Re-Presenting Victim and Perpetrator:

The Role of Photographs in US Service Members' Testimony Against War[1]

Since Mathew Brady and his team used the glass-plate camera to document the lives and deaths of soldiers in the US Civil War, photographs have been pivotal to the way we collectively know and remember war. The image of five Marines and a Navy corpsman raising the US flag during the Battle of Iwo Jima and that of five Vietnamese children running from a napalm attack near Trang Bang are notable, not just for their aesthetic value, but also for the symbolic meaning they have in the representation of the heroic struggle of the GI in World War II and the brutal tragedy of the Vietnam War. Historically, the visual recording of war has been the purview of journalists; yet, today, the pervasiveness of digital cameras among military service members has transformed the representation of war, to the extent that the photographs of the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison, taken by Army soldiers Lynndie England and Sabrina Harmon, have had a greater influence on the collective memory of the Iraq War than any other image. The public appearance of these images is also momentous because it has made visible a culture of subjugation and dehumanization within the military, where photographs serve as trophies that celebrate the identity of the service members as oppressors. The images are most shocking to the US public, not because of the abuses portrayed, but because of the apparent enjoyment conveyed through the smiling faces of the service members.

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[1] From *Memory and the Future: Transnational Politics, Ethics and Society*, eds Yifat Gutman, Adam Brown and Amy Sodaro (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2010).

For a group of US service members who have taken a public stand against the practices of the military, particularly in relation to the Iraq War, the use of photographs to objectify others and boost morale has become symbolic of a misogynistic and racist militarism that corrupts service members. Through their accounts of their personal experiences in the military, these service members integrate photographs from their time in Iraq into a form of testimony that I refer to as 'public atrocity witnessing,' a social practice that emerged after World War II in which victims of systemic discrimination and violence present public testimony of their suffering as part of an effort to reveal and rectify the injustice of the system. The practice emerges out of the inclusion of the testimony by Holocaust survivors in the 1961 trial of Nazi SS Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann, not for the purpose of providing direct evidence of Eichmann's guilt, but in order to recognize publicly the suffering caused by the system that he supported. Since then, the practice has been particularly prevalent in the activities of post-conflict truth commissions, such as the hearings on human rights violations during the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

More generally, the practice is based on the moral dichotomy of victim (one who unjustly suffers from the system) and perpetrator (one who carries out the violence sanctioned by the system). The validity of this moral dichotomy is based on the denial of equal rights for the victim and the experience of suffering that results from the violation of the individual's physical and mental integrity. In the case of military service members, the conventional understanding of victim and perpetrator is unsettled, as they present themselves as witnesses not only to the suffering of others, but also to the suffering that they experience *as* perpetrators. In this way, the testifiers attempt to show how the

military's system of beliefs and practices, as unjust and discriminatory, dehumanize both service members and the Iraqi population. While the attempt by perpetrators to offer public confessions of remorse in authoritarian contexts are most often met with skepticism and derision (Huggins et al 2002, Payne 2008), the apolitical and self-sacrificing image of soldiers in democratic regimes provides a distinctive, albeit not entirely uncontentious, space for perpetrators to speak as public atrocity witnesses.

The practice of public atrocity witnessing is based on the presentation of personal accounts of the past; however, the intention of the practice is to bring those experiences into the present in order to reveal systemic inequity and establish an ethical order based on the recognition of human equality in the future. The event of public atrocity witnessing thus serves as a liminal period in which both witness and audience (re)experience the suffering of the past, recognize a shared humanity in that experience, and construct a vision for a future in which such suffering will not recur. The testifiers serve as witnesses, both in the legal sense of reporting events that they observed and the moral sense of using one's body as a spectacle of pain to affect the conscience of the listeners, transforming them into witnesses of the witness and moving them to action (Peters 2000). As military service members assume this role of witness, they establish themselves as authorities through their experiences as perpetrators yet simultaneously construct a narrative of self-realization that allows them to criticize past actions and assert the correct role of the 'ethical soldier.' In this process, the photographs from their combat deployments serve a key role in the re-presentation of victim and perpetrator. The reality portrayed through the images brings the past into the present with 'the always stupefying evidence of *this is how it was*' (Barthes 44 emphasis in original) in order to

compel the spectator to serve as a witness for the social and human need to transform the military.

