Introduction to "The Futures Industry"

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"Spectres and utopias—as practices of the imagination
—occupy the same moral terrain." (151)
Arjun Appardurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact*

"Capitalism has no built-in teleological purpose, historical logic,
or structure but rather is a self-imploding system that will not
stop at anything in order to fulfil its aim: profit. This inherently
self-destructive system feeds on and thus destroys the very
conditions of its survival: it is omnivorous, and
what it ultimately eats is the future itself." (215)
Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of 'Life Itself' and
New Ways of Dying"

The future has become a site of crisis, both materially—in the looming threats of climate change, environmental and species destruction, and imminent collapses of the global financial market—and in our capacity to imagine the future otherwise, as a site of utopian promise. We can imagine the future only as an intensification of the present: from one political orientation, a future of global capital and inequity continuing into infinity; from the other, a future of more and better shiny, technological products. Or we can imagine it as the site of apocalyptic collapse. The dystopian turn of recent popular culture and the unfathomable popularity of zombie narratives are evidence of this bifurcated future. Two events in the summer of 2015 aptly encapsulate this crisis of the future: Disney made its earnest *Tomorrowland* (Brad Bird), simultaneously a lament for the bankruptcy of the 1960s visions of the Space Age Future and a strained attempt to reboot this brand of technological optimism; and, in stark contrast, activist-artist Banksy opened his Dismaland Bemusement Park, a satiric exhibit that featured such attractions as a killer whale leaping from a toilet, a sculpture made from a petrol tanker, and a dead princess surrounded by paparazzi photographers. Clearly, we are at a moment of bluntly contrasted poles when it comes to how industry and activists imagine the future.

Yet even in Banksy's grim deconstruction of the naïve utopianism of market-generated futures, a trace of hope remains in the desire for such work to push viewers toward another kind of future. The urgent need for genuinely open and new futures, the need to reclaim the power to imagine the future outside of industry-produced advertising images—that is what this issue of *Paradoxa* is about. We are always in the process of making the future through our choices in the present, and there is a relationship between the role of the imagination in envisioning concrete images of the future and the difficult collective work of bringing such futures into being. How we might respond to the contemporary crisis in which the future seems foreclosed, always-already scripted as a dystopia, is one question that the essays collected here seek to address. More specifically, they ask what role speculative fiction might play in revitalizing our affective investment in new futures premised on social justice, keeping always in mind both the genre's transformative potential and its simultaneous complicity in a techno-optimism that often merely perpetuates the world as we know it.

More than thirty years ago, Fredric Jameson suggested in "Progress versus Utopia" that, far from providing us with blueprints of the future, the function of science fiction had become to dramatize our inability to imagine a future that was distinct from the capitalist present. Much of his critical work since, including his "genealogy of the future" in *Valences of the Dialectic*, has focused on the importance of speculative fiction as a critical resource for working through the difficulties of utopian thinking in a context thoroughly saturated by capitalism. Yet at the same time, sf often seems to be the default language for advertising everything from transportation to telecommunications to beauty products. No longer simply the "sense of wonder" shared by a marginalized group of geeks who liked that "Buck Rogers stuff" in the 1920s and 1930s, the futuristic promises of sf have become standard icons for our expectations of technology and progress: our age-reversing cosmetic creams; our bionic, world-controlling smartphones; the US Air Force advertisements filled with Michael-Bay-esque effects that promise "it's not science fiction, it's what we do everyday." In this age of military drones, Google glasses, on-demand entertainment that responds to voice commands, the promise that we can soon buy a trip on Virgin's commercial spaceflight with bitcoins, and more—in such a world, science fiction increasingly seems to be less about estranged new worlds and more about quotidian reality.

