

Neurodivergent-affirming therapeutic arts practice

Freya Pinney

Abstract

As a neurodivergent therapeutic arts practitioner, I explore the impact of double empathy in creating dissonance within/when companioning people I work with. This leads me to accepting my bias around working with my own neurokin. Reflections on a philosophically collaborative approach explore three neurodivergent-affirming therapeutic art practice sessions that include education on Autistic culture and norms. Images and descriptions offer insight into how art therapy supports the understanding, acceptance and affirming of neurodivergent identity within this relationship. I then reflect on the positive impact on self-expression and social engagement when the double empathy problem and ableism are overcome.

Keywords

Therapist lived experience, companioning, double empathy, neurodivergent, neurodivergent affirming, art therapy, Autism

Neurodivergent-affirming therapeutic arts practice

There is something magical in the meeting of neurodivergent people.

There is something overwhelming in the meeting of neurodivergent people.

There is something energetic in the meeting of neurodivergent people.

As a neurodivergent (Autistic) art therapist I am open about this with my employer and it is transparently located in my promotional material so that families and participants are aware of this before they meet me. I have for some time wondered about the role I play as a neurodivergent (Autistic) art therapist in the lives of Autistic people I work with. For some families, their attraction to working with me is literally to meet an Autistic person with a job. For many families there is a curious wonder about what I will be like. Will I look disabled? Will I be similar or different to them? Will what feels like the last hope of finding someone who is 'like' them be another disappointment? Will they be accepted? Are they Autistic enough for me to see it in them? Will I be Autistic enough for them to trust me? And then there is all the sensory nightmares of what art therapy might be.

At this time in Australia, access to funded support for Autistic children and/or adults through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is linked to goals. This means that initial contact is usually centred on specific goals, such as helping the Autistic person to understand their feelings/emotions, learn to express and communicate these, and to improve their

behaviour. Inquiries are often accompanied by a comment such as “and [they like] to draw or paint”. What follows is a series of conversations between me and an individual, parent or carer about whether they/the participant knows they are Autistic and what this means for them. This is scaffolded by the introduction of my own Autism and what this means in terms of my ways of communicating and being neurodivergent. I am upfront that I see and experience things differently and that I will encourage other Autistic people to learn about our neurodivergent culture and help others in their immediate lives to also embrace this.

To be neurodivergent-affirming within therapeutic art practice we need to connect people to their neurodivergent community: connect them to their own culture, language and support. This might look like learning about how they experience emotions. This could mean accepting the language they use to communicate, whether that is behaviour, vocalising, gesture, the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), words, images or whatever their preferences are. This will mean leaving the therapist’s understanding of ‘normal’ at the door and prioritising the inquirer’s expertise over our own experiencing. This may mean recognising neurodivergent discourses and being able to give someone the language that positions their experiences as normal. This means always prioritising their sensory needs and understanding these as they are linked to neurology, rather than trauma or preferences.

Neurodivergent people living within a neurotypical world learn multiple ways of being. In order to function within the broader society we are forced to engage with neurotypical culture, language and behaviour. Additionally, our own neurodivergent ways of being are measured against these neurotypical standards. Creative arts therapists are also educated into a therapy culture that privileges particular ways of expressing, experiencing and considering somatic experiences, interpersonal relationships, communication and emotions. This extends to how we are taught to express ourselves and how we are treated therapeutically. Understanding human relationships and communication within one framework of ‘normal’ creates a privileged position for those that are neurotypical. This invisible privilege positions those outside of ‘normal’ as invalid, often leading to discrimination. This is ableism. We all participate in ableism, as many neurodivergent individuals also judge themselves against neurotypical standards (this is known as internalised ableism). However, many of us live with a critical awareness of invisible neurotypical privilege (ableism). Being open to what this means can be challenging. Throughout this article I invite you to consider your own experiences and be open to the possibility of your own ableism. But what if we can create a frame of reference for neurodivergent-affirming therapeutic practice?

This paper begins an exploration of how I work as a neurodivergent therapeutic arts practitioner. It is auto-ethnographic and self-reflective and I hope that documenting this contributes to the development of a lively discourse within creative arts therapies around how we work as Autistic people and with Autistic people.

