

A reflexive account

Practicing Ethnography in Migration-Related Detention Centers: A Reflexive Account

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Feminist scholars, as well as community psychologists, have advocated the role of reflexive engagement in the research process in order to challenge power relations. Moreover, the liberating potential of storytelling, especially when working with issues of diversity and marginalization, has been stressed. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on an ethnographic work underway in the Identification and Expulsion Center-CIE of Ponte Galeria, Rome. How the researcher's identities, values, and experiences, alongside power and privilege, have influenced her positioning in the research setting and the relationships formed with the different members is the subject of discussion. In sharing the story of this work, the final intent is to contribute to the joint effort to foster a reflexive community psychology practice, incorporating feminist goals, and a dialogue about ethnography in community psychology.

KEYWORDS *migration-related detention, ethnography, reflexivity, power relationships, storytelling*

In the last decades, migration-related detention has become a mechanism of border governance regimes used by states to manage and control individuals' mobility. Migration-related detention is the deprivation of liberty of migrants due to their irregular status. According to this practice, typically based on administrative grounds, migrants may be detained up to many months, until being identified and deported, or having their claims adjudicated (see Global Detention Project, 2009). Over the years this mechanism has become stricter, increasingly affecting the lives of undocumented migrants, their family members, and communities at large (Esposito, Ornelas, & Arcidiacono, 2014).

Despite the growing concern shown by academia about this issue, a large part of scholarship has been based on secondary analysis (e.g., media account and legislation), or post-detention interviews, due to the difficulty in gaining access to these centers (Bosworth, 2012). Only in recent times have some scholars been permitted to conduct research within migration-related detention contexts, thus developing a line of research on everyday life in detention based on the use of ethnographic approaches (see Bosworth, 2012; Hall, 2010, 2012). This research is of great value for understanding the identity of these sites of confinement and enclosure, their impact in terms of lived experiences, and the ways in which power is negotiated within them (Bosworth, 2012). Furthermore, in thinking through ethnography as embodied research, these first-hand accounts reveal the salience of researchers' identities and experiences for the development of the research process and the engagement with participants (Border Criminologies, 2013a, 2013b).

Challenging implicit assumptions embedded in traditional psychological research and theory, feminist scholars have long highlighted the importance of reflexive engagement in the research experience in order to construct socially conscious and critical knowledge (e.g., Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992). In this view, reflexivity is a strategy through which researchers critically reflect upon the impact of their own stories,

values, and social statuses on the research and on the relationships with the participants (Reinharz, 1992). Sharing feminist concerns, more recently, many community psychologists have invoked a reflexive community psychology practice based on the sharing of scholars' stories about the challenges and vulnerabilities experienced in working with diverse groups in diverse communities (e.g., Arcidiacono, 2009; Harrel & Bond, 2006; Kelly, 2002; Reed, Miller, Nnawulezi & Valenti, 2012; Stein & Mankovsky, 2004; Trickett, 1996).

Focusing on the tensions related to power and privilege *versus* powerlessness and oppression, Mulvey and colleagues (2000) advocate the use of descriptive narratives and critical reflection in order to share personal stories about how community work is carried out and reveal whether and how it challenges inequality and promotes social justice. Harrel and Bond (2006) define reflexivity as a process of "owning up to one's own privilege and exploring how that privilege is manifested in one's thoughts and action in diverse contexts" (p. 373). In this sense, these scholars warn of the resistance to personal exploration of privilege embedded among community psychologists with a social justice orientation, as well as the risk of intellectualizing the concept of privilege. Speaking about community action-research, Arcidiacono (2009) stresses the responsibility of scholars to produce transformative knowledge being sensitive to the "circuit of *reflexivity* between subject and object of knowledge" (p. 118). According to Mantovani, reflexivity is viewed as a dialogic and interactive process undertaken by the researcher through the relationship with participants – i.e., all people somehow taking part in the research process, including the research team- and aimed at gaining critical consciousness about underlying theoretical and methodological choices (Mantovani, 2010, as cited in Arcidiacono, 2009). In this view, reflexivity is a key strategy for building research relationships based on mutual trust and respect and, ultimately, a central criterion of validity in qualitative research (Arcidiacono, 2009, 2012).

