Narrating Feminist Survival: Deborah Levy's *A Living Autobiography*

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Abstract: Deborah Levy's writing often delves into the redefinition of artistic freedom and the re-envisioning of women's identity. Her autobiographical trilogy, *Things I Don't Want to Know* (2013), *The Cost of Living* (2018) and *Real Estate* (2021), provides a daring and poetic examination of female authorship, personal growth, and the continuous navigating of life as a woman. Writing against the grain of patriarchal expectations, Levy does not conform to inherited narratives of happiness linked to marriage, motherhood, and material success in what she calls *A Living Autobiography*; instead, she chooses to write from spaces of instability, ambiguity, and self-reinvention. Thus, the trilogy provides a literary representation of what Sara Ahmed refers to as "living a feminist life"; a never-ending, incomplete process of reconciling freedom, care, and authorship. In this regard, the trilogy can be regarded as a feminist statement that is consistent with the lived, affective politics discussed in Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017). Using Ahmed's ideas of the feminist snap, the killjoy, and the feminist survival to analyze Levy's work, this study claims that rather than merely recounting a woman's personal account, Deborah Levy's autofiction puts feminist philosophy into practice and becomes a vital contribution to contemporary feminist thought by showing how writing the self may also be an act of recovering narrative authority and changing feminist futures.

Keywords: Autofiction, Living autobiography, Feminist killjoy, Feminist snap

1. Introduction

"We are our own survival kits." Sara Ahmed

Over the past two decades, most women such as Maggie Nelson, Rachel Cusk, Annie Ernaux, Olivia Laing and Sheila Heti turned to memoir, autofiction and more hybrid forms to interrogate identity, gender and power. Autofiction, in particular, emerged as a significant form in feminist writing thanks to its capacity to unsettle conventional distinctions between autobiography and fiction, making it possible to create a space to express one's own experiences without being forced to display accurate revelation and description, thus, enabling the author to write freely. Serge Doubrovsky, who coined the term autofiction, defines it as "Neither autobiography nor novel" but "exists in a perpetual oscillation between the two" (1993, p.34). He characterizes autofictional writing as marked by linguistic play, ambivalence and instability, describing it as "an ambiguous, androgynous genre of its own" (Doubrovsky, 1993, p.34). From this perspective, autofiction emerges both as a hybrid form and as a response to the limits of traditional autobiography, a genre in which self, language and narrative are deeply entangled. However, autofiction is still a difficult genre to define. The phrase is typically used to refer to "autobiographical fictions or fictionalized autobiographies", as Siddharth Srikanth notes, but "the appropriate or required degree of fictionality" is still up for debate (2019, p. 348). Since autofiction "violates every principle, signpost, or convention that theorists have identified as distinctive resources of fiction," Srikanth contends that this ambiguity presents a fundamental challenge to genre theory (2019, p. 352). As a result, autofiction challenges both autobiographical conventions and the theoretical lines dividing fiction from non-fiction.

As a contemporary British author, Deborah Levy demonstrates a great interest in the intersection of feminism, experimentation and innovative writing style and critique of social and political environment. Having been born in Johannesburg and relocating to the United Kingdom, Levy is an author whose first-hand experience to displacement, authoritarianism and resistance shapes her writing. She has consistently challenged normative structures of gender, domesticity, and women's creativity in her writing. In *A Living Autobiography* trilogy (*Things I Don't Want to Know* (2013), *The Cost of Living* (2018), and *Real Estate* (2021)), Levy rejects linear self-narration and instead she contributes to feminist life writing practice by also rejecting conventional ideals of fulfillment mostly associated with marriage, womanhood and economic stability. Her rejection of both conventional style and conventional ideals regarding femininity enables her to foreground precarity, transition and reinvention, presenting women's lives not as a fixed and stable product of the society, but as an unfinished and continual process. In the trilogy, Levy blends memoir, autofiction and essayist reflection, transforming life writing into a space where she critically questions and experiences authorship, autonomy and survival. Hence, it should be asserted that she does not position herself within a prescriptive feminist writing, instead her work enacts feminism through form and voice, which, as argued earlier, is fluid and continually evolving. In this sense, Levy's writing aligns with contemporary feminist theories that emphasize experience, affect and resistance, offering a literary practice both representing feminist concerns and actively participating in reimagining even reinventing feminist futures. *A Living Autobiography* trilogy, accordingly, being one of those text resisting conventions regarding self-writing, redefines autobiography as an experimental and critical open space. Within

these open spaces, women actively contest patriarchal expectations that construct them as submissive, silent and responsible for others' "happiness". In this regard, Levy can be read as a feminist killjoy, in the sense described by Sara Ahmed, disrupting expectations that women maintain social harmony at their own expense.