A case study

As an illustration of how US service members use photographs through public atrocity witnessing, this essay examines the accounts of 50 veterans who testified at an event in March of 2008 in the suburbs of Washington, DC, known as 'Winter Soldier Iraq and Afghanistan: Eyewitness Accounts of the Occupations' (WSIA). The event was inspired by the Vietnam War era 'Winter Soldier Investigation,' a veteran-organized public hearing during which over 100 veterans of the Vietnam War presented eyewitness testimonies of war crimes. However, the organizers of the 2008 event, Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), sought to create, not a public hearing, but "a spiritual…uninterrupted space for veterans to work out their issues" (Personal Interview). The immediate audience to the event consisted of several hundred people, mostly fellow veterans, friends and family, and members of veterans and antiwar organizations, while the testimonies were broadcast via alternative media outlets, such as Pacifica Radio, and streamed on-line through IVAW's website. Providing the testimonies to the general public was one aim of the organizers; however, their primary goal was for the candid accounts of the testifiers to influence active duty and veteran service members with similar perspectives in order to recruit them in resistance efforts. The heart of the event was a moral critique of the conduct of war that was aimed, not at the unjustness of war, but the unjustness of a military that sanctions inhumane acts.

The testifiers were organized into panels that addressed a number of issues, including proper healthcare for veterans, gender and sexual discrimination in the military, and the political and economic aspects of US foreign policy; however, the event centered around five panels organized around the themes of racism and the absence of clear rules of engagement, during which 33 of the veterans testified about their experiences in combat deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The organizers of WSIA had encouraged these testifiers to show photographs and videos as a way of providing evidence in support of their testimony. Of the 33 veterans that testified on these panels, 14 presented photographs, while another six spoke about the practice of taking photographs. Through an analysis of the photographs presented and the language employed in the testimonies, I demonstrate how individual accounts collectively form a shared speech event that critiques the ways in which military practices cultivate a form of militarism that dehumanizes both service members and the enemy. The analysis builds off previous work on the social role of the traumatic photograph (Barthes 1977, Goldberg 1991, Sontag 2003, Zelizer 2004) while engaging in a critical discourse analysis that examines how the language used in public atrocity witnessing is embedded in relations of power and dependent upon particular social practices (Anthonissen and Blommaert 2007, Katz 1998, Verdoolaege 2008). In the case of the US service members, we see the interplay between the discourse of the military and that of human rights. The event is particularly significant for the way in which it unsettles the moral dichotomy of victim and perpetrator. The service members attempt to demonstrate that systemic discrimination creates not only victims but also perpetrators by manipulating individuals' patriotic desire to serve and normalizing intolerance and violence. In this way, the

service members are victims *as* perpetrators and the testifiers at WSIA serve as witnesses to the harm and suffering that results.[i]

Photography as a military practice

While photography has played a central role in the experience of war for over a century, the presence of digital cameras today has transformed the influence of photographs on how service members experience and remember war. Foremost in this transformation is the development of the 'trophy photo,' a variation of the recurrent wartime practice of taking trophies from the defeated. As the photographs are shared among service members, they come to serve as cultural objects that reinforce collective memory and group identity (Halbwachs 1980). Within the military, these images reinforce the paradigmatic values of the warrior as an intrepid, powerful, and dedicated fighter who uses violent force to defeat the enemy. By introducing the photographs into a public forum, the testifiers at WSIA violate the exclusivity of that group identity, and by juxtaposing the images in relation to the discourse of atrocity witnessing, reveal the dialectical relationship between the image of the warrior and the cruelty and oppression that results from the use of violent force.

