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## **Seniors' Stories, Oral History in the Burton Street Community**

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### **Abstract**

The goal of this project has been to compose a vivid and personal history of the Burton Street community and those who have come from and/or to it. To do this I began with a series of group interviews done in a previous class project with a group of Senior Citizens centered at the Burton Street Community Center. I then sought to attach personal narratives to the group story that had already been developed by doing interviews with three or four individual members of this group. The goal has not been to record much longer "Life Story" type interviews in which the interviewee recalls stories and descriptions from all of his or her life, though this would be an interesting continuation of the project, but instead to collect shorter interviews that would be able to critically examine the history of the community in the life of the individual and the individual in the life of the community. The goal has been as much historiographical as historical, as engaging with these living histories forces us to constantly reexamine our view of our shared past. Finally, the goal is to make a collection of these stories for the Burton Street Center to keep, and to make a model of collecting oral histories in this community for future students to follow.

**Key Words: Oral History, Senior Citizens, Personal Narrative, Burton Street**

## Origins of the Project

The origins of this project date back to the spring of 2013 when I began work with the Burton Street Community in a ReStorying community class. The class was a collection of community service based projects centered on Burton Street. I had worked with a group of senior citizens during my time as an intern at a non-profit in Atlanta, and had left in awe and appreciation of the power of their stories, so I volunteered to work with the group doing oral histories at Burton Street. We collected four group interviews ranging in length from forty five minutes to close to two hours. The group did discuss on occasion their relation to major historical events, both on the national and community level (civil rights, race relations, Korea, Vietnam) which were fascinating. What really attracted me to the project, however, was their recollections of the smallest, seemingly mundane, details of their lives. One senior, for example, recounted in great detail the first time she tried pinto beans, nearly half a century ago. I was as, if not more attached, to her story than if she was recounting one of the grand events of history (war, protest, the creation of law.)

This gave me a new sense of appreciation for the power of oral history, if conducted mindfully. If we (myself and my partner) went to the group as young college students and grilled them about what we considered to be the major events of their lifetime, only to pull out answers that match our ideals of what those events should mean, their answers would certainly be unproductive. The interviewee's options at that point are to either give the answers we wanted to hear, or to practically be ignored. If, on the other hand, the interviewee is allowed to reminisce on their memories, whatever comes to their mind (pinto beans, housework, sights, smells) an important history would be generated. It was astounding how quickly a conversation about shared memories of a house on a corner or a neighborhood shopkeeper would shoot to profound insights about race or gender relations, reflections on changing morals in the neighborhood in relation to the influx of drugs, or the effects of unions on race and poverty and vice versa, and then back to where they started. I learned that the grand events, currents, and questions of our history were all embedded in the quaint stories of everyday life, and if allowed to flow out naturally these personal histories could speak truth with great effect to the power of our popular history.

After completion of this work, a little over a year went by as I studied abroad and returned to do work in other areas. The design of our class's initial project was that during the semester I was gone other students would take up with the seniors and continue the interviews, to produce a large collection for the Center. Unfortunately, the class the following semester failed to conduct interviews or give old interviews to the seniors, leaving the group with a sense of abandonment and a little hostility. I found this out when I went to begin my round of interviews this semesters. I gave the center copies of the interviews I had hoping it wouldn't be too late.

I conceptualized this semester's project with Dr. Ken Betsalel (the instructor of the previously mentioned classes) during the summer of 2014. It was inspired in part by Barbara Myerhoff's *Number our Days*, an account of her work conducting oral histories with an elderly Jewish community in Venice, California. In a fascinating style of writing she recounts the community members' stories along with information on her relationship with the seniors, their relationship with each other and their families, and how all of these factors affected their stories, and the

profound effect the work had on Myerhoff herself. While a project on the scale of *Number our Days* would have been impossible, Myerhoff spent more than a year conducting in depth personal and group interviews, exploring facets of their lives and relationships it took months just to broach, I liked and greatly respected the style of personal narrative and storytelling expressed in her project.