Contemporary feminist life writing has increasingly problematized normative narratives of happiness that explains women's struggles with patriarchal forces of oppression such as marriage, material success and motherhood. Operating as powerful cultural scripts, these narratives posit happiness as a social directive rather than a personal emotion and they, at the same time, render alternative modes of living as failures, deficits or deviations; women who do not follow these cultural scripts as "killjoys". Along with her studies on emotions and "promise of happiness", Sara Ahmed's more recent concepts of feminist killjoy and feminist snap are important terms to introduce because particularly Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) provides a significant theoretical framework for analyzing Deborah Levy's trilogy, offering a vocabulary for understanding feminism as an embodied, affective, and ongoing practice rather than a fixed ideological position.

This article is guided by three interconnected research questions: How does Deborah Levy's *Living Autobiography* trilogy employ autofictional form to challenge conventional autobiography and normative narratives of femininity, happiness, marriage, and motherhood? In what ways do Sara Ahmed's concepts of the feminist killjoy and feminist snap illuminate Levy's representation of refusal, rupture, precarity, and feminist survival as embodied narrative practices? How does Levy's hybrid life writing transform personal experience into feminist praxis, contributing to contemporary feminist thought by reimagining authorship, narrative authority, and feminist futures? Together, these questions frame the study's examination of Levy's trilogy as a formally experimental and politically engaged mode of feminist life writing, positioning autofiction as a practice that turns lived experience into feminist theory in action. Given the word-count limitations, the study focuses exclusively on Sara Ahmed's theoretical framework, leaving comparative engagement with other feminist approaches and life-writing traditions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed (2017) claims that "to bring feminist theory home is to make feminism work in the places we live, the places we work" (p.10), emphasizing the inseparable link between feminist thought and daily spaces. Ahmed further observes that even when composing "texts organized around the history of ideas, I have tried to write from my own experiences: the everyday as animation" (2017, p. 10), so she situates theoretical inquiry within lived experience, thereby rendering feminist commitments concrete and immediate. She emphasizes that by remaining attentive to the everyday, feminist theory becomes more accessible, a strategy Levy likewise adapts in her autofiction by foregrounding domestic, professional, and relational contexts as arenas for negotiating power and identity within everyday life dynamics (Ahmed, 2017). Ahmed theorizes the "killjoy" as a central figure and through this figure the emotional, social and political costs of feminism become visible. She argues that adopting feminism requires consequences because it exposes and disrupts happiness commonly attached to normative power. Ahmed argues "It is not simply that we first become feminists and later become killjoys. Rather, to become feminist is to kill other people's joy; to get in the way of other people's investments" (2017, p. 65). This sentence is not meant to judge feminists, on the contrary, to expose how dominant forms of happiness are built upon silences, exclusions and unequal power relations. She understands and reshapes judgements asserting that "In living a feminist life, we learn about judgments. We learn how they fall. Words surround us, thick with meaning and intensity. We hear these words. We learn from what we are called. It is a feminist calling" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 65). Hence, the killjoy is not simply a figure who is excluded, not wanted, blamed and named; she is also a political one because of these very judgements. Building on Adrienne Rich's (1979) call to be "disloyal to civilization" Ahmed suggests that refusing aforementioned form of happiness is a valid and even necessary feminist practice. She writes: "Our emotions are opened up when we refuse the commandment to be loyal and joyful" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 246). As a result, we can claim that the significance of the killjoy lies in this practice of refusal and keep resisting the voices that tell you to fit in, no matter what.