The testifiers speak about the practice of taking graphic photographs of dead or injured Iraqis within the frame of a broader tendency among service members to dehumanize others through violence. Not only do the images within the photographs portray the consequences of acts of physical violence, the act of taking the photograph is itself a type of symbolic violence, a violation of the integrity of the individual. As a form of objectification, the photographs 'turn an event or a person into something that can be

possessed' (Sontag 2003: 81). When the trophy photo contains graphic images of injury and death, it disrupts the expectation that the traumatic image ought to be 'the photograph about which there is nothing to say' (Barthes 1977: 30). The testifiers, to the contrary, portray jovial service members who engage in the communal and common practice of taking the trophy photo. As an Army specialist, Hart, recounts of a time when his unit came across a dead body while on patrol: [ii]

> My friends jumped off and started taking pictures wi- with big old smiles on their faces (…) and they say "Hey […] you want your picture with this guy?" (.) And I said no (.) but no not in the context of (.) that's really messed up because (.) it's just wrong (.) on an ethical basis (.) but I said no because (.) it wasn't my kill, (.) you shouldn't take trophies of things you didn't kill (..) I mean, that's (.) that's what my mindset is- was back then.

The striking element of Hart's description of this event is the apparent enjoyment of the soldiers who had 'big old smiles' as they took the pictures. In his explanation for why he did not participate, we see how the practice of taking trophies operates according to a moral code – it is right to commemorate the act of killing but wrong to take a picture of a person one did not kill. However, in his testimony, he critiques this military code by subsuming it under the proper ethical way to understand this practice as categorically wrong 'on an ethical basis.' When he mistakenly uses the present tense, Hart suggests that this mindset has an encompassing quality, while the immediacy and emphasis with which he corrects himself by using the past tense indicates his desire to distance himself from that code.

Other testifiers speak of the amusement that members in their units had in taking pictures of dead Iraqis and the ways in which these macabre scenes were used to boost morale. Those who revel in the gruesome images are viewed as 'hardcore.' A Marine, Vincent, illustrates this as he relates the practice of taking trophy photos to other abuses the occurred when his unit came across corpses while on patrol:

> When encountering these bodies, standard procedure was to run over the corpses, sometimes even stopping and taking pictures with these bodies (..) which was also standard practice whenever we encountered the dead. […] On one specific occasion after I had shot a man (.) in the back of the head after we had run him down from (.) planting an IED (.) device […] we subsequently left his body there to rot in the field […] There was also a picture- pictures taken of- of (.) this gentleman and for me personally it was (.) um very hard when- when our squad returned back to the uh to our main base (.) after I had killed the man (.) his picture was on (.) the backdrop of the laptop for a screensaver (.) of one of our more (.) motivated marines.

Vincent's testimony was prepared, and he relates this story matter-of-factly and with little hesitation. He uses the passive voice when describing the act of taking the pictures, insinuating that those responsible were the members of his unit, and he attempts to establish a distance from the practice by stating that 'personally, it was very hard,' and referring to the man who he killed as a 'gentleman.' His reaction is in contrast with that of the 'more motivated Marine' who degrades and objectifies the dead man by using the image as a screen saver on his computer. Vincent concludes his testimony by stating that

'these are the consequences of sending young men and women to battle' and asking the listeners to imagine what it would be like to have a loved one put in a similar position. In this way, he asserts that the real perpetrators are those who send the service members to war. Even as the testimony relates abuses committed against the Iraqis, the testimony is focused on the emotional, psychological, and moral harm to the service members that occurs in the objectification of the trophy photo.

Witnessing through photographs

While the descriptions of the practice of taking trophy photos is an effective means for demonstrating the abuse and dehumanization of the Iraqis, the presentation of photographs alongside the testimonies are particularly *affective* through the interaction between oral testimony and visual image. The photographic image serves as 'perfect *analogon*' of the past, arresting the moment and capturing the reality of the event in a visual frame (Barthes 1977: 17). The image exists within a spatial and temporal disjuncture that allows the viewer to reflect on its meaning, making photographs a mechanism for recovery from trauma (Zelizer 2002) or critical examination of social practices (Sontag 2003) that converts the spectator into a witness. The polysemetic quality of photographs, or the presence of multiple, and potentially conflictual, meanings, allows one to use linguistic messages to fix the photograph with a particular meaning, either through anchoring the image with nomenclature or relaying the meaning through a story or anecdote (Barthes 1977: 39). In the case of the testimonies at WSIA, the testifiers actually draw out the polysemetic quality of the photographs through narratives that highlight the duality of the powerful and dedicated warrior and the physical and

psychological trauma of violence. When the photographs are presented through the practice of atrocity witnessing, the testifiers engage in a reinterpretation that draws one forward toward recovery by identifying and attempting to rectify the factors that made that past possible.

