theories and methodologies

Dislocation Is My Location

VIET THANH NGUYEN

AS SOMEONE WHO HAS SPENT MOST OF HIS CAREER WRITING ABOUT OTHERS, I FIND IT ODD TO SEE MYSELF, OR WHAT PASSES FOR ME, BEING written about by others, especially academics, the people with whom I am most familiar. Who is this "Viet Thanh Nguyen" that they are discussing? Is he the one whose name appears as such on the cover of the Vietnamese translation of his short story collection, *The Refugees*, instead of as Nguyễn Thanh Việt, his Vietnamese name? Has "Viet Thanh Nguyen" disabled, in himself, the authenticity that most Vietnamese people hold dear and that he has been reminded of constantly throughout his life, symbolized in his name and his mother tongue? More important and urgent to him, is "Viet Thanh Nguyen," in being discussed in such a manner, already dead?

If the author is dead, then a ghost writes this text, or at least haunts it. If that ghost speaks in the future to belated audiences, it will only be because of language. Let's proceed from language, then, from how English is not the author's mother tongue but my native tongue. How he, or I, came to lose a mother tongue and gain a native tongue is one explanation for any theories and methodologies that I possess. I—the ghostwriter—came as a refugee to the United States from Vietnam in 1975. At four years of age the only language I possessed was my mother tongue, although it was also spoken by my father. That mother tongue of mine should have grown ever more fluent, ever more confident. Instead, it froze in the Pennsylvania snow, where my best memories of childhood still reside, before the full impact of history and my refugee existence struck me, first through the suffering of my parents and then through the "body count" of the millions of war dead to whom Sunny Xiang refers.

What kind of language would be adequate to the personal example of the sacrificial parents? What language should I use to speak of the millions who did not survive, unlike my parents, and whose deaths I know only in the abstract? A mediocre language would not suffice. A mother tongue, no matter how authentic, if inadequately mastered, would never do. As I look back some thirty

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or forty years later, I can only conclude that losing a language is not always a passive act. Loss is not always due entirely to the circumstances of the immigrant or the refugee, who often lacks, as I did, the family, community, or culture needed to sustain and nurture the mother tongue. Sometimes the loss of a language is also a choice. One of the things that has caused me the greatest guilt is that I let the mother tongue go to make room for the native tongue of English. In my own life, I was never as culturally fluid as many of my characters, certainly not as much as the narrator of *The Sympathizer*. His fluent bilingualism, as much as the rest of him, is purely fictional.

Knowing that I was not fully bilingual was one of the reasons I never believed that I was speaking for the Vietnamese, whoever they were. Paradoxically, I gave up the mother tongue to master the native tongue so that I could eventually write a novel that "does not so much give voice to the voiceless—the Vietnamese have been speaking and writing for a while now—as it does seek to disabuse the cultural systems that perceive the Vietnamese as voiceless," as Ben Tran puts it. His concept of "literary dubbing" quite nicely encapsulates one dimension of *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies*, both of which seek to foreground the act of speaking and the act of being spoken over, or dubbed, or translated, or misrepresented.

Literary dubbing "disrupts the body-voice continuum," Tran says, "[b]ecause [it] replaces the language of thought and speech with the language of representation." *The Refugees* is more interested in that body-voice continuum, that act of speaking from (but not for) Vietnamese or refugee perspectives. I was aware of the complications of literary speech from, for, and by members of a minority group, having already written *Race and Resistance: The Literature and Politics of Asian America*. Despite my critical awareness, however, I could do no better at the time of *The Refugees* as a writer. Realism dominates that collection of short stories. In contrast, *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies* more aggressively explore how language and form can alter our understanding of a reality constituted by millions of dead, although the books do so in very different ways.

Xiang says that "[s]alvaging the unrepresentable—the dead—requires distributing the authorial persona across many genres, texts, and professional dispositions." I learned that lesson from the first moment of my doctoral program at UC Berkeley, when I told the English department chair that I wanted to write a dissertation on Vietnamese and Vietnamese American literature and he said that I could not do that. I would not get a job. He was not wrong in 1992, but his message was that English—my language, my literature, my profession—would not acknowledge the fate of the bodies that had shaped me. As an English scholar, I would have to wait over twenty years to complete the project that I thought I would work on in graduate school, what became *Nothing Ever Dies*. Only as an English-language writer of fiction, rather than as an English professor, could I acknowledge Vietnamese bodies. That was what I set out to do in *The Refugees*, written in the margins of my life as a graduate student and professor.