Another concept Ahmed develops in the same book is *Feminist Snap,* which designates the moment when accumulated pressure, exhaustion and/or violence become so unbearable that feminist subject reaches a breaking point; a juncture that is both profoundly embodied and politically consequential. Ahmed frames snap as a bodily response to that moment of accumulated pressure, writing "Our bodies become our tools; our rage becomes sickness. We vomit; we vomit out what we have been asked to take in. Our guts become our feminist friends the more we are sickened" (2017, p. 255). Snap emerges at this moment of vomiting because of carrying "weight of histories" and reaching a moment that can no longer be carried and thus "things break" (p.255). As Foucault similarly contends power generates resistance and is productive, feminist snap can, therefore, be

understood a Foucauldian production as well. This relational and political act may constitute a breaking point, but it does not conclude there; rather, it signals the possibility of a beginning. Ahmed refers to this duality by writing "Snap, snap: the end of the line (…) Snap, snap: begin again" (2017, p. 192). In every situation that requires choices of either "be silent or lose it", Ahmed sides with rupture, declaring "I would prefer to lose it" (2017, p.194), which emphasizes one's own autonomy. Feminist snap, therefore, becomes an act of political resistance, not an erratic behavior. She explicitly connects the feminist killjoy and snap, noting that "The feminist killjoy might herself be a snappy figure; feminists might be perceived as full of snap" (Ahmed, 2017, p.190). By this connection, she argues that snap and killjoy become survival strategies against the pressures of normative happiness and injustice, and they shape how subjects endure, resist and make sense of the ordinary conditions of daily life.

3. Feminist Killjoy and Feminist Snap in *Living Autobiography*

Since Deborah Levy writes from the viewpoint of a life still in process, her work stands out from conventional memoirs. As Joanne Morra claims Levy "dances with the question" (2021, p. 13) when she writes "autobiographies are usually written in retrospect, right at one's end of life: what would it be like to write one while you were living?", she challenges the genre's tendency toward retroactive writing (Allardice, 2018). In her interview Levy declares that "The 'I' in my autobiography is myself, but you also have to invent a persona through which to speak, in the same way as when I write about a character in a novel; you leave as much out in nonfiction as you do in fiction" (Allardice, 2018). As the statement also hints, Levy uses an unstable and non-singular narrative voice. "Using an I that is close to myself and yet is not myself" is how Levy characterizes her narrating voice (2018, p.28). Levy acknowledges that "for some reason, the letter I on the screen was blinking and jumping and trembling. That's how I felt too" indicating that the physical act of writing mirrored her emotional condition (2018, p.40).

Things I Don't Want to Know (2013) is the first book of the trilogy *A Living Autobiography* and thus serves as the beginning of Levy's own struggle to write her life in a way that she was not used to do. As a result, the text reveals the author's positioning of the work itself.

> *The notebook I had brought with me was labelled 'POLAND,1988'. It would probably be more romantic to describe it as 'my journal' or 'my diary', but I thought of it as a note book, perhaps a sheriff's notebook because I was always gathering evidence for something I could not fathom. (Levy, 2013, p.7)*

The above quote demonstrates Levy's uncertainty about genre and purpose at the moment of writing, which makes the notebook a personal space rather than a clearly defined literary form. Much as she acknowledges that calling it a journal or a diary might seem "more romantic", she deliberately refuses these labels and frames it "a sheriff's notebook". This association is important because this framing makes the notebook what it is: a vital example of feminist autofiction that is filled with observation, collection and evidence, without a settled framework, incoherent, hybrid and fragmented. The act of note-taking precedes understanding or interpreting, suggesting that meaning would only emerge retrospectively, when, as she writes "flick[s] through its pages to remind" herself (Levy, 2013, p.7). In this way, the text emphasizes writing as an ongoing process rather than a finished form, positioning Levy between memoir, diary and investigative record, without consciously committing to any single genre. However, her later statement "This novel, it seems, is what I had been gathering evidence for, twenty years before actually writing it" (Levy, 2013, p. 8) crystallizes the author's recognition of its fictionality along with its factuality. Naming the text as a novel, Levy adopts a term associated with fiction, but her phrasing positions the text in lived experience accumulated over years. The quote implies documentation and memory rather than invention, suggesting that the raw material of the narrative originates in autobiographical fragments. As such, the text occupies an in-between space where autobiography is structured through techniques of fiction, making autofiction a particularly appropriate term to describe Levy's trilogy *A Living Autobiography.*