With my initial work with these seniors and a study of Myerhoff as a rough basis, I looked to other secondary sources on oral history to help build the parameters of this project. Most notable of these sources were: Alex Haley's "Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy," Alessandro Portelli's "What Makes Oral History Different," Susan K. Burton's "Issues in Cross-Cultural Interviewing: Japanese Women in England," and Fred Allison's "Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight: Changing Perspectives Over Time." While the last article may seem like an odd choice, Allison's analysis of why Vietnam veteran's memory of firefights change over time is fascinating, and in examining the particularity of these oral histories he describes many important aspects of how we generate memory in general. As secondary sources for why I think this type of history is so important, I looked to Michel Foucault's "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History" and the "Study of Philosophy" section from Antonio Gramsci's prison notebooks. These texts contain no direct analysis of Oral History, but their analysis of history and genealogy and what role they play in the generating of our shared political mindset were instrumental to the development of my views on the importance of oral history.

The plan, then, at the beginning was to create a small collection of personal narratives based loosely on the model of Myerhoff's work, which would construct a vivid, complex, and living history of a few of the people living in the Burton street community, and which would be given to the Community Center. The academic use of the interviews would be to use the analysis of oral history and genealogy developed in the secondary sources to study what these narratives have to say about how and why we write history, and what that can speak to in regard to our shared historical and political identity.

## **Methods and Work Undertaken**

I proposed the idea at the start of the Academic semester to the director of the Burton Street Community Center, Ms. Shateisha Lenoir. She expressed concern over the failings of previous classes to stay continually involved with the seniors and actually produce results (recorded versions of the interviews for the senior's and the Center.) She asked that I get her copies of previous interviews and create for her a set of my goals for the semester so that we would be on the same page as the work continued. She also mentioned that she liked the idea of the seniors creating a self-portrait by telling their stories and exposing their history. I took all of this and created a list of objectives and a list of potential questions for beginning the interviews. She accepted the questions and signed off on the project, but told me that I would have to wait a couple of weeks to begin interviewing, because the senior's group had taken on a big project (a statewide conference on aging that was to be held in Asheville) that would take place at the end of September. They would need to devote their whole attention to doing that beforehand, and then need some time to rest after it before they could begin work with me. She agreed to show

my questions to Mr. Henry Anderson, the head of the group, see if he approved, and then get back to me with his response and an estimate of when I might get started.

Unfortunately Shateisha got called out of the office for a week in early October, and was delayed by other external editions to her already huge workload, so the process was delayed. In the meantime, to keep the project on track, Dr. Betsalel and I contacted Mr. Anderson directly, asking if he would be willing to begin the interviews on the same parameters I had already established. He agreed to let me interview him (he had also been a part of the original group interviews) and that after he would see what other seniors would be willing to be interviewed.

On Tuesday, the 21<sup>st</sup> of October, 2014, I went to Mr. Anderson's house to conduct my first interview. His wife, Ms. Fannie Anderson, was also home and willing to be interviewed so I interviewed them simultaneously. I had high hopes for the interview as I knew they would be good interviewees due to my previous experience with the group. The interview exceeded my high expectations.

Without too much of a buildup of small talk and formalities both Mr. and Ms. Anderson were speaking openly with me. They were both born in the Asheville area, Ms. Anderson in Swannanoa and Mr. Anderson in Burton Street. They both told stories of early memories in the area. Mr. Anderson spoke of the strict racial geographical divides in the city. To highlight this point he told me a story from his youth about young white men driving through their neighborhood and throwing eggs at young African-American women. Many times, however, they would take a street to escape that they didn't realize was a dead end, so they would have to drive back through the area they had just egged, while Mr. Anderson and company were waiting with rocks to greet the fleeing assailants. He told more than one story like that. I do not know how he felt about telling this story to a young white man who could assuredly not appreciate its full emotional depth, but he seemed to do so without reservation. He reiterated more than once that his view of racial equality was just humans accepting each other as other humans, which I assume was meant to show, at least in small part, a lack of bitterness. How much of that was for my personal comfort I do not know.