Despite these encouragements for engaging in a reflexive practice, Cosgrove and McHugh (2000) note that the research published within community psychology has still not fully integrated reflexivity into its paradigm. Furthermore, Arcidiacono (2009) stresses how the researcher's practice of being “within the field” and of engaging in a reflexive process (i.e., reflexivity, situativity, and agency) usually is not valued as a scientific competence to be trained, but rather as the product of contingent and subjective circumstances.

Drawing upon an ethnographic work, relying on participant observation and topic-focused interviews (Arcidiacono, 2012, Arcidiacono & Procentese, 2010), which is underway in the Identification and Expulsion Center-CIE of Ponte Galeria, Rome, this paper discusses the challenges of engaging with contexts of mobility and border control. To this end, an exercise of reflexivity is carried out in order to figure out “the complexities of identity, of difference, of power and privilege” (Border Criminologies, 2013a) navigated by the researcher in the course of her research experience. Power *versus* powerlessness, sameness *versus* otherness, insider *versus* outsider are some of the “guide-lines” for the telling of this story, whose sharing we hope will further the use of a reflexive community psychology practice that incorporates a feminist perspective (see Mulvey et al., 2000), as well as enrich the debate about ethnography in community psychology (see Case, Todd, & Kral, 2014).

THE CONTEXT: THE CIE OF PONTE GALERIA

Ponte Galeria is the largest of the five migration-related detention centers currently operational on the Italian territory. The center has been operating since 1998 and is located in the southern-western suburb of Rome, close to Fiumicino airport. The facility looks like a prison: high walls and fences delimit the perimeter of the centre, which is under camera surveillance. While the administrative functions are undertaken by the Immigration Office of the Police Headquarter, the provision of basic services is entrusted to a private entity (i.e., a

social cooperative). An interforce police unit -consisting of policemen, *carabinieri*, and finance police - is in charge to maintain the security inside the center, while military staff ensures the surveillance of internal/external areas. The center consists of three main areas: an administrative area, a services area, and the detainees' living units. Both male and female living units consist of several sectors, each one with two dormitories, and are surrounded by five-meters high bar fences (MEDU, 2012).

The facility can host up to 354 migrants subject to a removal or deportation order (176 men and 178 women). However, since the beginning of the research, March 2014, the number of detainees in the center never exceeded 150 people. Most of the men come from Maghreb and Nigeria, but there are also EU citizens (e.g., Romanians), who are considered a threat for public order or public security. Among women, the majority are Nigerians, but many also come from China and Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Georgia, Russia). The number of detainees with a criminal background is high among men (around 80%), while the number of victims of trafficking for labor or sexual exploitation is high among women (MEDU, 2012).

Under the current law (Law n.129/2012), detainees can be detained up to 18 months. However, detention rarely exceeds 6-8 months. In the last few years, Ponte Galeria has been the theatre of protests, hunger strikes, and riots undertaken by detainees to denounce the excessive length of detention and the inhuman living conditions inside the center.

BEFORE ENTERING: THE INCIPIT OF THE STORY

The desire - or rather the urgent need - to carry out research in this site, in order to reveal its dysfunctional and noxious nature, while helping promote the closing of these very institutions, has its roots in my experience of working in the place as an advocate for detained migrant women victims of trafficking, violence, and exploitation. Having a background in feminist activism and having worked in women shelters, that are places created "by women

for other women”, this experience has strongly marked my life and professional career. First of all, I have been faced with a totally different setting, which is highly oppressive and hostile, hence completely different from the ones which I was used to (in which to make women feel “protected”, “supported” and “welcomed” was a cultural key component). Furthermore, according to the concept of intersectionality (Cole, 2009), this experience has represented a shift in the identities salient for the exercise of my professional activity. Working in advocacy services for women survivors of intimate violence, I mainly relied on my identity as a woman, which helped me create empathy and a feeling of sameness with the participants. Conversely, inside the CIE my identity as a woman lost its salience, while the one as a White, native, member of the dominant group prevailed. My privilege in terms of migrant status, and the resulting distance with the experiences of the migrant women I met, made me experience, for the first time, a sense of otherness.