Notes on language

As a practitioner I use the terms ‘inquirer’ for therapy participant (client) and ‘companion’ for therapist to represent the nature of how I work alongside someone in mutual respect and therapeutic co-inquiry. ‘Companionship’ is to work therapeutically with someone supporting their creative arts process. ‘Inquiring’ is exploring or researching through creative arts processes. ‘Co-inquiry’ refers to what emerges in the therapeutic space between the inquirer (client/participant) and companion (therapist).

Articulating my Autistic perspective through an inquiry into wordiness

When inquiring into my neurodivergent approach to therapeutic arts practice, my access point is words and wordiness. I inherently experience words as the vehicle of articulation, of understanding and expression. Words mediate my existence in the world. My use of words is both empowering and limiting. I have a social communication disability. My Autistic neurology is me – it is my wiring and my identity. It is not a disorder, illness, or accessory. It fundamentally underpins who I am, how I think, express, and receive language and how I experience everything. My values, ethics, somatic experiencing, relationships, use of materials, and sensory and emotional processing are inherently Autistic. However, the interaction between myself and another is mediated through words as a meeting point of interaction and clarification (not, of course, in the spaces of felt sense, transference, or co-creation). It is these distinctions that are explored here in relation to companionship, or working therapeutically with another in creative arts inquiry (represented through poetic forming and Figure 1).

Too many words

Filling space

Seeking

Seeking understanding

Grounding myself

Entering their channel

Modifying, bounding, sharing

Compelled to immerse and understand

Words are the vehicle and the journey is a good one

Driving along a path of the unknown

Sharing this journey

Inhabiting the journey

Unravelling roads

It is loud in the silence

Screaming in colours

Breathing thoughts



Figure 1. Freya Pinney, *Representation of wordiness*, 2022, watercolour on paper, 1680 × 297mm.

Inquiry into my wordiness as a companion started with paint splatches on paper intuitively placed in conversation (see Figure 2). I added water and moved the paint around as a dance of articulation. I printed the excess paint from one surface to another then added water to amplify this new conversation and repeated this process over eight pages (see Figure 1).



Figure 2. Freya Pinney, *Beginning wordiness inquiry*, 2022, watercolour on paper, 210 × 297mm.

The process of reduction through printing then amplification through adding water became an exploration of my thinking style and use of words in companioning (see Figure 3). I started out pragmatically with clear boundaries and literal precision and then moved into a co-created space of reflection and something emerged in the relational experience. The dance of: ‘is it this?’, leaning in, amplifying, feeling, sensing, exploring, clarifying, and reducing. Then repeating until I felt I reached a representation of the smear and stain as the essence of how words can become signs that hold meaning beyond functional language. The inherent imprint of neurodivergence evident in the beauty of the stain and residue, the blurring of boundaries, and the possibilities within how I use words, emerged as exciting.



Figure 3. Freya Pinney, *Reduction and amplification in wordiness inquiry*, 2022, photograph of watercolour on paper, each page 210 × 297mm.

The smearing and staining of the paint on paper visually reflects my experience of how boundaries feel blurred between the companion and inquirer within the intersubjective relationship. This simultaneously represents my experience of words within my companioning. I use words to tune into the needs of the inquirer to create a shared sense of relational ethics and meet them where they are, establish a shared space, and then work collaboratively (Anderson, 2007) within the trusted boundaries co-created within the therapeutic context (Geller & Greenberg, 2012). I use words to mirror and reflect back to the inquirer what I am feeling or hearing from them and to check that my sensing is attuned to them or to reorient myself and align with them. My words are of service to the inquiry, the inquirer, and the co-inquiry. My words are not a reflection of me but of the space beyond inquirer or companion, the shared space of what emerges in the togetherness (Doane, 2009).

Understanding my bias towards my own neurotype

Words do not mean the same thing to everyone. My use of words is deliberate and specific and literal. I also receive words literally. This is important to understand when working with someone through inquiry and companioning. While developing a relational ethics framework for each inquiry it is important to match communication styles, but when working across neurotypes this can be overlooked. If one person is communicating with a literal approach to words and another is utilising inference and looking for meaning beyond the specific words communicated, it is hard to establish and maintain trust. When the approach to verbal communication is shared, my companioning feels energising and effortless. When there is a mismatch of communication styles it takes me time to adjust and re-orient to the needs of the other. I find this frustrating and overwhelming and it is a repeated problem when working across neurotypes. Through inquiry I explored this dissonance (see Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4. Freya Pinney, *Caustic excrement*, 2022, acrylic and watercolour paint on butcher's paper, 650 × 450mm.