I wrote *Race and Resistance* and *The Refugees* from within the constraints of those margins. The former, a first book born from my dissertation, is marked by the conventions of academic discourse, muscle-bound with theory and jargon in the kind of display that academics like to flaunt and like to look at. The latter, a short story collection where I taught myself to write fiction, is marked by a svelte liberalism. I invested in a straightforward mode of representation because it was what I was capable of doing and what was most clearly encouraged by a mainstream literary industry. In my stories, I spoke about Vietnamese people, and I explored them as a diverse people who are part of a diverse United States and Vietnam. Both books were written while I wore masks (even as this

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article is written while I wear a mask, possibly one that I cannot see myself).

One mask was the academic one that I donned to survive in a white-dominated academia where I was sometimes the only nonwhite person in the room. Another mask was the writerly one, marked by the features of a liberal writer hoping for approval from the gatekeepers of literary success. I knew I was wearing those masks. As Xiang puts it, "we might view Nguyen's authorial program as an especially Asian American phenomenon in that his claim to literariness is informed by a hyperawareness about the political betrayals that both academic institutionalization and mainstream fame can entail." Wearing these masks was a way of surviving my institutionalization in academia, if by "institutionalization" we mean acquiring conventional theories and methodologies, both as a critic and as a writer. Institutionalization was both a maturation and a betrayal of the wild literary dreams of my youth. I would survive in academia, but not as the writer or scholar that I had wanted to be when I began.

As a naive and idealistic scholar and writer, what I hoped from the beginning was that I was doing something, rather than doing nothing. The ending of *The Sympathizer* pivots on the problem with "nothing," and the mission of the narrator is to answer the question, "What is to be done?" (2). As an undergraduate and graduate student at Berkeley, I was very concerned with that question, and I became convinced that the act of literature—writing it and writing about it—was the doing itself in the wake of all those dead bodies. Tran writes:

> For Nguyen, the significance of nothing points . . . to the passivity of war's spectator—who is both a witness to historical events and a viewer of movies that contribute to the unethical memory of war. The protagonist and narrator of *The Sympathizer* eventually confesses his war crime of passive spectatorship, transforming his writing—through literary dubbing—into ethical remembrance.

I was one of those spectators, in terms of watching movies and reading books but also in terms of looking at my parents and what they had been through: being refugees twice, separated from most of their family for decades, and enduring the travails of running a grocery store, including being robbed at gunpoint at least twice and shot once (not to mention being attacked with a hand grenade in Vietnam and seeing two police officers shot to death outside their San Jose store). All that I had seen firsthand and heard secondhand made me want to write and be a witness.

Since I could not write a dissertation about Vietnam in my English doctoral program, I resolved to get as close to the bodies as possible by writing on Asian American literature. While my older brother was a real medical doctor working on real bodies, I was a critic looking at symptoms through the bodies of texts. As for being a fiction writer—that never came up with my parents, who already deserved some kind of prize for tolerating my pursuit of a PhD in English, which at least might lead to a respectable job. Since there was very little such hope when it came to becoming a writer, I wore the academic mask at home with my parents. Doing so made me just like many other Asian Americans and Asian American writers, caught in an "inexorable double agency" that "encapsulates the tortuous history of Asian American subjectivity," as Yunte Huang puts it (using "double agency" in Tina Chen's sense). Wearing masks was itself a methodology of survival and negotiation, born from a subjectivity located between evading the public surveillance of dominant (white, academic) power and the private surveillance of suffering, sacrificial (Asian) parents.