In her trilogy, we can see how Deborah Levy presents femininity as an "old-fashioned" exhausted script, yet still powerful to impact subjects who do not have courage to step outside (2018, p.44). In *The Cost of Living* (2018), for instance, she examines expectations through which femininity has been organized and structured, in particular, around the association of virtue. In the following quote, how serenity and endurance are constructed as virtue can be seen clearly:

> *Serenity is supposed to be one of the main characters in old-fashioned femininity's cultural personality. She is serene and she endures. Yes, she is so talented at enduring and suffering they might even be the main characters in her story. (..)It was obvious that femininity, as written by men and performed by*

> *women, was the exhausted phantom that still haunted the early twenty-first century. What would it cost to step out of character and stop the story? (Levy, 2018, p.44).*

Here, Levy exposes how femininity is maintained through women's willingness to accept pain in silence. The quote is particularly useful when considered Sara Ahmed's critique of happiness as a regulatory agent. Levy expresses her own rejection of this femininity that she "had been thought" by declaring that the narrative, "written by men and performed by women" was "no longer expressive" for her, signaling what Ahmed describes as a feminist snap (2018, p.44). The question of what it would cost "to step out of the character and stop the story" further positions the narrator as a feminist killjoy, who refuses to continue to feed the inherited narratives of feminine happiness (Levy,2018, p.44).

The inherited narratives about femininity also require women to be in compliant with the role society organizes for them, especially when it comes to marriage as a social institution. In *The Cost of Living*, Levy reflects how femininity is socially organized through this relational identity rather than individual recognition. Based on one of her male-colleagues and his relationship with his wife, Levy touches upon how some women cease to exist and their identities are erased with the marriage. She writes:

> *Ah, I thought, as we walked past the golden trees, she does not have a name. She is a wife. I wondered why my male colleague often forgot the names of most of the women he met at social events. He would always refer to them as someone's wife or girlfriend, as if that was all I needed to know.*
>
> *If we don't have names, who are we? (Levy, 2018, pp.13-14)*

The observation that "*She is a wife*" highlights the reduction of women to their marital status, which positions them as objects in some others' life (Levy, 2018, pp.13-14). Throughout the novel, Levy questions these gendered hierarchies which are constructed and reproduced each day through casual interactions. More importantly, the final question "If we don't have names, who are we?" functions as a feminist killjoy interruption that unsettles the comfort of such practices (Levy, 2018, p.14). The above passage also signals a feminist snap as it is this weight that accumulates and lead women to snap.

Levy reflects marriage in a way that reveals both personal grief and critical awareness. She states unlike her presumption that life would be "more stable and predictable" after certain age, her "life became faster, unstable, unpredictable" (Levy, 2018, p.13). This acknowledgement serves to rationalize her future decisions, while at the same time making her grieve. She owns that grief, even so she is straightforward about what her marriage meant to her: "My marriage was the boat and I knew that if I swam back to it, I would drown. It is also the ghost that will always haunt my life" (Levy, 2018, p.13). This line of questioning is both tragic and productive at the same time since it opens a space for critical insights. Levy writes the ideal that "love that achieves all of these things" could be "a phantom" and asks "What sort of questions does this phantom ask of me? It asks political questions for sure, but I am not a politician" (2018, p.13). Thus, she forges a connection between the personal and the political, echoing a foundational feminist approach. Likewise, in *The Things I Don't Want to Know*, Levy reflects on marriage and motherhood as structures that shape and often constrain women's lives. During her time in Poland, while observing rehearsals of *Medea*, she closely examines the production process and draws connections between the play and her own experiences. Through this lens, she critiques motherhood as a societal system that governs women's most intimate choices and emotions, frequently demanding the sacrifice of their personal desires. She writes: "It proved very hard to re-negotiate the world's nostalgic phantasy about our purpose in life" (Levy, 2013, p.11). Levy continues claiming that we do not fully comprehend "that Mother as imagined and politicised by the societal system, was a delusion. The world loved the delusion more than it loved the mother" (2013, p. 11). Levy's reference to the "world's nostalgic phantasy" frames motherhood as an idealized construction, not a lived reality, one that is "imagined and politicised" and therefore fundamentally illusory (2013 p.11). From a feminist killjoy perspective, naming this ideal as a "delusion" constitutes a refusal that disrupts the inherited narrative that presents motherhood as natural and fulfilling destiny (Ahmed, 2010). By distinguishing *mother* and the socially "loved" idea of *Mother*, Levy unearths how women are valued less as subjects than as symbols (2013, p.11). This *loved* construction was "fathered by masculine consciousness" and sustained through women's systematic erasure of their own desires (Levy, 2013, p.12). The idea of systematic erasure of desires is made clear when she writes "This male consciousness was male unconsciousness. It needed its female partners who were also mothers to stamp on her own desires and attend to his desires, and then to everyone else's desires" (Levy, 2013, p.12). From the perspective of feminist snap, the quote documents the conditions that make snap inevitable: the repeated demand that women attend to "everyone else's desires" accumulates the weight that would finally become unbearable (Levy, 2013, p.12).