Logically, I understand this dissonance as centred around the concept of ‘double empathy’ – the space where neurodivergent and neurotypical communication styles clash (Crompton et al., 2021; Milton, 2012; Zamzow, 2021). For my inquiry I stuck with the felt sense. The sickly feeling of squirming excrement leaching from the inside of the body to the outside and beyond. The discomfort felt like a stain on me as a person. An insurmountable overwhelming sensation of catastrophe. So, I let myself sink in. Inhabit this discomfort. I used paper towel and smeared paint over butcher's paper on my floor. I soaked it with water and let the paint bleed from the paper towel over the butcher's paper (see Figure 5). My dogs joined in while I was not looking and went to the bathroom on my painting. I embraced this extra layer as it reinforced the excremental nature of it. It had a stench, which filled the air.



Figure 5. Freya Pinney, *Caustic excrement process with dog participation*, 2022, acrylic and watercolour paint on butcher's paper and paper towel, 750 × 700mm.

Bringing a felt dissonance into an embodied sensory experience was grounding for me. It helped me place the clash back where it resides – as a clash between my values and emotional experiencing. The overwhelming discomfort was within me. When establishing relational ethics between myself as a companion working with an inquirer, I utilise words literally in order to meet my values of authenticity and transparency. When I discover an inquirer has not been honest or has not been using and interpreting words literally, this leads to dissonance for me, which can lead to feeling betrayed. I can experience this as an emotional shock, which in this instance felt catastrophic even though logically it was resolved within a few minutes. The feelings stuck and remained until I was able to engage in this inquiry. In order to inquire, I open my sensory brackets and let all my noticing in. I also do this to companion. My sensory experiences are neurodivergent, and for me this means my senses are enhanced and I see this as a strength. I hear, see and smell with great sensitivity. This happens with both internal and external stimuli and extends to the feeling of textures and the recognition of patterns. My sensitivity to noticings was also echoed in feedback I received from the inquirer within this example, who stated:

She also noticed small details about the type of language I used to describe something and how I was using my hands to move the sand at different moments in my inquiry. Freya brought my awareness to what was happening in my body by asking me about my somatic experience.

Despite the dissonance I experienced, this did not have a negative impact on my companionship. This led to an additional inquiry on what this meant for me as a companion (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Freya Pinney, *Unearthing bias*, watercolour on paper, 630 × 297mm.

Through inquiring into my companioning and considering the communication clash that impacted on me so greatly, I became aware of my own bias. I work neurodivergently. I am more comfortable with my neurokin. Double empathy (Crompton et al., 2021; Milton, 2012; Zamzow, 2021) presents a problem for me. I have a bias against neurotypical people. Deep breaths. I don't think there is anything specifically unethical about having this bias. I sat with the acknowledgment that I have bias. I had not considered myself to be someone who is biased – I occupy some interesting, intersectional identities and have an awareness of my white privilege and the privilege of literacy and articulation. I explored this through paint and water.

This inquiry enriched me with an acceptance of my own bias and the ability to draw confidence from this awareness. I watched the colours blur, blend, spread and fall deeply into the absorbent paper. I noticed the points of acceptance and resistance between colours and textures. One page demonstrates full acceptance – seamless transference between colours and strokes. One page allows two styles of painting to inhabit the same space, giving each other space and creating balance. One page reflects the layers of hard work that go into the relationship between neurodivergent and neurotypical people. The edges are distinct, boundaries are installed and reinforced, there is a lot of hard work involved, it is busy and repetitive and uncertain, and nothing seamlessly absorbs. The creative outcome of this inquiry represents my experiencing, and seeing this created a sense of acceptance for me. An acceptance and articulation of my way of companioning being linked to my neurodivergence and an excitement to pursue this further.

