everyday life" (p. 3) because the metaphor is "not just in the language but in the thought and action." (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 3).

In constructing my reality, or story, I identified four distinct layers, or ways to apply the metaphor throughout the various parts of my research study. I refer to the first layer of the metaphor as the methodology layer, or the bird's-eye view perspective. I used this layer to situate my study descriptively, explain the processes involved within the study, and describe the events that took place throughout my entire research journey. It is, the how, the why, the what and the when perspective. This is an overview perspective – like the view of a bird looking down on the journey of a mountain stream – which enables one to see the wider landscape – the pieces that make up the 'big picture'.

The second layer of the metaphor was my personal research journey into the literature of pre-service teacher education. In this layer I saw myself metaphorically, as a canoeist, travelling on and down a mountain stream. This journey through the literature of pre-service teacher education, like a journey by a canoeist down the mountain stream, was challenging and revealed an interesting historical perspective explaining how PSTE in Australia arrived at where it is now.

The third layer of the metaphor was my data gathering inquiry, which presented an emergent interpretation of what I saw and heard from others as taking place in this pre-service teacher education program and the internship in particular. This layer metaphorically represents the journey of the water in the mountain stream.

The fourth and final layer of the metaphor can be thought of as the gradual unravelling along the passage of the journey. This layer became the evolving metamorphic layer of analyses, thinking and emergent consciousness, which came about as I stood back and reflected upon the emergent patterns of the study. It is the unknown at the beginning of the journey, which came to the surface or came into consciousness.

| The journey travelled by the mountain stream | My personal research journey |
|---|---|
| Deep pools | Times of deep thinking and pondering. Opportunities to examine some of the 'Big Picture' issues. Being still enough to see the landscape |
| Overhanging branches | Arriving at places, times and spaces that I initially found difficult to understand, deal with, or navigate. Finding a way forward was rewarding |
| Rapids | Working through overwhelming volumes of literature and data. Sensing a lack of control but gradually coming to terms with what required attention and what did not require attention. What was important and what was not |
| Stoppers | Working with people and situations that prevented, or disallowed the passage of ideas and growth. Finding solutions and a way forward |
| Gentle meandering | Finding the time to take it easy, reflect and appreciate the journey itself |
| Waterfalls | Visiting areas in my thinking that required shifting, portage or change in perspective |
| Different landscapes | Continual reflection about changing views, ideas, knowledge, understandings and new learning |

**Table 1:** The journey of the mountain stream and my research journey

The mountain stream metaphor has enabled me to understand my research journey as a journey and enabled transforming new learning.

There are risks involved in telling personal and professional stories and seldom can the whole story ever be told. Although there are parts that should, or can, never be shared on moral and ethical grounds what is told, is told, from my perspective with my filters engaged. Some of the stories that were related to me during my research cannot be shared because to do so would jeopardise the privacy of the individuals involved. Ellis and Boucher (2000) also place a key responsibility on the authors "who made themselves and their experience, a central focus of their research" (p. 734). They believe that recently there has been "a wave of interest in personal, intimate, and embodied writing" (p. 734). Personal feelings and thoughts should be included, but not in such a manner as to bring harm to others. Although I was the person collecting the evidence, I was also one of the participants engaged in the process and in the product. What I, as an individual does, affects others and I am also affected by others because we live within an interdependent ecosystem.

Ellis (1997) claims that in her early forays into narrative writing she experienced intimidation, or a fear of personal exposure. It wasn't until she achieved increased status as an academic and experienced personal grief, which demanded expression, that she was prepared enough to give it a go. "Now it felt less risky to write something other than traditional social science, something that would be engaging, therapeutic and sociologically useful" (p. 126). My quest is similar and through my writing and research I want to do something that is personally rewarding and also of benefit to the wider educational community. To bring this about that which is unknown, or not within my consciousness, needs to be revealed or unravelled. As a seeker of new knowledge I seek new understandings and new learnings in order to arrive at a new level of consciousness within a different landscape.