Levy consistently reflects on womanhood as a space of negotiation with societal norms, exploring how women's desires are limited by pressures to be likable, nurturing, and self-effacing, and how asserting ambition or independence often leads to discomfort, pushback, and moral condemnation. In the following excerpt from *Real Estate* (2021), Levy recounts a moment when she is pitching a film script to producers about a woman who "follows her own desires" (p.39), in contrast to the inherited narrative. When she presents her concept for the character, the women do not appear enthusiastic. Levy observes:

> *I guessed that no woman around the table had ruthlessly pursued her own dreams and desires at the expense of everyone else. In fact, I knew we felt guilty every time we absented ourselves from the wishes and desires of those who depend on us for their well-being and for cashflow. (2021, p.40)*

From the perspective of the feminist killjoy, Levy and the woman she imagines both purposefully defy expectations. Because her self-centered desire undermines the moral economy of caring, which requires women to put others before themselves, the proposed character is a killjoy. Levy writes, "The kindest female executive laughed. She looked exhausted. There were dark rings under her eyes. Perhaps I was exhausting her" (2021, p.40). This moment, in particular, marks Levy as a feminist killjoy. By proposing a script about a woman who follows her own dreams, she disrupts the affective comfort of the room, producing visible exhaustion even in a sympathetic female executive. Levy presents this scene as a deliberate recognition moment. She makes it apparent that she was previously familiar with the narrative: "So then, what did the executives want their female characters to be like? I should have asked that question, but I already knew the answer. They had to be likeable" (Levy, 2021, p.40). Her claim that a woman "steering her high horse, with desires of her own" is acceptable only "if she steers her horse off the cliff" succinctly acknowledges how women's desire is permitted only when it is punished or self-erasing (Levy, 2021, p. 40).

According to Levy, "To unmake a family home... is like breaking a clock" (2018, p.17), implying that the end of a marriage represents a complete structural collapse. Building on this idea, Morra observes that during this period Levy "finds herself in a state of radical flux" (2021, p. 9), emphasizing the instability and transformation that accompany such a rupture. In responding to this upheaval, Levy's writing aligns closely with feminist thought. As Dearbhaile Sophie Houston argues, she "employs a vocabulary and rhetoric found more commonly in feminist literary and theoretical writings" (2025, p. 1023), situating her personal experience within a broader feminist discourse. The following quotes emphasizing the roles of both the wife and mother which were assigned to women are examples of this vocabulary and rhetoric. For instance, "If the wife and mother has been impregnated by society, she is playing everyone's wife and mother" (Levy, 2018, p.16) is a very strong criticism revealing that when the subject accepts these roles, she becomes the idealized versions of such roles. Once more, feminist killjoy is exemplified when she further states:

> *To not feel at home in her family home is the beginning of the bigger story of society and its female discontents. If she is not too defeated by the societal story she has enacted with hope, pride, happiness, ambivalence and rage, she will change the story (Levy, 2018, p.16).*

This is a significant representation of feminist killjoy since Levy refuses to accept the patriarchal narrative that domestic labor and emotional care are naturally women's responsibility; rather, she exposes the structural injustice embedded in "the nuclear heterosexual family" (2018, p.16). This is another feminist snap moment because as the text reveals "If she is not too defeated by the societal story she has enacted with hope, pride, happiness, ambivalence and rage, she will change the story" (Levy, 2018, p.16). Through this analysis, Levy shows how personal experience intersects with social norms, highlighting the political dimensions of domestic labor and the ways women navigate, resist, and transform oppressive structures. *Changing the story* is a snap.