He told me a similar story that took place as he was about to ship out for Korea. His mother had made him report to base a day early to insure he wouldn't be AWOL. To kill time after he arrived he went to see a movie, but was told he couldn't buy a ticket. He took that to mean he just couldn't buy a ticket at that booth, but was told that he could not buy a ticket anywhere, as the theatre was all white. He spoke of a feeling echoed by many African-Americans of his generation who were asked to be willing to die for freedom they did not personally enjoy. He told me this, though, with somewhat of an ironic chuckle. He did not try to pretend the story was not tragic, or that it had not deeply hurt him, but again, he conveyed it without all of the bitterness that could reasonably be expected.

The Andersons also spent a majority of their working life in New York City, so they could critically compare the situation in the North versus the South. He attributed much of the higher standards of racial equality to the higher rate of unionization in the North. He pointed out that no matter what sense of prejudice you take into a work place, if you are forced to work alongside a person of a different race and be paid the exact same wage, at least some part of your sense of racial hierarchy must be brought down. He told of the complexity of the situation, speaking both of racial hatred in the north and certain positives of the south. Mrs. Anderson pointed out, for

example, that in the rural area where she was from you were living and playing and working in such close proximity to another race you had to find a way to make it work.

I put so much focus on this particular issue because I think it brings up important questions for methodology. In his analysis of a Vietnam veteran's recollection of a firefight, Fred Allison demonstrates that when a veteran is asked to retell a traumatic story originally recorded immediately after it happened, in this particular case in telling a story that was originally recorded in 1968 again in 2002, the veteran tends to place traumatic events into a wider, more justifiable plotline (Allison, 224). The traumatic events must be arranged in a somewhat logical, ordered, way to be bearable, and to fit with the storyteller's conception of the period's history. Perhaps the Andersons were performing a similar act with their stories, though what made them such great interviewees was that they were critical of their own ordering. They weren't content to just say the North is always better for African-Americans, or that unions are the sole cause of the difference. Instead, they articulated the different possible causes for the way they had ordered this history. This demonstrates the importance of being continually critical as an interviewer, remembering that no source is objective, especially not personal narratives. It also demonstrates in part the importance of oral history, in that it continually imparts new, personal, histories to remind us that our history is always subjective and that there's always another perspective to be considered.

This exchange also brings to mind a point articulated by Susan Burton in her discussion of her interviews with Japanese women living in England. She discusses the value of the insider/outsider relationship in interviewing. There were things that the Japanese women would say to Burton as an outsider that she claims they wouldn't have dared admit to another Japanese person (Burton, 167). I don't think my interview fit these circumstances, as I doubt it's easier to speak about racial abuses to a person of the race that was responsible. None the less the insider/outsider dynamic was at work, it's just a matter of articulating how in a particular situation.

The interview was a few minutes over an hour in total, and copies will be transferred as both CDs and as transcriptions to the Community Center. After the interview had concluded I asked Mr. Anderson if he would ask the seniors at their next meeting if anyone would be willing to be interviewed. He said he would and to call him on Friday afternoon. When I called that Friday, he said that he had asked them to think about it over the weekend and that I should call him back the following Tuesday for a list of names. When I called on Tuesday he informed me that as the seniors were busy setting up another set of activities, none wanted to participate. Distressed, I contacted Dr. Betsalel who managed to set up interviews with a few other community seniors. We cleared it with Shateisha, and I conducted them during the following two weeks.

The second interview was with Mrs. Ruth Wells on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, 2014. She warmly welcomed me into her home and we chatted briefly about the weather before we got started. She told me when she was a girl you could always expect snow on Christmas in Asheville, but not anymore. Thankfully, she said, you usually could trust the weatherman. Mrs. Wells is eighty seven years old, and I was told to expect a quality but short interview. My expectations were again exceeded, as she spoke to me for close to an hour and forty minutes.

The topics Mrs. Wells and I covered ranged from community icon Mr. E. W. Pearson and her memories of his accomplishments and caring personality, her father's work maintaining fires in the furnaces of West Asheville apartment buildings, a favorite hot dog stand on the corner of

Burton Street and Haywood Road, relations with the white kids from other neighborhoods, and the creation of an Asheville Catholic school for African-American children by the woman her mother did domestic work for. While I had a series of prepared questions for the interview, it quickly became apparent that I should be as quiet as possible and let her mind wander where it may.