Those parents' sufferings and sacrifices are born from war and the struggles between competing powers in the United States and Asia. That those struggles have led to crimes and might themselves be crimes helps provide context for Huang's claim that the "spectacular

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success of such genre-mixing works as *Native Speaker* and *The Sympathizer* elevates the status of crime fiction." *The Sympathizer* is concerned with both the offenses of individuals and the crimes of states and armies. Addressing state crimes and war crimes is certainly a theoretical choice in *The Sympathizer*, in which I reject the pervasive trend in contemporary American literature toward being apolitical. This apolitical tendency is due to the demands of a primarily white literary industry and to the way literary-fiction writing is taught in the university through writing workshops. Such workshops are the "blind leading the blind," according to Flannery O'Connor, herself a workshop graduate (86). Part of that blindness is not simply technical blindness about the art of writing but also political blindness about how the most privileged literary aesthetics intersect with dominant ideological thinking.

The Sympathizer splices "literary" fiction together with "genre" and "minority" fiction because it is in genre fiction and minority fiction that we are most likely to find political writing (which is not to say that the politics are inherently radical). So long as it is literary, minority writing occupies an ambivalent space in workshop instruction, while genre fiction is mostly excluded for being too lowbrow. Minority writers, however, have often turned to genre fiction to raise political issues. Huang rightly points to crime fiction as an important genre option for Asian American writers who come from populations already suspected of being criminal or subversive. As for minority writing, even absent genre inflections, it also is frequently political because the conditions of minority existence tend to be explicitly political. The politics of minority fiction, however, are susceptible to containment through the liberal temptation to believe that having a voice, speaking for others, and acquiescing to inclusion, rather than instigating revolt, represent the best possible outcome of politics.

The most radical of American minority literatures is probably the African American tradition, which plays an important part in my writing, evidenced in the title of *Nothing Ever Dies*, which comes from *Beloved*. As Yogita Goyal points out,

> [Nguyen] constellates a range of established metaphors in African American literature, responding to his own call to think comparatively across ethnic borders. The refugee appears as a ghost (like Toni Morrison's Beloved), as an invisible man (like the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's eponymous novel), as a figure of double consciousness (reiterating W. E. B. Du Bois's powerful formulation), and as a critic of racial capitalism (echoing Martin Luther King, Jr., who opposed the Vietnam War).

Thus, even though *The Sympathizer* is not much concerned with including other minority groups besides the Vietnamese, as Caroline Rody points out, African American presence is formally evoked throughout the novel (one correction, however, to her point that "the novel features no black characters whatsoever"—Claude, the CIA agent, is one-sixteenth black, an allusion to the one-drop rule and to the drops of black in the white paint of *Invisible Man* [196]).

The theoretical and political point of citing African American literature was that I did not just intend for *The Sympathizer* to be a part of American literature, although that is a definite intention. As Rody accurately sees, *The Sympathizer* is deliberately written in the manner of epic American novels of the heterogeneous, writerly self, albeit with a difference:

> [A]mong American narrators, only one with an uncommonly elastic sense of self would summon—to help him excoriate American outrages in his Asian homeland—a many-voiced American chorus, swelling "I" to the Whitmanian brink of "we" . . . [,] a "choral" we, an impulse toward *communitas*. . . . Nguyen thus reminds us that the highest calling of the goading voice on the American

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> literary margins has always been to call into being a wider sympathy.

Yes, and *The Refugees* is also part of that literary demand for wider sympathy (or empathy, except that *The Empathizer* makes for a lousy title).

But while I wrote *The Sympathizer* with the notes from my nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature qualifying exam on a nearby shelf, just to remind me of one of my traditions, I was not thinking only of American literature or of the acceptable value of sympathy. The "we" of the novel's conclusion is also the collective "we" of revolution and solidarity, much missed, and much more suspect, in contemporary American literature. Indeed, I never thought of myself as writing the great American novel, sincerely or ironically or hopelessly (don't Philip Roth, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace already own that genre?). I wanted to write the modernist European version of the realistic American novel as grafted onto the Vietnamese refugee body. And if my book was to be a part of American literature, it would also be through my invocation of African American and Asian American authors, not just white ones, even if I did know most of the white ones, even if they did not have to know nonwhite people like me.