Probably driven by these considerations, albeit not totally consciously, it appears relevant to place my decision to pursue the study of these institutions with my emigration to Lisbon, Portugal, where I enrolled in a doctoral program in community psychology. This is how I have become a migrant, even though a privileged one, by undertaking a life-change pathway in which for professional reasons (my fieldwork is in both Portugal and in Italy) and personal ones (I have loved ones in both countries) I always feel divided, sometimes stuck, between two worlds, often with the feeling of not fully belonging to either.

INSIDE THE CIE OF PONTE GALERIA

My professional background definitely contributed to how I managed to conduct research in Ponte Galeria. The support of my NGO, *BeFree social cooperative against trafficking, violence, discrimination*, as well as of other entities working with us, allowed me to have the credibility to obtain a long-term authorization for access to the centre, which is, indeed, not

an easy task, especially for research purposes. Furthermore, the familiarity with many members of the staff and the manager, who had memory of me working there as an advocate for detained women, facilitated me to be perceived not as an outside researcher, devoid of any experience with such a context, but rather as a “partial insider”, potentially able to understand the intricacies at stake in sites like that one. However, this aspect did not spare me from struggling with tensions and vulnerabilities arising throughout the research process.

The account below, chronicles the main identities and values-based struggles, as well as emotional dilemmas, arising over the course of my ethnographic work. Relationships with different setting members, in their tensions and power imbalances, are discussed.

RELATIONSHIP WITH CENTER STAFF, NGOS’ PRACTITIONERS, AND INDEPENDENT AUTHORITIES

Researcher's experience/knowledge of the local context is a key element of community psychology practice (Arcidiacono & Procentese, 2010), and had a particular value in my research, facilitating my relationship with center staff. However, it did not prevent my intrusiveness as a researcher, and, as a result, the occurrence of guarded, suspicious, or even aggressive attitudes on the part of the center staff (on the exploitative and intrusive nature of fieldwork, see Stacey, 1988). It is indeed common practice for ethnographers to be looked at with suspicion (Case et al., 2014). Moreover, as highlighted by Nikuru’s reflexive account about her work on the SIS project (Reed et al., 2012), the researcher's insider/outsider status constantly shifts during the fieldwork: this is what I experienced throughout my research with respect to the different relationships I engaged in. The process of building mutual engagement, openness, and trust has been harder and longer with some setting members than with others. Meaningful in this regard is my first encounter with a social worker who, without any introduction, asked me provocatively "*so now you're coming here every day, aren't*"

you?!?" Although it took time to build up a collaborative relationship with her, eventually she became a key gatekeeper, mediating and connecting me to other local actors.

My relationships with center staff, as well as with NGOs' and independent authorities' professionals, have influenced my feelings, my engagement, and my positioning in the research process. At the beginning of my research I was completely focused on the detained migrants, considering the analysis of their lived experiences was the aim of my study. Professionals, and in particular center staff, were almost invisible in my research plan. To be honest, I felt a sense of ambivalence toward them given their role in these centers. The image of them as "the bad ones who keep migrants in detention" is widespread, especially among activist groups and people who are generally critical toward these institutions.

However, over the course of my research, while I engaged with them on a daily basis, I have become more aware of the complexity of the identity- and value-based struggles in which they were involved, and which made their work emotionally taxing. I realized that many of them, especially the cultural mediators, were faced with the distressing paradox of wanting to help the detainees, with whom they shared an identity as migrants, but at the same time of not being able to do so due to the intrinsic nature of that site, which is devoted only to the confinement and expulsion of people. Furthermore, they felt accused by many people, including some of the migrants themselves, of being "jailers", thus experiencing a conflict between their subjective and ascribed identities. Despite their powerlessness, all the decisions about immigration cases were made by the immigration authorities, they interacted with detainees on a daily basis, dealing with their anxiety, stress, suffering, and aggressiveness. Having to spend several hours per day with detainees, staff members ended up listening to their stories and hardships, building emotional bonds and creating empathy with many of them. Their "front line position" often gave rise to great personal and professional dilemmas in them, making them struggle with their sense of self and their identity as migrants (in the

case of the cultural mediators), and more generally as practitioners devoted to “assisting vulnerable others” (the managing body, as social cooperative, runs services directed to socially disadvantaged populations, thus its workers perceive “assistance” and “help” as core values of their mission, resisting to acknowledge the real nature and social function of CIEs).