While the issues inherent in me being a young, white, male interviewer were surely there, not much seemed to inhibit her from saying whatever she wanted to, for which I was very grateful. She told of riding the bus with the white children and getting off on Burton Street while they continued to ride on to their neighborhood “We rode the bus with them. With the white kids, we all had to ride the bus together. When we got to Burton Street they would give us some kind of slur remark, call us something, and ‘all off at burr head junction’ and stuff like that.” She would candidly tell a story like that, then soon after tell a story about how her children’s experience of race in Asheville were radically different:

And my children in a sense, I have never figured it out, if something happened in school, and I said “were they black or white?” they’d say “I don’t know.” So I had to almost try to say “is they light skinned?” or whatever, trying to get it out of them. But they never paid any attention, it just didn’t happen with them, and they had no problems, never had any problems going, and they didn’t have, and they had some problems, you going to have some. When integration had come to Lee Edwards High, because that was the white foundation of Asheville.

That was one of my favorite quotes in the interview, especially the “and they had no problems, never had any problems going, and they didn’t have, and they had some problems, you going to have some” section. It demonstrated to me that she was simply speaking as she thought. She had not prepared an objective for her thoughts to support that would be acceptable to me, to her, to anybody, she just spoke. She told me her children had no problems in school, because that’s what she remembered, then she remembered something else that made her critique her first memory, so she did. I don’t mean to assert that she was all that comfortable with me, or that my interviewing style released something in her, just that, for whatever reason she seemed to speak unencumbered by many of the obstacles that many of us find in expressing ourselves. In doing so she expressed the reality of her personal history, which I think to be the most valuable kernel in conducting oral histories. She did this with many of the topics we spoke about. The interview was both highly informative and a pleasure to conduct.

My final interview was conducted on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, 2014, at the Burton Street Community Center with Mr. Ross Peterson. I had met Mr. Peterson while conducting the group interviews, and had since seen him at a couple of community functions, but his was the first time I had an extended conversation with him on something besides sports. He has been one of the friendliest members of the group every time I’ve been around.

His interview was different than many of the rest. He was not as prone to speculation and elaborate storytelling. When asked a question he would respond to it politely and give as much information as seemed necessary. This wasn’t a bad thing, I got several good stories about his life and about the neighborhood, they just took a different form.

He talked to me about being the second African-American fireman in the Asheville fire department, he talked about growing up in a community where everyone knew each other, he

told about the time a cross got burned in the neighborhood, and he told about the importance of the senior group at the center and the sense of community he got from that. In total it was about a half an hour, and an interesting interview.

After completing the three interviews I transferred them to a laptop and began transcribing, which was by far the most time consuming aspect of the project. I averaged roughly thirty five to forty minutes of typing for every ten minutes of recorded interview. I then edited them down to present to the center, which held its own set of challenges. There were several words it was difficult to make out, some of them spoke about very sensitive issues that required me to make difficult decisions about what was appropriate to share or not, and many of them spoke in dialects that I was conflicted about how much of which to represent in the transcriptions. In the end I think I reached a reasonable balance and am pleased with the results.

The final product was a binder full of the transcriptions and a set of CDs of the interviews in their entirety. I gave them to Shateisha on the 21st of November, 2014, and she seemed pleased. She said the seniors would like them a lot, and that she was very thankful for all the help that all of the class members had given to the center.

## **Ties to Academia**

Alessandro Portelli leads his essay “What Makes Oral History Different” with a quote from Agatha Christie’s *Elephants Can Remember* that succinctly and brilliantly defines the academic relevance of collecting stories: “It’s important to know certain facts that have lingered in people’s memories although they may not know exactly what the fact was, why it happened, or what led to it. But they might easily know something that we do not know and that we have no means of learning. So there have been memories leading to theories (Portelli, 32).” Portelli argues that oral history’s subjective, narrative qualities are their immense value, not their faults, and that they should be considered as valuable resources.