Embracing my bias

With an awareness of my bias and a confidence in trusting my neurodivergent approach to companioning, I listen more deeply and pay more attention to my sensory noticings. I have highly developed skills in demonstrating therapeutic presence (Geller & Greenberg, 2012) as I lean into the necessity of articulating to share experiencing. I encourage the inquirer to do

the same with me – to articulate their experience. This opens the space for inquiry/companion relationships to emerge, derived from creating a deep human connection with my inquirer (Geller & Greenberg, 2012). When working with inquirers with alexithymia and interoception challenges, I have found working through gesture and mirroring as exclusive modes during an inquiry creates and deepens understanding of emotions. This process allows for understanding and then language to be formed around somatic experiences. Both alexithymia and interoception challenges are common within Autistic people.

The holding and experiencing of gesture can be a creative conversation that is philosophically collaborative. It can become a curious co-inquiry beyond what was inquirer or companion, emerging from the space of what is between us. This style of intersubjective relationship works well for me as a neurodivergent art therapist, as my values and emotional experiencing align and words become less involved or important. Here my words are utilised within a philosophically collaborative (Anderson, 2007) approach to demonstrate therapeutic presence, so they are not intrinsically personal, nor subjective.

Using a neurodivergent-affirming approach to creative art therapy with Jesse (not her real name)

Jesse's mum, Rebecca (not her real name), contacted me after a friend on social media told her there was an Autistic art therapist that might be able to help her daughter. Rebecca told me that Jesse was Autistic and home schooled, as she had recently been diagnosed with an intellectual impairment and would go to a special school for high school next year. She told me Jesse preferred to stay at home in her bedroom and that she liked drawing. Rebecca asked if I could help the family as Jesse is one of two Autistic children living there, both diagnosed with high support needs.

When I arrived at Jesse's house, I was greeted by two dogs barking loudly and a ten-year-old boy yelling at the television while playing video games. Rebecca came to the door and quickly apologised for the house, the yard, the noise, the mess, feeling disorganised, the dogs' barking, her toddler having a soiled nappy and the yelling child in the living room. And breathe. I met the whole family. The dogs jumped up into my arms from the ground while I was standing and licked my face. The toddler yelled "pen" at me repeatedly as mum was yelling out that the art therapist had arrived. The ten-year-old continued to loudly express himself.

Rebecca spoke loud and fast. She offered to cook me a meal, make me beverages and told me how much she loved her children, while she cleaned her kitchen. I sat at her dining table with a toddler drawing pictures and two dogs taking turns jumping on my lap and trying to lick my face. After only a few minutes of me being still, listening, and then engaging with her toddler, Rebecca slowed her speaking pace and lowered her volume and joined us at the table. I took deep, slow breaths. Her toddler smiled at me. Rebecca talked about her fears for Jesse, concerns about her recent low IQ test result and hope that I could help Jesse "be happy" and "make something that someone could be proud of".

Session One

I knocked on Jesse's bedroom door and heard a high-pitched soft voice with an American accent say "Hello". I said "Hello" back and asked if she would like to come and make some art with me. I told her I had art materials she could use on her dining table and that she could choose whatever she wanted to make art with and we could work wherever she wanted. She came to the dining table and chose to try watercolour paints and chalk pastels on her back deck.

Jesse approached materials with distinct ideas in her mind and certainty in how she held a brush. She was very quiet when I asked her what she was painting and how it felt. I asked if I could paint with her and her eyes widened and she smiled. I shared her paint palette and used the same colours she chose and mirrored her marks on a page next to her. She rubbed her hands together fast then painted faster. I slowed my brush down and she stopped and looked at my painting. Then she resumed but moved her brush slower too. Jesse used her colours deliberately and was patient, watching the paint spread when more water was added. She enjoyed seeing what happened on the page as the paint and water dried. She commented on liking what she was doing. She made statements such as "My mommy will love this" and "Mommy will be so proud" in an American accent. When she finished, she said, "I'm going to give this to Mommy" and she walked back to her room and went to bed.



Figure 7. *Jesse's Inquiry 1*, watercolour on paper, 297 × 210mm.

I invited her mother, Rebecca, to see what she had made. Rebecca immediately asked for photos to share with their extended family. She was shocked that Jesse interacted with me, let alone produced something that wasn't a mermaid drawing. Jesse then joined us to show her mother what she had made. Speaking slowly and using words precisely, Jesse spoke reflectively about being surprised by the paint and that it had turned out differently, but maybe better, than she had expected. She chose details to photograph (see Figure 8). She

described the round shapes as planets. She saw these as linked to her creative expressions when she plays Minecraft.