From one point of view, of course, this is nothing new. The genre, or at least the version of it that emerged in the American pulps that gave it its name, has always been bound up with ideologies of progress through technology and industry. Indeed, Hugo Gernsback, founder of the first

genre-specific magazine, *Amazing Stories* (1926), headed his editorial column with the pronouncement "Extravagant Fiction Today … Cold Fact Tomorrow!" Similarly, World's Fairs served as sites for displaying the wonders of technology and anticipating the better worlds it would bring, especially the 1939 World's Fair in New York entitled "The World of Tomorrow." It was the first to evoke so explicitly images from fictional anticipations of the future in everything from Westinghouse's robot Elektro to the introduction of new commercial products such as Wonder Bread and television. The Futurama exhibit channeled visitors from a view of a miniaturized City of Tomorrow to a full scale model of the same street corner as they exited the ride and received their "I have seen the future" button. This exhibit not only advertised the futuristic cars GM hoped to sell that season, but also did important ideological work preparing the public to support the construction of what would become the interstate highway system, at that time just a dream outlined in the report *Toll Roads and Free Roads* prepared by the Bureau of Public Roads Division of Information. This is the history that both the recent film *Tomorrowland* and the Dismaland exhibit engage, in their distinct ways.

The essays collected here seek simultaneously to illuminate and resist this intellectual history, in which thinking about the future and the genre of speculative fiction have been bound together with both corporate vision of the future-as-better-products and with critical and collective visions of more just and inclusive futures. These essays look for a third way to negotiates this history that avoids either the complacency of *Tomorrowland*'s attempts to revitalize the "old futures" of technological progress or the despair of Dismaland's visions of the future as a police state filled with pollution and decay. The issue was further inspired by the frequency with which cultural theorists turn to a language of future temporality—and often to sf images and narratives—as they describe and intervene in the present. What is it about our contemporary moment that makes sf the ideal mode through which to respond to it? And what kind of cultural work does the genre do in this context? Most crucially, how might we reclaim the future, not only the material future as a space of greater equity and social justice, but also the future as our imaginative capacity to think about estranged and new worlds rather than to capitulate to the future as envisioned by global capital? Can science fiction foster a critical understanding of the intersections between political economy and contemporary technoscience, or does its own status as an entertainment commodity inevitably compromise its utility as a tool for social critique? What is the role of speculative thinking in political struggle and social justice today?

Elizabeth Povinelli, for example, turns to Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973)—about whether we would continue to live in a paradise if we knew it was premised on the immeasurable suffering of a single child—in her introduction to *Economies of Abandonment*. Povinelli's concern is with how the logic of late liberalism encourages us to inhabit a temporality by which suffering in the present should be viewed from a "future anterior perspective" (3) through which—from the viewpoint of this anticipated, utopian future—contemporary inequalities are ultimately an insignificant, because temporary, anomaly. As she points out in her careful analysis of a number of examples of lives condemned to endure rather than thrive in the present, such logic lets the market determine what the future should be and which lives are valuable enough to have a stake in it. "Within a neoliberal framework," Povinelli argues, "any social investment that does not have a clear end in market value—a projectable moment when state input values (money, services, care) can be replaced by market output values (workers compensated and supported by nothing except the market)—fails economically and morally" (23).

As Povinelli's analysis makes clear, these rhetorical understandings of the future as a specific kind of market-driven social project have material effects in shaping what sorts of futures can materialize. Alternative social projects that invest in different kinds of futures and different kinds of relationships to the present—such as preventative health care that improves quality of life but does not decrease healthcare costs overall—are ruled out of the future-as-shaped-by-the-market in advance. Povinelli succinctly observes, neoliberalism "exhaust[s] alternative social projects by denying them sustenance" (134). I want to suggest that the resources of the speculative imagination can work as a counter to this exhaustion, a way of re-energizing our capacity to believe in and hence work toward others sorts of futures. Similarly, Arjun Appadurai's *The Future as Cultural Fact* addresses the uneven distribution of the very capacity to *aspire* in our contemporary globalized cultural order. His work, as the epigraph at the top of this introductory essay states, is premised on the mutual entwinement of the dystopian visions that dominate our imagination and the utopian impulse to envision the world otherwise. Appadurai talks about the ethics of probability as they are embodied in a corporate futures industry, and contrasts them with an ethics of possibility. I think of these ethics of probability as the future imagined and embodied in things such as disaster bonds, drone warfare, and techno-topian advertisements, and I want to argue—with the contributors to this issue—that the tools and techniques of science fiction can offer us examples and locations for an ethics of possibility.

