Paul Steinbeck
Sound Experiments: The Music of the AACM
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LET'S BEGIN AT the beginning—no, *before* the beginning—with the first sentence of the acknowledgments: "This book is an offering to the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), an organization that has had a profound effect on my life" (ix). The prose is clear-eyed and unpretentious, virtues in all of Steinbeck's writing, but the sentiment is hardly simple; it is delicately poised. Note the word "offering." Steinbeck does not *dedicate* the book to the artists of the AACM, but *offers* it to them, in gratitude for the "profound effect" they have had on him. The tone is one of care, appreciation, and giving back. Steinbeck writes as a white male musician—a lanky bass player from Nebraska, as it happens—who has unfolded his scholarly and musical life in the vast creative space that the AACM has opened and cultivated for over half a century.[1] As he goes on to detail in the acknowledgments, he was introduced to the AACM while an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, via former AACM chair Mwata Bowden. Steinbeck went on to perform with several AACM members, and for his PhD ultimately landed at Columbia, where he studied with one of the AACM's brightest luminaries: George Lewis. Steinbeck's scholarly work in the years since has centered largely on the AACM, offering an analytical complement to Lewis's own compendious history of the organization (2008). Steinbeck's first book, *Message to Our Folks* (2017), delved into the music of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, one of the AACM's premiere groups. The present book is a wider-ranging study of music from other AACM figures and ensembles. It is thus no exaggeration to say that the AACM created the conditions of possibility for Steinbeck's career, a debt he acknowledges in his thoughtful opening gesture.

The statement's tone is representative of the book as a whole: generous, warm, unfussy, and deeply substantive. What it is *not* is angsty. Steinbeck spends

1 For those new to the organization, let Steinbeck introduce it: "Founded on Chicago's South Side in 1965 and still active today, the AACM was—and is—the most significant collective organization in the history of jazz and experimental music. The AACM united dozens of African American musicians who were interested in experimental approaches to composition and improvisation" (2).

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vanishingly little time fretting about the ethics of analyzing the AACM's music. Nor does he turn to high-flown critical theory to address thorny questions of race, representation, and the scholarly gaze. There are no citations of Hartman, Moten, Sharpe, Okiji, or even Baraka.[2] There is instead page after page of closely heard, lovingly detailed analytical prose. Steinbeck writes as a practitioner—a performer within this tradition—who knows the major players well. Indeed, three of the AACM's biggest names blurb the book: Lewis, Roscoe Mitchell, and Wadada Leo Smith. Perhaps as a result, Steinbeck is less concerned about the ethics of analysis, as he has had ample opportunities to discuss his work with AACM members. Scholars who don't enjoy that proximity may well have appreciated some reflection on the matter.[3]

Yet Steinbeck's approach of diving right into analysis without undue hemming and hawing has its virtues. It places the sounds of the AACM at center stage, lavishing on them the kind of analytical attention that elite white musics have long enjoyed. Moreover, his no-nonsense analytical description leaves ample space for readers to supplement it with their own theories, whether critical or musical. Crucially, the low theoretical load makes the book accessible to nonacademics, including AACM members. Steinbeck's demystifying, matter-of-fact narration of musical events will also be especially welcome to those new to the music. For these readers, the book amounts to something of a decoder ring: everything you ever wanted to know about the AACM but were afraid to ask.

Steinbeck has done readers an enormous service in making the music discussed in the book available on his website in high-quality audio files (paulsteinbeck.com/av).[4] Every reader—especially AACM neophytes—should navigate the text with the website open and headphones on. Indeed, Steinbeck recommends listening while reading the analyses (4). When I did, I often found my reading proceeding at about the pace of the music's in-the-moment unfolding, a felicitous coordination. At other times, I finished the prose before the relevant musical section ended, allowing me to pause reading and listen freely until the next timestamp, also felicitous. I nevertheless recommend that readers new to the AACM do some initial listening to the given chapter's music *before* digging into the analytical prose, getting the sounds in their ears and developing some first impressions before working through Steinbeck's moment-to-moment narrative. Such an

2 See, e.g., Hartman 1997; Moten 2003; Harney and Moten 2013; Sharpe 2016; Okiji 2018; and Baraka 1963 and 1967.

3 In this respect, Steinbeck's work differs from that of Marc Hannaford, another Lewis protégé from Columbia. Hannaford writes often about his subject position as a white male musician, and about the ethical stakes of analyzing Black music from that position. See esp. Hannaford 2017, as well as the interview excerpt with AACM founder Muhal Richard Abrams in Hannaford 2019: 91–92.