The relationship of the image to the narrative is central to the interpretation of the interplay of the photograph's literal and symbolic meanings; however, the force of the image, and its capacity to affect the viewer, is located in what Barthes refers to as the 'third meaning.' Barthes definition of the third meaning is rather vague, as he intends it to refer to the obtuse and elusive qualities of an image that defy articulation. In her study of 'about-to-die' photographs, Zelizer (2004) uses Barthes' notion of the third meaning to identify what she calls the 'subjunctive voice,' or the impulse to see in a photograph the world, not as it is, but as it could be (Zelizer 2004: 163). Yet, the third meaning captures more than the moment of uncertainty that leads us to ask 'what if?' It is better understood not as a singular message but the paradox of multiple meanings, or the presence of one meaning that is disguised in its opposite. The third meaning is situated within the image but it is dependent upon the interpretive frame of the viewer, and therefore, is never permanently fixed, and the image draws us in not just because of its internal expressiveness, but also because of the way in which it refers us to our own lived experience of paradox and uncertainty. For example, as Barthes illustrates, the third meaning in the Eisenstein picture of a weeping peasant woman is contained in the tenuous dialogism of the nobility of the expression of the woman's grief and her clownish appearance that is attributed to her low-lying headscarf (Barthes 1977: 57). The

photograph affects Barthes because he recognizes in his viewing of the image an elitism that denies the dignity of grief to the uneducated, lower classes.

In the case of the photographs from US service members, the third meaning is located in the tension between the allure of power and the repugnance for suffering. In presenting the traumatic images conveyed through trophy photos, the testifiers make explicit the gratification that service members take from possessing these images of death, which validate their role as a warrior. For the audience, the revelation of the symbolism of the trophy photo for those in the military is shocking precisely because one expects that images of trauma should defy symbolic meaning. However, the force of the trophy photo during the event arises out of the interaction between the images and the testimonies, for both the photographs and the testifiers present us with images of suffering. Both have the capacity to disturb us because we find ourselves evocatively drawn to the image of human suffering, a condition that Seltzer (1997) defines as 'wound culture,' or 'the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound' (Seltzer 1997: 3). Yet, we are also confronted by the need to reconcile the conflict with the service member as one who testifies to their suffering and one who has caused the suffering of others, symbolized through the trophy photo. In the testimonies, the photographs enforce the testifiers' assertion that the experience of combat radically intensifies the 'ambition to inhabit a place of total affect *and* to be drained of affect altogether, to possess the obscene vitality of the wound *and* to occupy the radical nihility of the corpse' (Foster 1996: 166 emphasis in the original). This desire has been exploited and corrupted by a misogynistic and dehumanizing form of militarism, yet it is inherently a *human*

characteristic. Thus, the testifiers maintain that they are the same as everyone else, yet have a unique authority to speak as victims who suffered *as* perpetrators.

The presentation of a series of graphic images of the faces of dead Iraqi men by an Army sergeant serves to illustrate how photographs reinforce the misogyny and dehumanization of militarism, thereby intensifying the trauma of acting in the role of perpetrator. The sergeant, Kristofer, recounts an event during which he and another member of his unit were tasked with documenting the exhumation of over a dozen bodies from a mass grave. He tells us that the men had been tortured and murdered by unidentified perpetrators, and that his role was to photograph the bodies so that they might be identified. Kristofer's memory of the event is directly framed by the act of taking photographs of the corpses:

> While I was taking those pictures (..) I never <u>looked</u> directly at the bodies. What I did was I held the camera out in front of me. I had a digital camera (.) and I held it out in front of me and I looked at the two and a half inch screen, and I flashed the photo and as that flash went off (..) that image was burned into my mind, every one of these pictures is <u>burned</u> into mind. I <u>remember</u>. I could <u>draw</u> them to the <u>T</u>.