Yet the challenge of activating the ethics of possibility and their estranged and alternative social worlds is more difficult than it might at first appear. The complication lies in how effectively the rhetoric of the future has been coopted by a specific and narrow corporate view, by the ethics of probability. As Wendy Brown argues in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*:

> At the triumphant "end of history" in the West, most have ceased to believe in the human capacity to craft and sustain a world that is humane, free, sustainable, and above all, modestly under human control. This loss of conviction about the human capacity to craft and steer its existence or even to secure its future is the most profound and devastating sense in which modernity is "over." Neoliberalism's perverse theology of markets rests on this land of scorched belief in the modern. Ceding all power to craft the future to markets, it insists that markets "know best," even if, in the age of financialization, markets do not and must not know it all, and the hidden hand has gone permanently missing. (221)

Corporations forcefully present visions of the future that serve themselves and their products, using the language of those who seek to articulate alternative futures. This dilemma is epitomized by advertisements for Monsanto. It is difficult to imagine a corporation less invested in a future of social justice and sustainability; since its early days of pioneering plastics and pesticides, Monsanto has been embroiled in controversy regarding its GM crops, its violation of environmental statutes, health problems allegedly caused by its products, lawsuits with farmers over proprietary seed, and controversies regarding its deleterious influence around the globe such as the suicides of farmers in India and the destruction of subsistence agriculture in Argentina. Yet Monsanto's advertisements, such as those from their "grow" series,[1] repeatedly claim the space of utopian futurism: "We've been inspired to improve the crops that feed and fuel our world because we dream of a better tomorrow for all of us" reads the text of a "We Dream Here" advertisement, while a "We Grow Ideas Here" poster proclaims, "As a company founded on scientific innovation, we are passionate about sharing our love of science and creating educational opportunities for children here at home—because they are the future of our community." Visually, the first advertisement appropriates the promise of futurity embodied in the reproductive, heternormative family, while the second

[1] These advertisements can be viewed on the Monsanto website at http://www.monsanto.com/stlouis/pages/ads.aspx.

evokes a multicultural vision of inclusivity with its portrait of multi-ethnic future scientists. Both erase the socioeconomic inequities of the present, including the uneven distribution of health risks and pollution in which Monsanto participates.

Verizon similarly participates in narrating a vision of its corporate presence as an important contributor to a utopian future, equating solutions to global problems with possibilities inherent in Verizon's technology. In its recent "Powerful Answers" campaign—"The World's Biggest Challenges Deserve Even Bigger Solutions"—the promotional copy for this campaign announces invites participants to enter for a chance to win "*up to* $1 million" to put "life-changing ideas to work to help those around the globe."[2] More importantly for Verizon, I suspect, is the prominent invitation to consumers to "see how we are banding together with others to find powerful solutions to the world's toughest challenges." My concern with such "powerful answers" is twofold. First, the question that such solutions leave out: the cost of technology and access to it; how meaningful, for example, might "improved data" be to Mexican farmers whose access to irrational water has been curtailed by American appropriation of water reserves; or how useful will a cloud of healthcare data be to African patients who are denied access to drugs by a for-profit pharmaceutical industry? Not to mention the costs of access to these Verizon solutions in the first place, or issues such as who will own the patents for any profits to be realized from ideas funded by the contest? More important than these economic issues, more pernicious, is the narrowing of our horizon of utopian possibilities to this type of thinking about the future: the future is only more of the present, more of the same capitalist values and sites of invisibility, the future—as the present in which some of us already live—while the actual present pales in comparison to the techno-product-saturated future to which we aspire.

Mark Fisher calls this kind of thinking "capitalist realism." Capitalist realism, he argues in his book of that title, is the dominant ethos of the present, a present in which we can imagine no alternatives to capitalism, in which the world as seen by capital is simply the world, not one social alternative among many. Under conditions of capitalist realism, Fisher contends, dystopias no longer function to prompt us to imagine something other than the present but simply exist as the spectre of its intensification. Under the condition of capitalist realism, we seek simply to survive, to endure, and are no longer capable of imagining that there is an outside or alternative to it. Echoing work done by Michael

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[2] See this campaign, and information about previous winners, at https://www.verizon.com/powerfulanswers/.

Schudson, a Marxist theorist who studied advertising, Fisher points to the speculative images of the future that are produced by corporations as the chief mechanism by which we are encouraged affectively to invest in the future of capital. Fisher calls such images "science fiction capital" and suggests that our emotional investment in them encourages us to place our material investment in only a narrow range of futures. He calls on us to invest our sf capital instead in estranged new worlds rather than the continuation of this one.