4 Steinbeck only mentions the existence of the website in passing within the introduction (4). I wish he or his editors at the University of Chicago Press had flagged it more prominently in the front matter, perhaps pointing readers to it via a dedicated page (turns out those unlovely "About the companion website" pages have their uses). Having missed the brief mention on p. 4, I read several chapters before realizing that all of the audio was collected in one place. Much time spent seeking out streaming versions and ordering used LPs would have been saved had the site been advertised more conspicuously. (I'm delighted to own the LPs, though!)

Table 1: Table of Contents

Chap. 1: Roscoe Mitchell, *Sound* [1966]; Muhal Richard Abrams, *Levels and Degrees of Light* [1968]
Chap. 2: Roscoe Mitchell, *Nonaah* [1976]
Chap. 3: Anthony Braxton, *Composition 76* [1977]
Chap. 4: Air, *Air Time* [1977]
Chap. 5: George Lewis, *Voyager* [1987/1995]*
Chap. 6: Fred Anderson, *Volume Two* [1999]
Chap. 7: AACM Great Black Music Ensemble, *At Umbria Jazz 2009* [2009]
Chap. 8: Wadada Leo Smith, *Ten Freedom Summers* [2011]
Chap. 9: Nicole Mitchell, *Mandorla Awakening II* [2015]

*Lewis first composed and programmed *Voyager*, a piece for performer and live electronics, in 1987. Steinbeck analyzes a 1995 performance.

initial "naive" listening can provide a holistic first encounter that Steinbeck's analytical narrative can then focus and shape, bringing local details into sharper relief.

Steinbeck calls the book a "sonic history" (3). It is an apt locution: history taken in through the ears. Its nine chapters are arranged in chronological order, each one braiding historical context with analytical deep dives. Eight of the chapters are dedicated to a single work and/or album by one of the AACM's premiere artists or ensembles. The one exception is the first chapter, which focuses on early albums by Roscoe Mitchell and Muhal Richard Abrams. Table 1 reproduces the book's table of contents with years added in brackets.

To get a sense of Steinbeck's approach, let's dip into the first analysis in the book, on Roscoe Mitchell 1966 track "Ornette." Mitchell's debut album *Sound* features a sextet consisting of saxophonists Mitchell and Maurice McIntyre, trumpeter Lester Bowie, cellist Lester Lashley, bassist Malachi Favors, and drummer Alvin Fielder. I've identified these musicians by their primary instruments, but it is important to know that multi-instrumentalism has always been central to the AACM. Players regularly switch between different instruments within a single composition or improvisation, and the stage for AACM performances is typically arrayed with dozens of instruments large and small. Among these are countless "little instruments," which include musical toys of various kinds, small percussion such as finger cymbals, harmonicas and slide whistles, and much else.

Two of the three tracks on *Sound* feature little instruments prominently. The first track, though, does not, in part because it is an homage to free-jazz pioneer Ornette Coleman, following his traditional instrumentation of alto sax, trumpet, bass, and drums (to which the sextet adds a tenor sax and cello). Here is Steinbeck's prose description of the opening of the track. I've reproduced a significant chunk of it to give the reader a good sense of his analytical voice. To follow the discussion, I recommend that readers pull up the audio at paulsteinbeck.com/av.

> "Ornette" opens with a startling fanfare (see example 1.1 [reproduced here as Figure 1]). Bowie (on trumpet), Mitchell (on alto saxophone), and McIntyre (on tenor saxophone) reach for a high note, then fall into the middle register. An instant later, the other musicians enter: Favors (on bass) and Lashley (on cello) create a