Figure 8. Details of *Jesse's inquiry 1*, photographs of watercolour on paper, original size 297 × 210mm.

As this was my first time meeting Jesse, she became exhausted very fast and went back to bed with her iPad. I thanked her for working with me and told her I noticed how smart she was – that when she was overwhelmed, she took herself away to her room; and also that she found links between her special interests and what we were doing together. She smiled and touched her hand to mine. Rebecca was full of emotions once Jesse left the room. And Jesse's Autistic brother asked to meet me.

Session Two with Jesse

The next session with Jesse was in her bedroom. She invited me to join her sitting on her bed. She wanted to show me her Minecraft build. She told me about her favourite Minecraft YouTubers and communicated in echolalic scripting of their YouTube catch phrases with me. I asked her if she would like to make a video of her playing in Minecraft. She started practising scripts from her favourite YouTubers. I asked her if instead she might want to just show me what she knows. I told her I could see how smart she is and would love it if she could show me by explaining how she creates. She looked at me with confusion. I asked her if she knew what 'info dumping' was (Cola et al., 2022; Keaveny, 2021). She shook her head. I explained briefly that many Autistic people have lots of knowledge about things they love and sometimes talking about it without worrying about conversation can feel really good. I invited her to try it. We made two videos (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. *Jesse's inquiry 2*, video still.

Jesse talked fast and loud, non-stop, with no American accent. She described not only what she was doing but her feelings and preferences for colours, textures and material properties. She explicitly described feeling sad when she had to kill a Minecraft creature for their resources and that she holds memorials for them even if they are a mean character. She showed me a grave she had made. She role-played a short ceremony. This made her feel emotional and her voice had a crack in it. This surprised her and she told me so. She verbally acknowledged her feelings and then returned to game play.

Jesse continued talking fast for the rest of the session. Verbal language became creative, expressive and colourful – full of a wide range of intonation, volume, and some pace fluctuation. But it was not interactive, nor conversational. Jesse concurrent-dialogued and info-dumped with me. And she moved between jumping up and down, using her iPad, soft-pastel drawing and dancing around her bedroom.

Jesse and I talked about how tired she gets from trying not to be Autistic. She said people tell her she has an American accent, but she knows she doesn't really. She told me she finds it very hard to be smart or do things with people in the world. She then told me she loves chalk and did some drawing.

Session Three

Jesse was happy it was sunny and wanted to paint out the back. I set up acrylic paints, brushes, sponges, canvas and water. She smiled and clapped and made happy squeal noises. She started with the canvas and sang high-pitched noises while she painted. I then mirrored her painting on paper using the same colours and shapes (see Figure 10). Jesse got excited by this and added more paint. We then made a short video of her painting and stim vocalising. She got paint on her hands and was surprised but then I got paint on my hands, and she laughed. We pressed our hands together (see Figure 11). She liked the stickiness and the sound, so we explored that more and did some thick painting, moving piles of paint around with a palette knife. Jesse slowed down and really enjoyed this (see Figure 12). We talked about all her creations and sensory sensations. She made lots of happy noises and hugged me.



Figure 10. Freya Pinney, *Mirroring Jesse in paint*, photograph.



Figure 11. Freya Pinney, *Pressing painted hands together*, photograph.



Figure 12. *Jesse moving paint to explore sound and thickness*, acrylic paint on paper, each image 297 × 210mm.

Neurodivergent-affirming for Jesse

Since beginning art therapy, Jesse has begun to accept and understand herself as a neurodivergent person. Jesse is vocal about her own experiencing now – whether that is speaking, uttering, vocalising, drawing, painting, dancing, hugging or resting. She now understands that her differences are part of a wider Autistic culture. This is demonstrated by her increased confidence and inviting neighbourhood children to view her art set up in her lounge-room. Sharing her visual expressions with her local community, that she previously did not engage with, Jesse asked her mum to explain that she created her art during art therapy and that it was about her Autistic experiencing. This has led to neighbours asking questions and one child sharing time with Jesse where they watch her paint and draw.