My study at UNCA has been a major in French, a minor in History, and work with Political Science in conducting this project. All of these subjects can be tied around individuals’ narratives. The individual’s story subtly critiques and reconfigures the way we compose our common history and our imagination, forcing us to constantly evaluate what power structures have determined what we consider to be true historiographically, linguistically, and politically. The story of how one person communicates with another is the building block of how complex linguistic relations are created and constantly differentiated, in turn constructing the subject and his or her narrative. Engaging with the seemingly mundane stories of humans from many times and places is a practice that transcends discipline.

Portelli highlights one of the ways in which oral history can inject new modes of truth into a variety of disciplines when he suggests that the role of oral history is to tell us not about historical events but about their meaning, particularly if the interviewee is of a non-hegemonic class or social group (like the Burton Street Seniors). Their interpretations of events can shed a radically new light on what we consider to be common knowledge. In this light he asserts that oral history’s greatest value is the interviewees’ subjectivity itself, not their reference to objective fact (Portelli, 36). What the teller of the story thinks happened is as real as what

“objectively” happened, and gives us a new version of a reality we formerly thought to be singular. Following this logic he proposes: “the importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerges. Therefore, there are no ‘false’ sources (Portelli, 37).”

For a broader view of how the collection of oral history can be inserted into the writing of history as a whole we can look to Michel Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History.” He asserts that “we want historians to confirm our belief that the present rest upon profound intentions and immutable necessities. But the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference (Foucault, 89).” In other words, we want historians to engineer the events of the past to confirm our ideas of the present; instead they should be rattling our conceptions of present truth by way of our assumptions of the past. To do this the historian must “refuse the certainty of absolutes (Foucault, 87)” in order to demonstrate the events of history as “the iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance (Foucault, 89).” Oral histories offer an excellent opportunity for the historian to complete this task. By infusing personal, subjective, narratives into the understanding of history, it insures that we cannot resort to absolutes. No totalizing system can be composed when individual narratives demonstrate the inherent flaws in that construction.

This use of oral history in this sense also seems especially politically pertinent. Engaging with contemporary American politics is a constant act of cognitive dissonance. We know on the one hand that all are equal before the law, and we see on the other African-American children being killed by police, women suffering endless abuses at the hands of our national legislature, immigrants being treated as less than human, and many other threats to our faith in modern American politics. If we try and remedy these problems by returning to the same hegemonic objective history of American political thought that created them, we can do nothing but repeat and further these systems of alienation.

The importance of how we write our history cannot be overstated in determining how we create our political future.

In historiography -- whether it is that of a form, a national population, or a single productive psyche -- the decision between continuity and discontinuity is not an empirical one; as I've said elsewhere. It is taken in advance, as a kind of absolute presupposition, which then determines your subsequent reading and interpretation of the materials (sometimes called the facts.) (Jameson, 3)

How we conceive of our past determines how we interpret the present and a possibility of a future. To be able to create a political space capable of actual change we must try incorporate into our history the narratives of those who have been muted, minorities, immigrants, women etc., as this forces us to not only critique the political system but also the methods in which affirm these systems as true, or rational.

To elaborate on this process we can turn to the work of Antonio Gramsci. Early in the section on the study of philosophy, he delivers one of the most celebrated quotes from his prison notebooks “the starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory (Gramsci, 324). Later in the section he elaborates “consciousness of being part of a particular hegemonic force (that is to say, political

consciousness) is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one (Gramsci, 333).” Consciousness of one’s position inside a hegemonic political consciousness, the type of consciousness I assert is in part developed by engaging with the personal narratives of others, is the first stage towards removing the hand-me-down political and historical ideology that separates our theory from our practice, and which instills in all of us a feeling of alienation and cynicism towards a hopeful political future.

An exciting example of oral histories being used to positively alter our shared national history is Beverly Bunch-Lyons’s “‘No Promised Land:’ Oral Histories of African American Women in Cincinnati, Ohio.” The oral histories have to do with the “great migration” of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North. She writes that a majority of histories about this historical event have been written from the perspective of men’s transition to different work forces and different environments, neglecting the women’s perspectives. She demonstrates that this is a serious flaw in the writing of history, because it neglects certain important aspects of the transition that would have only been felt by women. One example she gives is that women were largely responsible for communicating with the people left behind and upholding certain traditions in the domestic sphere. It’s often considered that families cut ties with most of their southern roots after their journey, but in actuality maintaining these bonds may have been an aspect of women’s lives that we have overlooked (Bunch-Lyons, 10). This is only one of many examples of the ways in which women’s narratives demonstrate important and often neglected aspects of this larger historical event.