> pointillistic background texture by plucking their instruments' strings, while Fielder (on drumset) doubles the horn players' rhythms. Together, Bowie, Mitchell, and McIntyre play a four-note leaping figure, then a chromatic ascent from E♭ to A, and finally a longer phrase that begins with a six-note stutter and ends with a playful tag in the key of B♭. The B♭-major tag sounds a lot like something Ornette Coleman could have written, as does the next phrase—a slow-paced interlude, starting at 0:11, where Bowie and Mitchell play in harmony rather than in unison. These two phrases, according to one critic [Bill Shoemaker], seem to emulate the "capering and plaintive veins of Coleman's melodic sensibility," and it is easy to hear this portion of the piece as a straightforward homage to the saxophonist-composer who was one of Mitchell's formative influences. But then McIntyre returns to the texture, interrupting Bowie and Mitchell's low-register chord with a shrill, altissimo squall. (15)

Steinbeck's plain-spoken prose has a way of making the unfamiliar approachable. He not only names what one can hear, he characterizes it. The opening fanfare is "startling," McIntyre's interrupting "squall" is "shrill." There is nothing fancy about these words, but they do important work, letting the reader know how one musician deeply involved in this tradition (Steinbeck) experiences the sounds in question. This can be affirming, especially for new listeners: "Ah yes, it *is* a startling fanfare! I wasn't wrong." Or one might disagree: "Hmmm, doesn't sound very pointillistic to me." But Steinbeck is a gentle guide, and such disagreements feel low stakes. Welcoming accessibility is the watchword.

Higher stakes disagreements may arise with regard to Steinbeck's decision to produce all transcriptions in the instruments' transposed keys. I suspect he may have done so to make the transcriptions accessible to the players themselves (including, in this case, Roscoe Mitchell, who is still active). It is hard to argue with this goal, especially given the book's status as an offering to the AACM. But it raises a barrier for readers who are not players of transposing instruments. Among other things, it makes it difficult to determine the intervallic relationships among the parts. Figure 1, for example, includes two B♭ instruments (trumpet and tenor) and one E♭ (alto). One has to transpose all three to concert pitch to figure out, for example, whether they are playing in unison or not; for what it's worth, the first system is entirely in unison except for the first note. Of course, our ears can tell us this too, but in music as potentially disorienting as this, any hurdles to comprehension are costly.

For example, the transpositions disguise the fact that, on the third system (starting at 0:11), Bowie and Mitchell are playing in thirds. This delays recognition that the two of them are not merely playing in the style of Ornette Coleman here—their phrase begins as a near citation. Figure 2a shows Bowie's and Mitchell's parts renotated at concert pitch on a single treble clef. Figure 2b transcribes the second phrase (0:06–0:10) of Coleman's "Congeniality," the penultimate track from his seminal 1959 album *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. The heads of both tunes are in B♭ major. In each, a jaunty unison phrase in that key is followed by a brief pause, and then a slower, quizzical passage in thirds. As the lines between the systems indicate, Mitchell and Bowie match the first two thirds in the Coleman exactly. Further, Coleman and trumpet player Don Cherry take the same

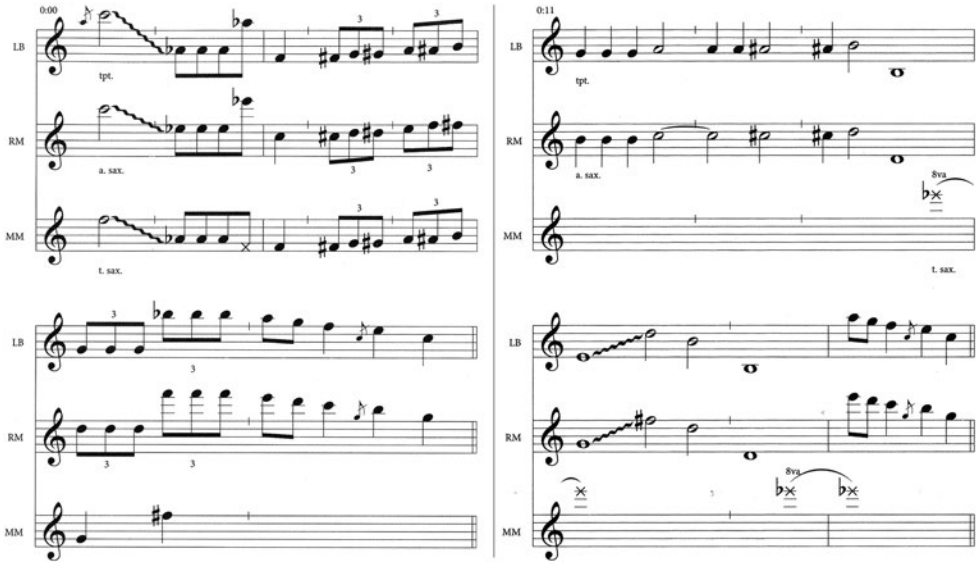

Figure 1. Steinbeck's example 1.1, a transcription of the opening of "Ornette," by the Roscoe Mitchell Sextet. NB: all instruments notated at transposing pitch, though discussed in the main text at concert pitch. Initials to the left of each stave indicate the players.