Jesse is developing her own visual vocabulary to express her emotions and process her experiences. This process is vastly increasing her communication with others. Jesse is now hosting art-structured play dates with other children. In art therapy sessions we have built inhabitable sculptures from recycled materials, such as boxes, and she has used these ‘cubbies’ to self-regulate while other children are in the same room as her. This has allowed her to have space to process overwhelming experiences and meet her own needs whilst also engaging in social activities with peers. Her understanding of this is reflected in paintings such as Figure 13.



Figure 13. Jesse, *Between the world and the end*, acrylic paint on canvas, 500 × 400mm.

In *Between the world and the end* (Figure 13), Jesse has painted a Minecraft grass block and a Minecraft portal to ‘the end’ within the game and added a line between with a figure on it. Jesse describes this as being both outside and inside the game. She articulates occupying and needing this space. Further, that this space acts as a bridge between realms of the social

world. At this stage Jesse is not verbally articulating this insight to others but is exploring her experiences in different media and working with me through creative expressions to understand herself and her needs and to process experiences. Through the materials and creative connection between us we are coming to know and understand together.

Without explicit support around her neurodivergence, Jesse was withdrawn, exhausted and disengaged from social interaction. Her mother described her as staying in her room mostly, wearing pyjamas and in bed. She did communicate verbally when it was deemed necessary by others, but she did so in an American accent, largely echolalic (Cohn et al., 2022; Sullivan, 2022) and following scripts (Brown, 2019; Heasman & Gillespie, 2019) from YouTubers.

Through her engagement with neurodivergent-affirming creative art therapy, Jesse is now participating in her social world. She now has an awareness of masking (Miller et al., 2021) and understands that this is a complex skill she has developed to function within the neurotypical world. She also knows that she has a range of social skills that are shared by her neurotype. Jesse finds masking and communicating exhausting and is developing strategies to manage her overwhelm. These are lifelong challenges. What is exciting is that Jesse now has a way of processing her experiences and expressing them for herself. She is learning to communicate authentically as her perfectly normal neurodivergent self.

She is meeting her neurodivergent self through exploring chalk pastels – grinding them, smothering her hands with the dust, reforming this dust into new colours and shapes, playing with covering surfaces with colour, then moving the colour around into morphing forms. Jesse now describes chalk as a special interest. She spends hours in wonder playing with these materials. And she uses her creations to connect with others.

Reflections on being neurodivergent-affirming

I see this as the beginning of a discussion about the meeting of neurodivergence between a creative arts therapy practitioner and neurodivergent clients. The first of a series of explorations of Neurodivergent-Affirming Therapeutic Arts Practice. Autism is only one way of being neurodivergent and as an Autistic art therapist it was an appropriate place to start. My neurodivergence and critical awareness of ableism leads me to take a human rights approach to disability. This means moving beyond the dichotomy of the medical (individual failure) versus social (socially failed) models of disability to see all disability rights as human rights.

Working within a neurodivergent-affirming framework means accepting difference and facilitating the creative explorations of another in order for them to be able to express themselves. This means amplifying their voice and perspective, learning from and with them. Moving away from a clinical model to a co-inquiry approach supports this. Horizontalising the therapeutic relationship and working together as inquirer and companion supports the process of being neurodivergent-affirming by removing the role of expert from the therapist.

This undermines the expectation that the therapist's perspective is the correct one, which is fundamental to overcoming the challenges of double empathy and ableism. Actively confronting these socially structured challenges is intrinsic to developing a neurodivergent-affirming therapeutic art practice.

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Endnote

The author has obtained informed consent from participants, including for visual documentation. Copies of the information, plain text information and consent forms are available for perusal on request.

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Freya Pinney, aka The Process Repository, is an Autistic artist and art therapist. Her arts practice explores concepts of identity, subjectivity and neurodivergence. As a lesbian, her work also engages with representations of gender, sexuality, history and critical theory. She processes these themes across multiple media – from textiles to painting, sound, video and sculpture. As an art therapist she specialises in neurodivergent-affirming creative arts therapy, predominantly with Autistic people (ages 4–92). Her work is on the cover of the Australian Attorney-General’s Disability and Mental Health Action Plan 2022–25 and she is an Autism CRC/Sylvia Rogers Academy Future Leaders alumna.



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