This is a crucial challenge for those of us who work on speculative culture. How can we resist the limited kinds of utopianism promised by the future that is imaged by corporate capital? How can we say "no" to such visions and their surface promises of inclusivity, how can we show our concern for the deleterious effects of globalization, solutions to real problems such as food distribution or climate change, and what Povinelli calls "the unequal distribution of life and death, of hope and harm, and of endurance and exhaustion in *late liberalism*" (3)? How is it that the right has so effectively captured the social imaginary of the future that those of us on the left find ourselves arguing against the future? Capitalism has colonized not only our present and imagined futures, but also, literally, has consumed the future in the form of futures markets. We now sell future value or assess the worth of corporations based on the products they will make in the future. As Robert Tally notes, derivatives such as commodity futures are "are at once products of the new capitalist world order and the engines driving it" (78). So, how might we invest our imaginative, affective and material energies in other kinds of futures? Part of the answer, I think, lies in thinking about the utopian as ways of living, as embodied in the social arrangements of the future rather than in its commodities.

Ruth Levitas's recent work on the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society in her book *Utopia as Method* offers a path forward in her insistence that utopia is an urgently needed, material practice, not merely some kind of imaginative fantasy; she refutes those who reject utopia as an impossible fantasy by noting that "what really is impossible is to carry on as we are, with social and economic systems that enrich a few but destroy the environment and impoverish most of the world's population. Our very survival depends on finding another way of living" (122-124). She argues that the utopian method has three aspects: the architectural practice of producing concrete visions of a better society; the archaeological method of finding elements of utopian possibility "buried in the constant barrage of political rhetoric and policies" (242); and the ontological method of "considering the kind of people we want to become" (244) and thus the kind of society capable of fostering such people. Levitas sees her

method as a kind of speculative sociology, emphasizing that utopia is a practice, not a goal or a static vision. More importantly, she contends, we need to be aware that utopia as process is

> … necessarily provisional, reflexive and dialogic. It is always suspended between the present and the future, always under revision, at the meeting point of the darkness of the lived moment and the flickering light of a better world, for the moment accessible only through an act of imagination. (3366-3369)

She ends her book by proclaiming, "we must live in this world as citizens of another" (4787-4788). In a variety of ways, both the creative works discussed in this issue and the essayists themselves take up this project, this "act of imagination" through which we can foster the light of a better world. We can live in this world as citizens of another by inhabiting a perspective from which the default logic of capitalist realism no longer holds, through which we can see, as some of the essays suggest, the cracks in its operations; as other essays and reviews demonstrate, we can live in this world as citizens of another by already understanding ourselves through this ontology, as those better people. We reclaim the capacity to imagine the future and, via that cultural work, remake—imaginatively and affectively, hence politically—our mode of living in the present.

   Hugh O'Connell begins by looking at a number of recent sf works that rely on the train as a figuration for utopian possibility. The train is simultaneously a symbol of our mired present condition and a symbol of the possibility for another kind of world. Culminating with a discussion of China Miéville's *Iron Council*, O'Connell analyzes how the novel transforms the train from its legacy as "the purveyor of markets and the subsumption of human labor and life under the sign of development and imperial progress" (17), to an image of always-approaching chances for revolutionary renewal. O'Connell sees in this image an example of Fredric Jameson's recent work in *Valences of the Dialectic* that announces a critical project of provisionally embracing as positive things which are negative in our world, "to isolate specific features in our empirical present so as to read them as components of a different system" (Jameson 434).

   Next Andrew Hageman reviews the career of William Gibson, an author long celebrated as a reluctant profit of the future in sf criticism. Hageman traces future prognostication in Gibson's fiction, seeing his oeuvre as a dialectic between anticipated circuits of information capital and residual cogs of industrial systems. Through this structure, Hageman

brings to visibility an ongoing concern with ecology in Gibson's work, neglected in previous criticism. Although the most recent novel, *The Peripheral*, shows speculative finance "at the helm" (22), as Hageman notes, nonetheless the novel "represents a transition in Gibson's sf in that the four new futures depicted move … from his earlier emphasis on precise transformative events to one on cumulative modifications" (22). In this shift, Hageman notes that Gibson is no longer projecting the technologies of transformative change into a future soon to come, but is instead positioning our present moment as the time of decisive change.