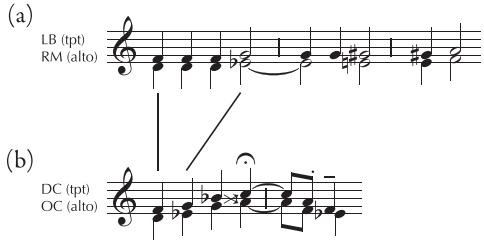

Figure 2. (a) The slow phrase in thirds from "Ornette," at sounding pitch. (b) The slow phrase in thirds (0:06–0:10) from "Congeniality" by Ornette Coleman, off of the 1959 album *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, also at sounding pitch. The players in both transcriptions are indicated by initials: RM = Roscoe Mitchell, LB = Lester Bowie, DC = Don Cherry, OC = Ornette Coleman.

lines as Mitchell and Bowie: alto below, trumpet above.[5] Steinbeck doesn't mention the near citation between the two tunes, and it took me awhile to source it, in part because of confusion created by the transposing scores, which hid the thirds from my eyes (though my ears registered them). A concert-pitch transcription would have aided my rummaging through Coleman snippets in memory.

5 That is, until the characteristically blurred voice crossing in the Coleman, indicated by the crossed arrows. At this point, though, Mitchell's passage is no longer tracking the original.

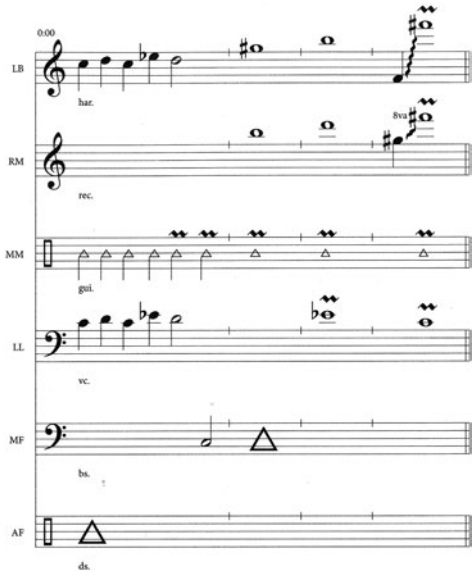

Figure 3. Steinbeck's example 1.4, a transcription of the opening of "The Little Suite," by the Roscoe Mitchell Sextet. Triangles indicate improvised sections.

One can of course quibble about other details in the transcription in Figure 1. For example, I hear the chromatic unison line at the end of the first system in the rhythm (16th–16th–8th), rather than triplets. But such disputes are, again, largely petty. Steinbeck's transcriptions are merely a point of reference—inexact, mnemonic, a placeholder for focusing hearing. And even when one disagrees with a transcription, that very disagreement can lead to sharper audition. At times, though, notation lags what we can hear considerably, leaving much for the reader to fill in. Figure 3 reproduces Steinbeck's example 1.4, a transcription of the opening of "The Little Suite," track 2 on *Sound*. Here, as in his first book, Steinbeck uses triangles to indicate improvised sections. Just *what* is improvised in these passages is not specified, nor can conventional Western notation really do such sounds justice. This is a familiar shortcoming: staff notation is only useful when relatively discrete "notes" are involved. When the sounds are unpitched, or when the pitches are so blurred together or rapid as to be all but indistinguishable (think of Cecil Taylor at his densest), Western notation loses its efficacy. This is especially evident in the passages for "little instruments," with their unpredictable play of sound and silence, their skittering caprice. In these cases, prose is far more versatile, and Steinbeck uses it deftly.