As Goyal says of my work, "How might centering the refugee reframe existing classifications of ethnicity, race, and national origin and serve as the ethical optic through which current worlds become legible?" This refugee optic leads to two elements of the novel that might be considered weaknesses or outright failures. Rody points out one possible weakness when she writes that "[l]iterary 'sympathy' becomes here a kind of intertextual porosity that opens the lines of the page to a diverse crowd of forerunners. A reader stirred by familiar voices could still be forgiven for finding this fabric of quotations somewhat odd and not fully integrated into the telling of the tale." "Odd" and "not fully integrated" certainly describes how I feel about myself as a scholar in an English field that did not want Vietnamese bodies or voices and as a writer in contemporary American fiction that may want Vietnamese bodies and voices but without disruptive politics. As Rody goes on to say of the writing, however, "Why should it not display a dislocated, refugee-immigrant subject's virtuoso juggling of disparate, unwieldy sets of forces and sources, or his urgent search for answering faces and voices in his new 'super' nation home, while he seeks to forge an articulate, literary 'I'?" Exactly. Dislocation is my location, one that has been inhabited by many others before me.

If one predecessor of mine was Caliban, articulate and obscene only in the master's language, another would be Frankenstein's monster. He is one of Western Enlightenment's excessive and disturbing creations and an allegory for them as well. If the monster was one such creation, so were the colonized and the postcolonial others of the West, among whom I count myself. Dislocated, disparate, unwieldy, bloated with the best that the master has said and the worst that the master has done, the monster cannot help letting his seams show, unless he wears a mask and distracts attention from them—or maybe draws it to himself—with a gaudy display of the master's tongue.

Was it monstrous, then, to include in *The Sympathizer*—indeed, to make central to it—the act of rape? Was this optically ethical? I included rape, not any other atrocity, because rape is as fundamental to war as combat but is often denied, as I argue in *Nothing Ever Dies*. Rape is fundamental to the refugee experience, too. Even so—must rape be shown? Sylvia Chong takes up this question when she argues that the "violation of the female Vietnamese body sets into motion the violation of the nation and the reclamation of humanity through inhumanity. *They cannot rape themselves; they must be raped*. Is it possible

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to write (or film) the war without traveling through this abject trope?" To be fair to myself, toward the end of *The Sympathizer* one of my characters, the commissar, says this of the triumphant postcolonial, postrevolutionary Vietnamese condition: "Now that we are the powerful, we don't need the French or the Americans to fuck us over. We can fuck ourselves just fine." In other words, claiming the power of representation means attempting to claim power in general and acknowledging how abjection can also be self-inflicted. It was crucial for me to show that we—the Vietnamese—own even rape, that we cannot simply displace rape onto foreign powers. While the French literally and metaphorically rape the Vietnamese in my novel, the Vietnamese do the same to other Vietnamese.

But I understand what Chong is getting at when she points out that the position of the racially abject spectator, which I claim, is analogous to that of the sexually abject spectator, which she claims: "Just as Nguyen cringes in 'intense feelings of disgust, horror, shame, and rage' when he sees himself as gook on-screen, I likewise cringe as I feel myself thrust into the position of these raped women." Finally, she asks, "If the Auteur (and Nguyen) have an 'obligation to show,' do we have a similar obligation to look on?"

Maxine Hong Kingston, who wrote a blurb for *The Sympathizer*, later acknowledged that she skipped the violent parts. So there is no obligation to look. I also had no obligation to look at racist and sexist movies of the Vietnam War, but I felt that I had to do it, in order to do something about what they represented. The question is whether I had an obligation to show the damage, and, if I did, whether I did so ethically (Tran seems to think so). *The Sympathizer* does not look away from the violence done to Vietnamese bodies, but it looks on from Vietnamese points of view. Chong's charge is that my representation of heterosexual rape is problematic because I show it through the male gaze. On the one hand, once I made the decision to write from the first-person perspective of a masculine and misogynist narrator telling a crime story and war story, I was bound by certain conventions of genre. On the other hand, I did not have to make that decision and could have told a different story if I had wanted to depict rape in a less problematic fashion.