The emphatic understanding of the center staff’s experiences allowed me to stop seeing them just as “jailers”, “oppressors”, and made me broaden my research focus to encompass the complexity of their first-hand experiences. As Stein & Mankowsky (2004) point out, “in conducting research with dominant groups, witnessing may help elicit prior experiences of being powerless that are unexamined or repressed, or reveal unguarded narratives that make transparent the workings of an oppressive system” (p. 24). Furthermore, in cases like this, qualitative research can reveal the costs of being involved in such a system.

In engaging with the NGOs' practitioners and the independent authorities who provide their service at Ponte Galeria (e.g., monitoring of living conditions, advocacy for victims of trafficking and violence or for asylum seekers, psycho-social and legal counseling), I understood that, despite their difference in terms of role, they too experienced the tension between subjective and ascribed identities. Indeed, they often felt blamed by the noborder activist groups for legitimizing the existence of such oppressive sites through their action within it. Although based on different positionalities, these experiences evoked my own struggles, based on the decision to work, first as an advocate and now as advocate researcher, “inside” these sites. It has not been easy for me to make this choice, which is based on the belief that is mostly necessary to “enter into” a system in order to grasp its intricacies and to develop critical knowledge to promote social change. I have often questioned myself about it, and I have often felt judged for it. Furthermore, similarly to what happened to the professionals I met, I often felt powerless with respect to the situations I encountered in the course of my research. As some detained migrants pointed out “I did not have the power to

give an answer to their urgent need for freedom”. This feeling of powerlessness has challenged my enjoyment and engagement throughout the research process.

RELATIONSHIP WITH DETAINED MIGRANTS

Although my identity as a migrant helped an empathic understanding of the experiences of the migrants I encountered in my research, I had nonetheless to face struggles and dilemmas related to the power imbalances between myself and the research participants. I was aware of being a White, professional female with access to privileges, opportunities, and freedoms denied to them on the ground of their non-Western origin. Moreover, as a native-born Italian citizen, I was conscious of being a member of the dominant group. Probably enticed by the “seduction of sameness” (Hurd & McIntyre, 1996, as cited in Mulvey et al., 2000, p. 901), I made the mistake to believe that, at least with the women, with whom I shared the same gender identity, I could engage in a relationship of trust and mutuality. In such a relationship, I naively believed, we would be able to recognize each others’ experience (Mulvey et al., 2000). In practice, our different backgrounds as well as my privilege in terms of socio-economic, educational, and migrant statuses have challenged our relationship, raising barriers between us. These barriers sometimes resulted in a distant, distrustful, or sometimes even aggressive attitudes by the women, causing me frustration and challenging my ideal of “sisterhood among women” that I had learnt to value through my feminist socialization.

During our conversations, as an insider, an engaged participant in their lives (Case et al., 2014), I could suddenly become “the Italian”, a member of the dominant group that makes them suffer unjustly, keeping them in detention without having committed any crime. “*Because you, Italians, when you come to our country we do not treat you like this!*” I have often been told with anger. This sense of otherness sometimes made me feel like an outsider entering into their living space, or even an “academic voyeur” spying on their lives (see

Sharon's story in Mulvey et.al., 2000, and England, 1994). Although the "contradictory synthesis" of insider and outsider status has been described as the core of the ethnographer's role (Case et al., 2014), in these situations I worried I might be, albeit unintentionally, colonizing detainees "in some kind of academic neo-imperialism" (England, 1994, p. 247).

In this regard, I recall an event concerning a Bosnian Roma woman. Angry and desperate because her detention period had been extended for an additional 60 days, this woman threatened to hurt herself as well as everyone else in the center, including me. At the time she started threatening, I was in the female living unit, chatting with other detainees. A member of the staff came to warn me of the danger. I got scared, feeling that the detained women's living space was not anymore a safe space for me as a native-born Italian woman. When I met the Bosnian Roma woman, with whom I had built a relationship during my fieldwork (and with whom I continued to have a relationship after this event), she shouted at me "*You come here, you come here and write... But what do you do for us?!?*" (referring to researchers, journalists, practitioners, advocates, lawyers etc.). Some hours later, she cut herself with a sharp-pointed piece of plastic in the middle of the female living unit (fortunately without seriously hurting herself). This event made me feel a terrible sense of otherness as well as of powerlessness, bringing me to question the very rationale behind my research as well as the sense of carrying on with it.