The faces, still not yet decomposed, are variously bloody, blindfolded, bruised, and in one case, so badly damaged that the skin has been removed, exposing the skull. In his account, Kristofer speaks with palpable trauma and says that he felt 'violated' and 'repulsed' while taking the pictures, a trauma that was intensified when he discovered that the photographs were not used to identify the bodies, but to serve as 'trophies of war for people who didn't have to experience that death.' He suggests his own ethical failure

when he notes, 'This is what we nicknamed the faces of death (…) and it was a joke while I was over there.' Yet he also distances himself from that mindset by using the past tense, and the trauma that he has suffered as one who had to experience those deaths further distinguishes him from those who used the images as trophies. He concludes the story by emphasizing the humanity of the dead men, a humanity denied to them by the use of the photographs as trophies. He asserts, 'This is somebody's brother. This is somebody's husband. This is somebody's son,' an ostensibly self-evident claim that is meaningful precisely because, among service members, it is *not* self-evident.

While Kristofer explicitly details and condemns the circumstances surrounding the photographs of the corpses, the testimony of Jon, a Marine lance corporal, is notable for its austerity. He relies on implicature and allows the graphic images of several photographs to communicate the meaning of his testimony. For example, after describing the destructive force of a 50-caliber bullet, Jon shows a photograph of a person, seated in the driver's side of a vehicle, whose head has been, literally, blown apart. He narrates the photograph with a blunt statement: 'This is what happens when you get hit with a fifty-caliber.' He then shows another photograph of an obscure image of flesh and blood on a car seat, and remarks with equal candor,

> For those of you who don't know that is brains. Um, that was not my kill that was one of my friend's (.) but uh that did happen on (.) my deployment to Iraq (….) and afterwards it just goes to show you that (.) th-the mistakes we did make we had no respect for (.) their bodies afterwards.

Jon's testimony reveals the way in which service members talk about such incidents, referring to the dead person as a 'kill' and the actions that led to the man's death as a 'mistake.' He also implies that he and the members of his unit felt no empathy for the victim and the photographs he presents are examples of trophy photos. A deep disquiet underlies the terse and impassive tone of the testimony, and the photographs, as blatant images of gore, punctuate a raw trauma that is present but unspoken until the conclusion of his testimony, when Jon states, 'I just wanted to say that I am sorry for the hate and destruction that I've inflicted on innocent people (….) At one point (.) it was okay (..) but reality has shown that it is not […] I am sorry for the things that I did. I am no longer the monster that I once was.' In this apology, the previous narrative is framed as an act of confession by which Jon marks a break with the person he used to be and asserts a self-realization that allows him to serve as an ethical and authoritative witness to atrocity.

In another example of how the trophy photo serves as a point of reference in the narrative of self-realization, Adam, a Marine sergeant who served as part of a civil affairs unit, shows a series of photographs taken following a checkpoint shooting. While not present at the time of the shooting, he relates how the Marines at the checkpoint reported that a car had approached the checkpoint at 'a high rate of speed,' leading them to open fire on the vehicle. The bullets struck the driver so forcefully that his seat broke backward and ultimately caused the car to catch fire. The automobile, with the charred driver still inside, was later pulled into the Marine base, where, the following morning, Adam and others took photographs. In one of the photographs, Adam is leaning against the hood of the car in an otherwise desolate scene. His stance is relaxed, with hands folded in front, but the smile on his face appears posed, giving the image the quality of a tourist

photograph. The banality of the pose conflicts with his dominant position to the burned-out car that serves as a temporary coffin for the driver inside. Adam notes the discomfort he felt in posing for the picture, stating,

> It felt funny because (.) not because what we were doing was (.) morally wrong, but because I wasn't the one who killed this guy. And there was a group of us Marines that (.) that all took turns taking pictures (.) an- and posing like this.'

In this explanation, Adam creates a temporal distance from the person he was at the time of photograph. He, and the others who had joined him in this communal practice, had erringly followed a military code that might circumscribe when a trophy photo ought to be taken, but ultimately condones it. He later blames the cause of this 'morally wrong' behavior on the US government, which puts service members 'in a situation where this kind of thing is (.) normal.' In this way, Adam and the other testifiers assert that the practice of taking trophy photo is not wrong simply because it objectifies those in the photograph; it also causes psychological and emotional harm to those who, unable to recognize the real meaning of the photograph, not only dehumanize the other, but also themselves.