Levy shows how marriages could finally come to an end when the subjects decide not to endure anymore and *change the story*. She writes, "You get tragedy when the tree, instead of bending, breaks. They will live with each other for over two decades in this house. And then their marriage, instead of bending, will break" (Levy, 2018, p. 78). Here, feminist snap and killjoy overlap on the verge of a breaking point. When she writes "instead of bending, breaks", Levy points to the rigid expectations of idealized marriage and/or happiness that is systematically taught, yet instead of romanticizing that ideal, she exposes the pain caused by it; thus, her writing resists the social narrative that love should always endure without compromise. The image of the tree breaking, in particular, exemplifies a feminist snap, revealing the structural pressures that shape women's life. As Sara Ahmed writes "feminist snap" is "to snap a bond can be to make room for life by leaving the room" (2017, p.205). In short, when women do not cooperate, endure silently and pretend to be satisfied, they become killjoys by being fair to themselves and when they finally take an action towards ending that haunting phantom "to make room for life by leaving the room", the tea breaks, she snaps, they break (Ahmed, 2017, p.205). Levy, while

exemplifying both killjoy and snap, consciously refuses endurance; she understands that by making a personal choice, she simultaneously shapes the political. She writes, "Their father and I agreed that we would live separately but we would always live together in the lives of our children. There are only loving and unloving homes. It is the patriarchal story that has been broken" (Levy, 2018, p. 17). She chooses a genuine loving home over an *imagined* happy one.

4. Conclusion

As a conclusion, Deborah Levy's *A Living Autobiography* trilogy demonstrates how feminist life writing can function as a sustained practice of refusal, survival, and reorientation rather than as a coherent narrative of resolution or fulfillment. Employing autofiction as both a formal and political strategy, Levy disrupts the conventions of traditional autobiography and the normative narratives that organize femininity around happiness, marriage, and motherhood. Blending memoir, autofiction, and essayistic reflection, she unsettles dominant scripts of femininity and writes from states of instability and precarity. Divorce, financial insecurity, and creative uncertainty are framed as enduring conditions shaping women's lives and artistic practices. By rejecting linear self-narration and stable identity, Levy presents women's lives as ongoing negotiations rather than coherent stories of fulfillment. Writing becomes a method of navigating precarity, allowing reflection without resolution and movement without arrival. In this sense, Levy's autofiction moves beyond personal testimony and puts feminist philosophy into practice, reclaiming narrative authority and reorienting feminist futures.

When Sara Ahmed's concepts of the feminist killjoy, feminist snap and feminist survival are considered, Levy's work reveals how women's lives are shaped by affective economies that demand accommodation and silence, and how resistance emerges precisely at the points of exhaustion, discomfort, and rupture. Within this framework, Levy's narrative gestures appear not as stylistic choices alone but as embodied practices of refusal that expose the affective economies sustaining patriarchal ideals. Rather than merely recounting a woman's individual experience, Levy's narrative practice materializes feminist theory by staging moments of snapping, refusal, and endurance as lived, embodied acts. Moments of discomfort, exhaustion, and breaking are not framed as personal failures but as politically charged responses to accumulated structural pressure, transforming refusal into a condition of feminist survival. Levy's characters repeatedly refuse to "bend" within inherited structures, instead exposing the violence embedded in ideals that promise happiness while requiring self-erasure. In this sense, Levy's writing enacts what Ahmed describes as a politics of embodied resistance. As Ahmed writes, "A killjoy survival kit is also about allowing your body to be the site of a rebellion, including a rebellion against the demand to give your body over to a cause or to make your body a cause" (2017, p. 249). Levy's trilogy stages this rebellion through everyday acts of stopping, leaving, refusing, and re-narrating. Whether by rejecting exhausted scripts of femininity, questioning marriage and motherhood, or insisting on women's desire despite social backlash, Levy aligns with Ahmed's killjoy ethics: refusing to perform happiness when happiness itself is a disciplinary demand. *A Living Autobiography* thus becomes both a method of feminist survival and a vital contribution to contemporary feminist thought, insisting that women's lives remain unfinished, complex, and open to reimagining even when, and especially when, that insistence exhausts others.

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