Alan Lovegreen explores similar territory in his analysis of singularity fiction. Growing out of the cyberpunk work for which Gibson is famous, the singularity describes both a group of fictional texts and a community of cultural practices premised on an anticipated future of intelligent machines and humans fusing with—or being surpassed by—these posthumans. By focusing on issues of speculative finance and the erasure of labor in both the material economy and the future that is depicted by these works, Lovegreen critiques the utopianism of the singularity and demonstrates its complicity in logics of capital, noting that "the identities of tomorrow's humans are on their way to some sort of assimilation with capital" (60). He calls for a "new spirit of sf" to show us better futures that depict "protagonists carefully positioning themselves in relation to cybernetic-capital, navigating eco-conscious works that offer strategic use of indignation; with narratives that compel readers to perceive and engage with matters of social and ecological justice" (62).

Karen Omry explores similar terrain in her rethinking of how capitalism and liberalism are entwined as she explores the transformative potential of alternative worlds fiction. Such works, she suggests, "complicat[e] the teleology of capitalism" and its "liberal democratic narrative of progress" (67). Her reading of Richard Powers's *Generosity* in particular reflects a vision of love and grace that is similar to the kind of utopian ontology that Levitas celebrates in her work. In the novel, Omry finds a resistance to the monetization of all value in protagonist Thassa's capacity for generosity and in a conclusion that refuses a stereotypical definition of progress and success, opting instead for "mutual collaboration, friendship, and love" (74).

Josh Pearson rounds out this series of papers by looking at ways that markets and people are conflated in his examination of the rhetorical strategies in a number of advertisements for financial management services. Just as Lovegreen's analysis of protagonists in singularity fiction found a disturbing conflation between humans and capital, Pearson discerns in the address of these advertisements evidence of the corporate elite's "imaginary relationship to their own conditions of

existence" (87) in their vision of becoming one with the flows of global capital. Although misleading, such visions are reassuring in a time of market volatility, Pearson argues, and they naturalize a logic that is much like that analyzed by Povinelli. The need to protect the health of the economy, they imply, "justifies actions taken in the present, no matter how threatening they are to social and economic stability in the short term" (106).

Rubén Mendoza begins from a similar premise regarding the pedagogical function of popular culture in general, but looks to identify the specific capacities of science fiction that might enable it to function as a site of critical, cultural resistance. Drawing on the capacity of the genre to denaturalize our relationship to an inequitable present long celebrated by sf scholars in the Marxist tradition (and discussed above), Mendoza reads works by James Tiptree Jr. and China Miéville as contemporary versions of an ancient sophist educational practice. The ways these works "engage audiences in re-oriented perceptual and imaginative modes" (114), he argues, train us in new ways of perceiving that can open the door to new ways of living. This essay thus articulates an important link between what Levitas would call the architectural world of depicting concrete new ways of living and the collective and political world of bringing them into material practice.

Following along this path, Anindita Banerjee and Debra Castillo explore the way that contemporary biomedical cultures of transnational adoption, surrogacy, and tissue donation can be grasped through the icons and themes of science fiction. Indeed, the genre seems the only mode capable of engaging a reality of biopolitical labor and reproduction in which, for example, the Israeli State "rescued" certain infants born to surrogate Indian women "not on the basis of past or present rights to be cared for by the State, but on the presumption of the futurity of [their] status as citizen-subject" (137). As Bannerjee and Castillo reveal by looking at a number of recent sf works by Indian and Latin American authors, new markets of biomedical care are increasingly shaped by flows of capital and produce a bifurcated population of supra-national subjects and "disenfranchised populations whose humanity is increasingly etiolated" (154). Science fiction can help us map and respond to these new bio-cartographies.