While the presentation of the trophy photo underscores the tension between the role of the warrior and the dehumanization of war, photographs that contain portraits of the service members are used to mark the testifiers' transformation into an ethical person. The portraits typically portray the testifiers during their deployment to Iraq, in their combat uniform with their assigned weapons. The presence of the weapons, which are central fixtures during their deployment, is visually conspicuous in images that otherwise

tend to imitate tourist photographs. The images express the pride service members feel in an identity that is associated with sacrifice, bravery, and strength. The paradigmatic image connotes confidence, power and intensity. The facial expression tends to convey determination or self-satisfaction. We find the third meaning for the photographs in the dialectic of the strength and dedication of the fighter and the cruelty and oppression in the use of violent force. The images evince a mix of emotions and memories that draw out this tension, as the anguish and trauma of war disrupt the idealistic image of the honorable and courageous warrior. The photographs are evidence of that betrayal and loss which is both distant and present, while the image of the soldier or Marine serves as a visual representation of the past, which is distinct from the individual who is present as a testifier. For example, Kristofer marks this break as the loss of youth and innocence when he begins his testimony by showing a photograph of himself as a young boy, and states: 'This is a picture here of me when I was about ten years old (.) wearing all camo (.) havin' a pair of dog tags and givin' my Boy Scout's salute (…..) <u>That</u> boy <u>died</u> in Iraq.' He emphasizes this rupture by turning the photo face down and the eager young boy is contrasted with other images shown of Kristofer as an enthusiastic soldier and his presence at the event as an 'emotionally broken' individual.

Another testifier, Mike, uses several portraits taken during his time in Iraq to make an explicit contrast between his past self, as a specialist in an Army Military Police unit, and his present identity. In one photograph, taken in one of Saddam Hussein's palaces, Mike stands in the middle of a large hall, next to a ring of ornate chairs and a large, opulent chandelier. He describes the photograph by stating, 'I'm pointing to my American flag (.) thinking to myself (..) good job (.) I'm being very proud of my country

at this point. This slide highlights (.) the arrogance (.) that I had at this point in my life.' He asserts that this feeling of self-importance allowed his unit 'to do harm to the Iraqi people (.) and treat them as second-class citizens.' The photograph, as a visual representation of who he *had* been, serves as the departure of Mike's testimony, which includes several events in which Iraqis were abused. As he concludes his testimony, Mike tears up a Bronze Star Citation he received for his actions in Iraq, punctuating his rejection of his past identity. In constructing this discontinuity, Mike re-presents himself and asserts an ethical autonomy that frames his actions in the present and future.

Testifying for the Future

The photographs shown at WSIA evoke emotions and memories that attest to the trauma of war and the anguish that disrupts the idealistic image of the honorable and courageous warrior. While the testimonies problematize the conventional categories of victim and perpetrator by showing how the military system dehumanizes both Iraqis and service members, the photographs serve as a mechanism for drawing the reality of war into the present and insist that the spectator become a witness to that reality. Accompanied by the service members' testimony, the meaning of the photographs is fixed in an ethical critique of the way in which they are used by service members to celebrate their role as the perpetrators of that suffering. The primary message for those willing to bear witness to this reality is the imperative to rectify the system of inequity and discrimination within the military that harms service members by turning them into perpetrators. Through narratives of self-realization, the service members assert a particular authority that arises out of their experience as perpetrators to establish the

proper ethical code for members of the military. This code, which continues to venerate the ideals of the warrior while insisting on the essential integrity of every person, must deal with the fundamental tension between the discourses of the military and atrocity witnessing. Yet, it remains central to the efforts of these veterans to come to terms with their own culpability and establish a new self for the future. By serving as public atrocity witnesses, they claim a new meaning to their past actions: no longer part of a system of subjugation, they become symbols for the need to end militarism. Collectively, the testifiers and the audience use this meaning in their efforts to end the war, transform military practices, and shape the future.

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[i] It is important to keep in mind that this was a public event and the testimonies are selective accounts that are intended to convey particular messages. The stories presented here are not intended to be representative of service members' experiences, although the testifiers often claim that the experiences that they recount are commonplace in the military.

[ii] Transcription conventions are as follows:

(.)	pause, each period denotes one second
.	pause with falling tone
,	a brief pause with a rising or falling tone
-	interruption or stammer
[…]	omitted text
<u>underline</u>	spoken with emphasis

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