But prose also has its limitations. Among other things, it can lead to play-by-play narration; Steinbeck's prose admittedly often proceeds in this inchworm fashion. The danger of this approach is of course a loss of the forest for the trees. It can also make for a tedious reading experience, though this greatly improves if one listens while reading. Steinbeck further ameliorates the tedium by perforating his analytical narrative with critical and historical asides, as well as by using formal tables such as that shown in Figure 4 below, which parses sections in three

Example 9.4 "Sub-Mission"/"The Chalice"/"Dance of Many Hands": formal diagram.

Aoki solo	0:00–0:53
+ Reid solo	0:53–2:02
+ Umezaki solo	2:02–4:58
+ Baker solo	4:58–5:35
birdsong texture	0:00–1:03
"The Chalice" theme	1:03–2:17
transition	2:17–2:49
dance texture	0:00–2:21
Aoki solo	2:21–3:04
"Dance of Many Hands" theme	3:04–4:08
Reid solo	4:08–5:48

Figure 4. Steinbeck's example 9.4, a form chart for three consecutive movements in Nicole Mitchell's *Mandorla Awakening II*.

consecutive movements of Nicole Mitchell's *Mandorla Awakening II.* Tables like these are indispensable when listening to a large stretch of the music, helping the sonic forest to reassemble from the many local analytical trees.

The play-by-play does, though, have one crucial virtue: it allows one to track the in-the-minute interactions of the performers—the fleeting contingency and dynamism of their decisions. Often in Steinbeck's book the result is a performer's-eye-view of the music: the perspective of an improviser listening intently to the other musicians and responding in real time. This performer-centric perspective is especially evident in the chapter on Anthony Braxton's *Composition 76*.[6] The score of this piece consists of forty different notated modules arranged on twenty-seven cards that can be shuffled and played in any order. The modules vary in prescriptiveness: some are tightly composed with standard notation; others leave ample room for improvised realization; all can be traversed via multiple different paths (e.g., two notes from this system, three from that, and an improvised flourish to wrap it up). Staves often lack clefs. Braxton also employs geometric shapes in various colors to indicate improvisational gesture of different lengths and subgroupings. Steinbeck describes how the players navigate the score, telling us who plays what and how it relates to the current module. The result is a kind of forensic music analysis; it reads like a whodunit. But such an approach tells us much more about the performer's perspective than that of the listener

6 A slightly different version of this chapter was published as an article in this journal (Steinbeck 2018). Material from chapters 2 and 5 also appeared previously (Steinbeck 2016 and 2019, resp.).

innocent of the score. For that listener, the experience can be of a constant flux of seemingly improvised sections, broken by moments of clear compositional coordination (say, via surprising unison lines). The analysis, like the book as a whole, tilts heavily toward the *poietic* side of Jean-Jacques Nattiez's (1990) semiotic tripartition—the side focused on creative activity—rather than the *esthesic* level (focused on listener response) or the *niveau neutre* (the sounding trace as immanent object).

Steinbeck's prose narration is also well suited to documenting the interaction of performer and audience in a live context. His analysis of Roscoe Mitchell's performance of the piece *Nonaah* at a jazz festival in Willisau, Switzerland in 1976 is the most vivid example. Mitchell had been asked to replace headliner Anthony Braxton at the last minute, as Braxton was delayed in transit. Mitchell agreed—bravely—to play a solo concert. The audience was, at first, not happy, greeting Mitchell with hoots and catcalls. As Steinbeck puts it, "Mitchell came to the stage to play a solo concert, but he soon found himself in an unexpected showdown with Anthony Braxton's supporters" (43). As the belligerents hollered, Mitchell played the first phrase of his piece *Nonaah*, holding the last note a bit longer than expected. He then repeated the phrase, holding the note longer still, thus filling the sonic space and preventing further interjections from the hecklers. Then he repeated the phrase again. And again. And again. And on and on, for a total of ninety-six iterations. Steinbeck explores the play of difference and repetition among these iterations in exhilarating detail, his ear cocked as much for sounds from the audience—disapproval giving way to excitement—as for the subtle shifts in nuance from Mitchell's alto. Steinbeck offers here not an analysis of a piece, or even an analysis of a performance, but an analysis of a total social *event* involving player and audience. The music, from this perspective, is no mere aesthetic object of disinterested contemplation but a medium of social encounter and affective ricochet.