After a thorough discussion with my scientific supervisors, we reached the conclusion that this painful event, rather than making me give up, could have strengthened my motivation in carrying out the research in order to "give voice" to these people and to their stories, mainly socially and politically silenced (also within academia). Like Stein and Mankowsky (2004) stress, it is by apprehending both "the horror and the humanity of what is unfolding around" that the researcher becomes "more capable and motivated to engage in social change efforts" (p. 24). This is the role of "qualitative researcher as witness" (Stein &

Mankowsky). Therefore, this event fostered our reflection on how to make detained migrants understand the importance to engage in research that, although not bringing them any personal benefit in terms of freedom (their fundamental need), aimed to contribute to a broader, long-term, socio-political change, designed to end irregular migrants' oppression through these institutions. Considering the detainees' "survival mode" as well as their different backgrounds - many of them did not understand well my role as an academic researcher since it was not familiar to their experience - this challenge was not easy to address. The main difficulty was to make the participants understand the transformative impact of disclosing their voices through research (Stein & Mankowsky, 2004).

Fortunately not all the relationships have been so challenging and emotionally taxing as the one with the Bosnian Roma woman I mentioned above. Through openness, transparency, and authenticity regarding my identities as well as the research process and goals, it was possible to create a mutual engagement with the majority of the participants. Feeling that I was willing to share my personal and professional experiences, detained women felt more at ease in doing the same. Furthermore, I shared with them potentially useful information (i.e., about rights, laws, procedures, strategies, services inside the CIE). They also asked me to read their "papers" (i.e., legal documents) to confirm their meaning (frequently misunderstood due to the lack of translation).

By overcoming the sense of mistrust held against me (wariness is the main emotion governing the relations inside Ponte Galeria), and recognizing the genuineness of my research goal (through conversations and oral/written explanations) many participants decided to disclose their experiences in order to help others who, in the future, might find themselves in the same condition (see, Stein & Mankosky, 2004). Positioning myself as "an open, totally present, passionate listener [...] interested, affected, and responsible" (Stein & Mankowsky, 2004, p. 24) to what I was witnessing, the relationship with some detained

migrant women became so strong as to go beyond the boundaries of the CIE. Indeed, I am still in touch with some of them and they still inform me about their life after detention. This taught me that, when based on authenticity, nonjudgmental acceptance, and valorization of others' experience, sharing stories in oppressive sites transforms human relationships in intimate and meaningful events. This shows how much the quality of the relationships built with participants is a crucial aspect for the success of the research (Case et al., 2014).

The story has been different with respect to detained men. In addition to the power imbalances characterizing my relationship with women, in the relationship with men my gender identity turned out to be very salient, shaping the research process and the mutual positioning in the research setting (on how the gender of the researcher and of those being researched influences the nature of fieldwork, see Warren, 1988). Male detainees often used their masculine power to challenge our power relationship. This situation was further complicated by the limited mobility I was allowed in the male living unit (I will come back to this issue). Therefore, throughout my experience with detained men I navigated the tension between privilege and oppression arising from being a researcher and a member of the dominant group, and being a woman (see Hamerton's story, in Mulvey et al., 2000). When I entered the male living unit and other male areas (e.g., the canteen) I felt at the same time powerful and powerless, strong and vulnerable. The research experience has trained me to deal with these tensions, while attempting to become a witness of detained men's struggles.

RELATIONSHIP WITH POLICE OFFICERS

Even my experience with police officers has been marked by power imbalances and tensions. Although my research authorization allowed me freedom of access to and movement inside the CIE, the power struggles in the relationship with police staff have often concerned the control of my mobility. In this respect, my gender identity has played a salient role,

highlighting the gendered nature of the experiences inside the CIE. Alongside the controls I had to undergo every time I wished to access Ponte Galeria (during which I had to show my authorization), the main limitation to my freedom of movement was the impossibility, as a woman, to access the male areas by myself. While full mobility was allowed to me in the female areas, the access to the male areas was granted only on prior approval of the police and under escort of male security officers (according to the provision of the Prefecture).