Justin Izzo's essay that follows does similar work, reading Abdourahman Waberi's satirical and counterfactual *In the United States of Africa*, a novel that itself provides a speculative mapping of the globe as it might have been had Africa rather than Europe colonized it. Izzo carefully traces how Waberi's novel reveals the relationships among technological advancement, social transformation, and political

domination, but also moves beyond such simple reversals. By engaging in a kind of "speculative ethnography," Waberi highlights the ideological construction of both Africa and The West, and explores how deeply such histories shape avenues toward possible futures. By depicting this counterfactual history, Waberi invents "alternative experiences of everyday life" (165) the new worlds Levitas calls for.

The final essay, but Kennan Ferguson, looks at the temporality of apocalypse and its political role in a large historical perspective, reaching all the way back to St. John of Patmos and his authorship of the *Book of Revelation*, but more specifically to how and why this document has had such a long political life. How does the idea of some kind of "social afterlife" influence our choices in the present, and to what effect have political thinkers been able to promote other kinds of temporalities? Ferguson asks if we can think about the end of the world—a prospect that popular culture suggests we currently face—without resorting to this eschatology, and explores three models for doing this: radical postmillennialism, messianic presentism, and pychic antifuturity. Each of these modes requires us to rethink our relationship to the future in terms of emergence and to refuse the solace of inhabiting the present as just one step along the way to an already-scripted end. New thinking about temporality, then, is integral to finding a way out of our crisis of the future.

The essays are followed by two interviews, a review essay, and book reviews. Malisa Kurtz discusses with Lauren Beukes an interest in fiction that investigate the vitality of the "broken places" of the world, and acclaims the power of fiction to help us see things more complexly, and hence to act with greater empathy and justice. In her reflections on the interview, Kurtz cautions us against focusing too exclusively on the future—and thus failing to acknowledge the weight of the past in shaping options in the present—warning against an ideological investment in the "postpolitical" which too casually presumes a cosmopolitan "we" that has achieved global consensus regarding desirable futures. In his discussion with author Thomas Sweterlitsch, Daniel Ante-Contreras echoes the analysis found in Banerjee and Castillo's essay about the ways in which science fiction provides a language that helps us to speak about issues of technologized global modernity. Sweterlitsch shares with Beukes a concern with the ubiquity of violence in popular culture and a desire to insist on the shocking and necessarily upsetting materiality of real violence, as compared to its mediated form.

In a review essay of the new Futures books published by Verso books, Steven Shaviro finds ample evidence to affirm that we are paralyzed in our abilities to conceive of and work toward more socially just futures. In

their various explorations of the sense that capitalism has colonized both the present and the future, that the future has become a site of precarity and fear rather than of hope, and—perhaps most provocatively—that we should see in unmotivated mass murder a trace of genuine alienation that has no appropriate channel for political expression, these books bluntly catalogue our present crisis and thus address the same terrain as do the contents of this issue. Shaviro concludes that these books demonstrate the need for renewal, but offer few options for, as Lenin has it, what is to be done. The solution, he suggests, may lies in the imaginative resources of speculative genres:

> At its best, science fiction works by giving expression to a futurity that is already implicit within the present moment. Science fiction does not claim to actually predict the future; what it projects or extrapolates is a kind of virtual future. That is to say, it explicates (literally unfolds) the anticipations—or the shards of futurity— that are lurking within our actual social experience. (242)

This issue of *Paradoxa* seeks to draw critical attention to and participate in this utopian capacity of science fiction. The three reviews that conclude the issue show a variety of ways in which the genre, broadly construed, continues to do this work. Gerry Canavan's analysis of the critical book *Cartographies of the Absolute* reveals how popular culture can help us to try to cognitively map and hence to see at least part of the operations of capitalist power in the present; Irene Morrison's review of Ahmed Towfik's *Utopia* shows how the novel speaks to a sense of a foreclosed future experienced by youth in the Middle East and how the genre is ideal for responding to realities such as the almost science-fictional planned Masdar City; and finally Rhys Williams' review of the first issue of *Salvage*, a new and critical left-wing project of grassroots political activism, shows that this new political method itself partakes of something of the science fictional in that it begins with the conclusion that the present is an apocalyptic ruin, and then sees what we can build from there.

If there is perhaps more that is specter than utopia in this issue of *Paradoxa*, no matter. As Appadurai announces, both occupy the same moral terrain, and even if we have to begin from the ruins, as does *Salvage*, the scholarship collected here insists that the future is not yet written, and seeks to reclaim the power to imagine it from the industry default.

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