That other story would have had to occur in an alternate universe or a subsequent novel. An alternative way of portraying rape can be seen in my story "Black-Eyed Women," from *The Refugees*, which likewise pivots on a rape, this time on a refugee boat. Unlike *The Sympathizer*, the story shows the rape from the victim's point of view and in far less graphic and disturbing detail. But the necessity of acknowledging rape, as part of an ethical refugee optic, persists. As for *The Sympathizer*, if it had not dealt with rape, so central to war and refugees, it would be a lesser novel. If it had dealt with rape differently, somehow gesturing at a worldview beyond the limits of the narrator's masculine and misogynist perspective, the novel's semirealistic seams might have burst.

As disturbing as the rapes are, *The Sympathizer* is meant to be a novel both intellectual and visceral, and taking on those two dimensions is the closest thing to a theory and methodology that unites my fictional and critical practices. Once I made the intellectual commitment to a certain story and form, I had to feel the novel as I was writing it, even if it was painful to me and the reader. This is a position of "simultaneous self-assertion and wariness," says Sarah Chihaya, which is also the position of this critic writing about himself as a writer. Chihaya goes on to say that "we are all on unsteady ground and may not always be able to maintain critical distance" from my work. That is because I am on unsteady ground and not always able to maintain that firm traction myself. My entire existence in the academy, the only profession I have ever known, and in the Modern Language

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Association, at whose annual convention I presented my first paper, at twenty-two, has been both intellectual and visceral, both objective and subjective. My profession draws me in and repulses me, and to avoid revealing my ambivalence and distaste, I wear a mask. Much of my professional life in the academy has been about wearing a mask to pretend that the visceral and the subjective had been left behind, in the refugee world of grocery stores and households saturated by memory and the odors of eucalyptus oil, Tiger Balm, Salonpas, fish sauce, jasmine rice, and anise. But that was not true. If I close my eyes, I can still smell them all, even in my campus office.

The visceral and the subjective were always there behind the theory and the methodology, waiting for the moment when I was confident enough not to give a shit and despairing enough not to give a fuck. The visceral and the subjective lurking within my scholarly self are expressed in these lines that Chihaya picks out from *Nothing Ever Dies*:

> Having carried ourselves over, or been brought over, from the other side—we Gooks, we goo-goos, we slopes, we dinks, we zipperheads, we slant-eyes, we yellow ones, we brown ones, we Japs, we Chinks, we ragheads, we sand niggers, we Orientals, we who cannot be distinguished between ourselves because we all look alike—we know that the condition of our being and our self-representation is that we are both ourselves and others. We are never without identity and never without ideology, whether we like it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Chihaya writes that she

> felt as though Nguyen, who'd been keeping a low profile under the brim of his critical hat for a while, unexpectedly looked up and fixed me with his eyes. . . . [T]he passage felt like a chute that opened beneath my feet and sent me plummeting to another level of readerly identity—certainly not the part of me reading Nguyen's work for *PMLA*, nor any analytically reading part at all, but a personal and vulnerable part.

Writing an essay for *PMLA*, I—born in Vietnam, a refugee, a first-generation college student, a beneficiary of affirmative action in graduate school, a son who still does not speak English to his parents—feel not only the analytical part of me but the emotional part of me as well. And I want to make eye contact with those who want to acknowledge the deeply personal and vulnerable, even as they also want to be deeply theoretical and methodological, even as they know that none of these things can be separated from the others except through the fictional pretense that we, as scholars, are ever only rational.

It took a long time to get to the point where everything that I felt as a refugee, as a child of refugees, as an inheritor of a history of warfare and death, as a passionate and polemical undergraduate who perhaps unwisely wrote a paper criticizing his own professor's influential book, could come back to me. I spent a lot of time in academia learning how to think, and all of that was useful, but what also mattered was letting myself feel. Feeling and acknowledging feeling were theoretical and methodological steps that allowed me to embrace the body that colonization and racism despised, exploited, maltreated. We, the natives, were only our bodies and they, the colonizers, were only their minds.