The ties to academia here are very important. Accepting the subjective narrative as a legitimate academic source and allowing it to shape the way we write history, view politics, and engage with a whole other host of disciplines opens the space for a multitude of exciting new ways to seek genuine progress and not the rearticulation of the same systems of alienation.

## **Challenges Faced and Response to those Challenges**

The two principal challenges I have faced were the problems at the beginning of the semester due to the seniors not receiving their previous interviews and being neglected by the class, and then the group declining to do anymore interviews. I do not believe the two are connected, although that did cause me worry.

The first problem, if I am correct about the two not being connected, was solved by delivering the interviews they should have received previously, and by setting goals and creating questions in advance so that the center and the seniors knew what was going to happen. I delivered the CDs and the goals/questions to the center on the same day, and after that these particular issues were not mentioned again.

The second problem was none of the seniors volunteering to be interviewed after the Andersons. The reason they gave was that they are currently too busy. I believe that this is not a cause of lingering bad blood from the first challenge for two reasons. First, Mr. Anderson is the head of the group, in touch with how they are feeling, and he and Ms. Anderson were very hospitable to me, accepting me into their home and speaking freely during our interview. Second, the two additional interviews I conducted were with members of the Burton Street group, and both

parties were exceedingly friendly and happy to talk. For these reasons I think that the challenges were not related and have been successfully overcome.

These challenges were instructive in doing work with a community, especially with groups of senior citizens. It was a good reminder that the community does not exist at your convenience, and assuming that it does serves only to weaken established bonds. The plan that I had did not work out, but instead of falling completely into disarray as it would have if my distress had ruled the day, those with more experience were able to find new avenues to complete the project in a way acceptable to me and my faculty and community advisors.

## **Results**

The result was the delivery of three interviews with four seniors, in audio and transcribed format, to the Burton Street Community Center. I believe the individual seniors who gave me the interviews, the senior group as a whole, and Shateisha were all pleased. I also think the possibility of the continuation of this work is open, both for future classes and myself.

This project, as well as the many others conducted by my fellow students this semester, all went well. We are proud of our work, the center is happy with the results, and I think the relationship between our class and the Center is in a better place than where we found it.

## **Sustainability**

I think that the model for this project is sustainable. I have the original group interviews along with the individual interviews, plus the questions that I've used, and some writing on the way that I've generated them. These have all been given to two students in an Anthropology course who are assembling descriptions of all the work being done at Burton Street. I hope that my contribution will be useful for future groups of students to generate models for their own collection of oral history.

There was also interest from the Center in continuing with the senior's oral histories, and I think there are several interesting directions that could go in. There could be full length life interviews done with one or two seniors a semester, which would be excellent additions to a Burton Street oral history collection and a fascinating addition to these interviews.

Another interesting direction that could be taken is to return to either the group format or shorter individual interviews and focus on one specific event or very narrow topic to try and generate a wide swath of input on it. Linda Shopes advised on some of the advantages and pitfalls of doing oral history in relation to the community in this way in her article "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities," and I would consider that to be essential reading in terms of continuing this work.

## **Conclusions**

The ideas that I held before the semester about the importance of oral history have been strengthened. I have been repeatedly impressed with those that I have interviewed and the strength of the community that they come from. The conducting of these longer interviews, coupled with the theoretical research that had to be done to write on the connections with academia, have propelled my interest in, and raised my esteem for the collection of oral history.

I have also been reminded at every step of the process how important it is to be mindful of the community you're working with. In doing the interviews it was necessary for me to remember my place as an outsider, as a young, white, male, so that I could conduct myself with the proper respect. In work outside the interview, I had to remember that I was working with a group of people who existed for many more reasons than to help me, and that I had to be attentive to their needs, and flexible as the work went on. All in all my relationship with the community is good and I am comfortable with where I left the work.

I am proud of the work I have done, hopeful that I can continue it in some way, and excited to see what others can create with oral history in this community and others.

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