**The Landscape of Transformation**

My own thinking, learnings and judgements over the years that I have been involved in teacher education have led me to some new insights and new questions about education, pre-service teacher education and the world at large. One of these is a re conceptualisation about how we change, as a result of a change in our consciousness, precipitated by our personal research. This re-conceptualisation, which became a central finding of my research, can be viewed as an add-on to Bruner's (1986) and White's (1998) Landscape of Action and Landscape of Consciousness. I have added a third landscape to their initial two landscapes, which I refer to as the 'Landscape of Transformation'. My perception of this Landscape of Transformation is that we reach a stage when we begin to see things differently to that which we first thought, or perceived. Our prior perspective is turned upside down. Within this landscape we potentially live differently because we have seen another way of looking at the world and the 'others' within the world in which we live. This landscape would seem to come about because of a major shift in consciousness and the development of a new 'worldview' rather than just a 'me view'. It is not just about having a consciousness of change, or the need to change, but 'shifting the perspective' because of a change in consciousness. This state of 'transformism' potentially names a changed humanity in which human beings embrace the state of being 'transformed' and 'becoming'. Arendt, (cited it Britzman (2003)) presents a similar view whilst referring to the importance and significance of education.

> For education belongs among the most elementary and necessary
> activities of human society, which never remains as it is but
> continuously renews itself through birth through the arrival of new
> humans beings. These newcomers, moreover are not finished but
> in a state of becoming (p. 9).

The means to bring about this 'transformism' already exists within all humans because all humans have the gifts, or the faculties of thinking and judging. To Arendt (1990) all of humanity have the ability to conduct what she refers to as a "two in one" (p. 446) dialogue. That is, in solitude, and away from the immediate concerns of the world, we examine in our own mind, as a spectator, the invisibles, the abstract and the unknown. The other essential faculty, possessed by each one of us, is our faculty for judging, or what Arendt (1990) refers to as that which "realises thinking, making it manifest in the world of appearances" (p. 446), that is, the actualisation of thinking. The Landscape of Transformation becomes realised through our thinking and our judging when we are both actors and spectators in the world in which we live. When we act in the world we do so after thought, and in thought. In this way a synergy is manifest in thought and action. They become one and are balanced. Each of us within the Landscape of Transformation has the potential to accept that we are in a 'state of becoming'. We have, in the words of Chardin (1959), the potential to create a new 'Spirit of the Earth'. This new 'Spirit of the Earth' is about the re development and movement of the mind, or the human psyche. Since research, education and teaching is "of the mind", as Swanson (1973) reminded us, this new 'Spirit of the Earth' is particularly relevant for educators and researchers, who are significant change agents

within society and have the potential to be the 'challengers of society' rather than be the maintainers of the status quo. The retelling of our research journeys and the unravelling of our perceived truths, through new consciousness, have the potential to move humanity forward into the 'Landscape of Transformation'. That is to transform itself and reach the next level of its evolution.

Of course there will be researchers and educators [out there] who question and wonder as to what constitutes a 'Truth' or a 'Truth statement' within this methodology, which is also a writing style. There can be no one answer to this query because an auto ethnography is a presentation of one person's view, or map, of reality, constructed around and through other people. It is a good story, which does not establish truth, like an argument, but presents verisimilitude, that is lifelikeness. The auto ethnographer, like other qualitative researchers, uses metaphor to order thoughts, experiences and to construct a reality about lived experiences rather than use particular procedures, to generate formal and empirical truths. Metaphor is used because of its power to bring new things into consciousness leading to initially unperceived knowledge. It generates lifelikeness and has the power to move a human being to new levels of consciousness as the various parts of a journey are pondered and unravelled.

Rather than be a seeker of 'the truth' the auto ethnographer reveals 'the voice of the insider' who has sought new knowledge and understandings of the world and found what was unknown to them when they began the journey. The credibility of such research is established through the verisimilitude revealed and the 'ringing true' of the quality story related.

## The Power of Auto Ethnography and Concluding Comments

In telling my research journey, using the methodology and writing style of auto ethnography, I have been able to relate my personal experiences and the experiences of the others in my research in a lifelike way. To present my narrative I used the tools of metaphor and personal writing to draw out, re-think and re-conceptualise parts of my professional life as an educator. Going through this process has enabled me to bring together my developing knowledge, my learnings, my thinking, about pre-service teacher education and opened my mind to the possibilities and potential for PSTE to move forward in this post modern digital age.

Perhaps herein lies the beauty of this methodology and its unleashed power in education, 'A profession of stories' and a profession who profess to be the transformers of society. The writing of transforming auto ethnography, containing multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural and embracing the power of metaphor, has the potential to move both the author and the readers into the 'Landscape of Transformation'. Without doubt this method and way of writing has unleashed for me many joys and delights as I have reached new insights, documented my struggles, frustrations and failures, which have all become part of another imperfect story leading, of course, to further journeys within a new landscape.

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