It's no surprise, then, that the natives who aspire to theory and methodology feel the pressure to forget their bodies and emotions, to use only their minds and their rationality in an academia that pretends that the bodies of academics do not or should not exist. But I felt a great deal when I wrote the passage that Chihaya quotes. I believed that I had earned the right to feeling because I had spent a dozen years laying the groundwork for feeling after reading books, struggling through ideas and theories, exploring sites of horror and its aftermath in Southeast Asia. I

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wrote that passage, that chapter, that book in one long burst extended over several months, where the rhythm and the feeling mattered as much as the argument and the logic. I wanted the reader to feel something, even if it was only to hate an unconventional book, a hatred from which I derive a perverse pleasure, knowing that I have disturbed the reader.

Another way of describing the movement between the intellectual and the visceral, the objective and the subjective, the logical and the affective, is to assert that my work "illustrates the materialist dialectic as proposed by Marx and Engels," as Anjali Prabhu does. Her description of the narrator of *The Sympathizer* could apply to me, if much less dramatically in my case: "[h]e generates the narrative from the knowledge that his bruised body allows his mind to piece together." My bruises are more figurative, but I nevertheless had the sense that my body was important to me, that history had shaped its contours and its visibility, both to others and to myself. In articulating that, I had to be dialectical. While everyone is always shaped by the dialectical, only some of us are conscious of it and struggle to make its movement visible.

The refugee, the colonized, and the member of a minority group are not inevitably conscious of this dialectical movement, but they are more sensitive to it, because of bruised experience, than those not so damaged by history. The refugee, the colonized, and the member of a minority group who are not dialectically conscious are reduced, or reduce themselves, to being easily assimilated, to being acceptable, to being "ethnic." In my fiction and my criticism, I am, in Prabhu's words, "less interested in participating in an 'ethnic' literature (related to immigrants) than in producing a philosophical space that emerges from a moment in history, a moment known as one of violence, war, and separation from a homeland that does not represent any kind of choice."

I share that philosophical space, or an overlapping philosophical space, with those whom Min Song describes as being in but not of the university (he is paraphrasing Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's work on the undercommons). As Song rightly points out, my own work would not have been possible without the existence of the conventional academic theories and methodologies that I like to flagellate with affection (only because I have endured their discipline for so long). Yet there are many, trained as I have been, who would like to speak outside the academic cloister, to the "public." How do we manage these two worlds—of the academic and of the public intellectual? And, as Song asks, "Is fame a good goal for the scholar–public intellectual?" That word, *fame*, has been used a couple of times in relation to me, although I cannot help but think it really applies to Viet Thanh Nguyen. Living in Los Angeles, however, I can testify that there are very few famous academics or public intellectuals here and that the most famous writers run television shows. Fame is relative.

But to get to Song's questions about being a scholar and a public intellectual at the same time: "To be a public intellectual . . . suggests public outreach, open debate in front of large audiences, and contributions to questions of wide-ranging concern. How do we reconcile these two roles, to keep what is important about each contributing toward the same goals of seeing the world as it is and daring to say we can do better?" First, I would say that being a public intellectual, or experimenting with the possibilities of one's academic career, is a bit much to ask of the untenured. I was never that experimental before tenure, but I had made myself a promise as an undergraduate: once I got to that promised land of tenure, I would do whatever I wanted. What puzzles me are all those tenured professors who do exactly the same thing after tenure that they did before. Is this what they truly wanted to do all their lives? If it is, then good for them. But if it is not—if they have been made over by the discipline and been disciplined—then that is lamentable.

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For those with tenure, or for those plotting a more daring future, or for those who have nothing to lose, I would suggest beginning modestly by imagining the "public" as the university, as anywhere outside our own discipline. Ironically, or sadly, the literary critic has, in my experience, the most difficulty being, or the least desire to be, legible and comprehensible to other disciplines, much less the general public. I have met many more scientists working in arcane matters who read literature, and who can give talks to humanists, than I have literary critics who care at all about being understood outside their niche specialties.

So: can the academic of this discipline say anything meaningful to the academic of the discipline in the building next door? Can the academic write a blog for a few hundred motley readers of widely disparate backgrounds? Can the academic present a paper without reading it?

Can the academic just look up and make eye contact?

Answering yes to all these questions was how I began. It was how I got to the point where I have to ask the question: Who does Viet Thanh Nguyen think he is?

I would like to know myself.

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