Apart from severely limiting my relationship with male detainees, with whom I mostly interacted in the services area, this aspect revealed a salient feature of the institutional culture, i.e., the symbolization of women as “vulnerable” and “in need of protection”. This symbolization also concerned detained women, viewed by police and center staff as “inoffensive victims” in comparison with detained men. This resonates with what Alberti (2010) defines as the “regime of ‘gendered detention management’” (p. 144), a system which employs “the ‘technologies of gender’ (de Lauretis, 1987) to control migrants’ mobility and divide them into different categories” (p. 145). Symbolizing migrant women -and not only, as highlighted by my account- as “mere victims”, this regime works to reproduce their vulnerability, attempting to silence their voices as political subjects (Alberti, 2010).

In light of these considerations, it is interesting to analyze another aspect of my relationship with police staff, also concerned with my personal and professional identities. Being a young professional, I often happened to be mistaken by the police for a student who was carrying out a dissertation. In addition to arising some discomfort, this mistake highlighted my representation as “harmless”, because young and because woman (consistent with what mentioned above). This experience reflects what England (1994) refers about her fieldwork with managers, mostly old White men. Drawing upon McDowell’s assertion that since women are perceived by men as “unthreatening or not 'official', confidential documents are often made accessible, or difficult issues broached relatively freely” (as cited in England,

1994, pp. 248-249), England notes that her participants tended to volunteer information about marginally legal practices they were engaged in. Similarly, in my experience, police officers often chatted with me, disclosing their frustration for working in a CIE as well as their views on the malfunction of such a system, kept open just for profit reasons. Like England, I wonder whether this information would have been shared with an older, male academic.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the goal of this Thematic Issue is to challenge the “static” and “apolitical” position assumed by much current research on migration (mainly hiding the standpoint of the dominant group), I decided to share this reflexive journey into the intricacies of the ethnographic work we developed in the CIE of Ponte Galeria. The goal was to illustrate the complexity of engaging into ethnographic and qualitative work, especially in oppressive sites like the one described. Furthermore, I aimed to discuss how power and privilege shape the research agenda, access, process, and relationships, especially when the research takes place in contexts of mobility and border control (see *Border Criminologies*, 2013b). This narrative choice stems from the recognition of the liberating potential of stories and storytelling, and their power to challenge inequalities (Mulvey et al., 2000).

As Stein and Mankowsky (2004) highlight, despite community psychologists usually describe their work through the metaphor of “giving voice”, to deal with the stories of both disenfranchised and dominant groups members is not an easy nor linear task. The challenge becomes even more difficult when scholars are faced with the stories of both groups at the same time, as in the case narrated in this paper as well as in most of the ethnographic work. Nevertheless, the risk of undertaking this challenge is counterbalanced by the potential of ethnography for community psychology, and by its value in bridging universal questions with situated experiences (Case et al., 2014). The use of critically reflexive ethnographic

approaches, though not eliminating this risk, may enhance researchers' capacity to address it, becoming a powerful tool for pursuing liberation and social change (Case et al., 2014).

This fieldwork experience taught me that, in spite of our efforts, the exploitative nature of ethnography, and of research in general, is unavoidable (England, 1994, Stacey, 1988), as well as that power imbalances in research relationships are endemic. Moreover, this made evident the intrinsic challenge for ethnographers, which is to balance and negotiate multiple roles and identities (Case et al., 2014), while addressing power differentials constantly shifting across time and space, as well as within and across relationships. In this view, reflexive engagement, as an ongoing process, may become a tool to gain critical awareness about tensions and vulnerabilities inherent to community work. Such awareness, though not removing power differentials, can make us more sensitive and able to navigate them (England, 1994). The way we connect with communities is a crucial aspect of research work (Reed et al., 2012): being honest and passionate witnesses of participants' struggles (Stein & Mankowsky, 2004) helps to create meaningful relationships, allowing participants to decide whether and how they want to engage with us. This is what I learned by this story.

Fieldwork is messy (Border Criminologies, 2013a), especially when it involves dealing with "diversity" (Harrel & Bond, 2006). Moreover, as feminist scholars argue, "fieldwork *is* personal" (England, 1994, p. 249), hence, political. I conclude by joining the call of Reed et al. (2012) to "come out and get messy" to create "a community of scholars open to self-appraisal and willing to share their messy examples of conducting research in diverse communities" (p. 25). I hope this paper may be a contribution in this direction.

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