To conclude, let's return to Steinbeck's light theoretical touch. As stated above, there is precious little critical theory in the book. I find this largely a fair trade, as Steinbeck provides such a wealth of engagement with the AACM's sounds in theory's stead. At only one point did I acutely miss a more critical-theoretical perspective: the chapter on Nicole Mitchell's *Mandorla Awakening II.* Steinbeck mentions Mitchell's status as one of the few prominent female musicians in the AACM—she would in fact become the organization's chair—but he does not dwell on the fact. Nor does he delve into the centrality of gender in the story behind Mitchell's album-length piece, an Afrofuturist parable that hovers somewhere between Octavia Butler and *Black Panther.* Since the advent of bebop in the 1940s, experimental jazz has been overwhelmingly male, riven with masculine competitive energy.[7] The AACM in its first decades was sadly not much different; at one point the group even seated men and women on opposite sides of the audience for concerts. George Lewis has discussed the gender politics of

7 For an incisive set of essays on gender in jazz, see Rustin and Tucker 2008.

the AACM in some depth (Lewis 2008: 203–4, 459–80), but I would have welcomed more explicit gender theorizing in Steinbeck's chapter, the only one to focus on music by a female composer and bandleader.[8] This isn't just a matter of context, but of music analysis. For the music's fluctuating temporalities and enveloping sonics richly reward a gender-theoretical perspective.[9]

There also isn't much music theory in *Sound Experiments*—or at least much of the field's jargon. Readers will search in vain for reference to set classes, transformational networks, or other high-prestige concepts. In their place is a wealth of plain-spoken description of musical events ripe for extension and elaboration in future studies.[10] Steinbeck moreover leaves significant swaths of the recordings he discusses only minimally analyzed. For example, his commentary on the first track on Fred Anderson's *Volume Two*, titled "Look Out!" primarily concerns tempo, groove, and interaction; there are no transcriptions, and not much fine-grained analysis. But a wealth of further detail remains to be explored analytically in this electrifying track. An intrepid analyst might even dig into some of Anderson's pitch material to see if it manifests any of his etude-like practice routines, which Steinbeck (2010) discusses in an earlier article. In this and many other passages, the book invites further analysis and interpretation, which will be especially welcome to those theorists looking to diversify what they teach—which is, at present, most theorists. For example, I have employed the book in post-tonal analysis courses, asking students to use Steinbeck's analytical overview as a jumping-off point for their own analytical explorations. It has worked remarkably well. The students' writing often involves a finer grain of music-analytical detail, which is as it should be in a grad analysis class, as opposed to a book aiming at a broad readership. I have also asked the students not simply to augment Steinbeck's observations with pcset analysis, but rather to adopt his broad approach to musical parameters. Their inventive treatments of timbre, gesture, texture, groove, and the like has been a breath of fresh air in a class all too often dominated by pitch-based abstraction.

The more time I spent with *Sound Experiments*, the more I found it a marvelously generous book. It is, first of all, rhetorically generous to the musicians of the AACM, beginning with that opening sentence of the acknowledgments. It is also citationally generous. Steinbeck has seemingly read every word ever written about the AACM, and he cites copiously and meticulously. His generosity is also evident in his writerly voice. It is, after all, an act of generosity to write clearly, and he does so on every page. With such writing, Steinbeck makes an entire body of challenging music accessible to a wide readership. That's a

8 Steinbeck also discusses cellist Tomeka Reid, another prominent female AACM-er of the later generation, in the conclusion (specifically, her trio with Nicole Mitchell and Mike Reed).

9 As Audrey Slote (2021) has shown in a paper written for a post-tonal analysis class I led, in which Mitchell was one of our guests.

10 Concerning the relative merits of description and analysis, see Dubiel 2000 and Forte 2000. Steinbeck's book is an excellent exhibit A for Dubiel's argument that the distinction between description and analysis is at best unproductive, at worst untenable.

gift, both to the musicians who made it, and to the readers who now have a far greater opportunity to hear their sounds sympathetically. The very fact that there is more to say, more to notice, more to ponder speaks not to lack but abundance, a plenitude of future listening, engaging, and theorizing. Talk about conditions of possibility.

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