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The mobius strip: Team teachers reflecting on disability studies and critical thinking

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The Mobius Strip:[1] Team Teachers Reflecting on Disability Studies and Critical Thinking

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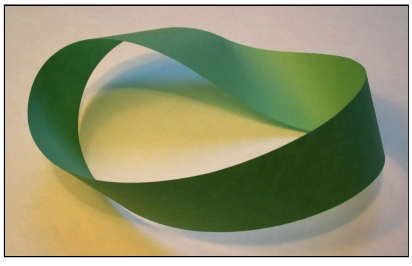
Abstract

This essay combines personal and academic reflection on teaching critical thinking through a disability studies perspective, and is illustrated by our experiences and insights teaching an undergraduate, general education course. We began with the understanding that disability studies is itself a critical engagement with a dominant ideology of bodily normalcy, value, access and power. We perhaps assumed that to teach disability studies at all would already entail critical thinking. But our experiences teaching this class challenged our beginning assumptions and raised the following questions, which form the focus for this discussion: Do disability studies classes (or any classes for that matter) enact critical thinking agendas by their content alone? What is the role of DS pedagogy in the goal of teaching critical thinking, and how can the teaching itself work to facilitate this goal by all engaged parties? We suggest that teachers incorporating DS consider the concept of "critical progress" rather than assuming that critical thinking is an end goal.



We arrived at our first meeting excited to begin. Even though we both think, write, and teach about disability studies in our jobs as university professors, this opportunity was different, and we viewed it as somehow more consequential. The grant we received allowing our attendance at the seminar came from the Bildner Foundation, an organization dedicated to inspiring innovative discussion of diversity and justice within educational institutions; and here we sat, critical readings devoured, pedagogical pumps primed. We debated, we listened, and we reacted. The end product of this week-long retreat was a class we developed then and taught a year later: "What's Wrong with Normal? The Body, Normalcy and Social Justice." The class was the direct result of collaboration between two scholars — one in Composition Studies and another in Communication

Studies — who both share a strong interest in and allegiance to disability studies and a desire to engage students in powerful and substantial reflection on social justice.

As we look back on the class, now two years past, and our objectives, we see interesting points of connection that only the doing of teaching can bring about. Our idealism in the planning of the course gave way to the realism of its enactment. Specifically, and to the point of this essay, we saw that we had not fully considered the interrelation between disability studies and the pedagogical objective of critical thinking. And the more we thought about their interrelation, the more of a mobius strip the two seemed to become. After all, disability studies is itself a critical engagement with a dominant ideology of bodily normalcy, value, access and power (Davis; Linton; Ware; Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson). So it seemed at first that to teach disability studies at all would already entail critical thinking. But what emerged for us from our time in the classroom, and what calls forth further discussion here, is the question of how we can better use the spirit and pedagogical instincts of disability studies to enact critical thinking. What is the role of pedagogy in developing students' ability to think critically, and how can the teaching itself work to facilitate critical thinking by all engaged parties? Rather than assuming that critical thinking is an end goal, we suggest that teachers incorporating DS consider the more dynamic, mobius-like concept of "critical progress," which offers a more productive way to reconsider the process of critical thinking.

The mobius was a map for our inquiry. In the spirit of Margaret Price, we opted against a strict "linear progress narrative" ("Accessing Disability" 49) as we reflected. Instead, we allowed connections from various points in time and perspectives to emerge because we found that making these disparate connections across temporal zones was more productive and more in keeping with the course itself. As the semester progressed we found ourselves reframing issues in light of new ideas. Course topics took on new meanings in relation to each other. Definitions of even the most familiar concepts such as patriotism, democracy, and obesity shifted and expanded in combination with other concepts.

In writing this article we discuss issues in a similar fashion, out of sequence of the course but thematically linked. Under the broad subheading "Critical Thinking" we use examples from the semester to present CT as an interactive process between students and teachers. Similarly, in the next section, titled "Team Teaching," we use specific occurrences to illustrate insights gleaned from team teaching.

Critical Thinking

Margaret Price asks in her essay, "Accessing Disability," "if we mean to incorporate disability as a critical modality, then how will we know when we are successful?" (51). Price attempts to answer this question through an analysis of her own composition classes, and we are inspired to review our own strategies and experiences in the same spirit. Thus, having already taught the course once, we took the opportunity to retrospectively engage our choices — as well as their outcomes — with this question in mind. Since a first-year composition course has more established outcomes to measure than a non-traditional interdisciplinary course, it made sense that our in-class exercises would similarly fall outside "the norm." And while we were not surprised to see some of our adaptive choices after the fact (not all strategies are created ahead of time), we came to reflect on our teaching itself in non-traditional ways. For instance, we regularly offered meta-analysis of the previous day's class discussion, not only in our private preparation for the next class meeting, but also shared with students in the classroom itself. Thus, our reflective turn was not simply a method used to engage students, but it was also a topic of discussion in itself.

One example of how meta-reflection worked involved a class meeting when we were comparing issues of body size and medical/cultural standards of "health." One of us mentioned her clothing size as a means of reference. For the one divulging the information, sharing her size with the class fit perfectly within the discussion. To the other teacher, admitting to being a "normal" size seemed ironic and "out of bounds." What does it mean to "disclose" normalcy? During this discussion, students and teachers alike were able to consider together the nature and function of disclosure in a disability studies class. While we had not planned this part of the class discussion, it offers an example of how our critical self-reflection gave us the ability to see things

about our assumptions and our actions as teachers and learners that we had not previously interrogated, especially in a team-teaching environment.

Before we go any further, we ought to share a few general assumptions about critical thinking. As many teachers know, developing critical thinkers in the classroom is a much desired and "measured" outcome, but very difficult to do well.[2] Cognitive psychologist, Daniel Willingham, suggests CT research generally coalesces around the following assumptions:1) that critical thinking should be taught in the context of discipline-specific subject matter because different disciplines ask different questions and value different ways of thinking; 2) that adopting metacognitive strategies increases the likelihood that critical thinking will happen; and 3) that there needs to be a fair amount of content knowledge and practice to make either 1 or 2 happen (19). While there is also much quantitative analysis within critical thinking pedagogy, quantitative methods proved less helpful than the set of traits outlined by Willingham for the sorts of questions posed in our class.

Our understanding, prior to the class, was that critical thinking is the process of engaging material, ideas, even contexts in a unique fashion unconstrained by normalized patterns of thought or expected outcomes, much like the title of our course, "What's Wrong with Normal? The Body, Normalcy, and Social Justice." The emphasis of such a course presumably would be on the strategic delivery of content, with critical thinking as the end product. However, our initial frameworks of critical thinking began to crumble under the pressures of the lived classroom experience. As a result, we became more focused on the quality and nature of our discussions and the students' thought processes. As the course progressed, and as we disassembled our assumptions, actions, goals, and choices in the classroom, "critical" took on two new meanings for us.

The first meaning to evolve from our experience: critical thinking is consequential. That is, critical thinking is not simple musing, offhand reference or surface level observation; it is important and it is serious. Critical thinking in this context speaks to people's experiences and subsequently shapes social realities. Of course, one presumes that all teachers think their content is important, but it is the focus on consequences that set the tone for this class. At every turn, we asked ourselves and our students to see the course material as more than a subject to be studied, but also as experience always, already lived. And ultimately, we wanted them to grasp that in understanding the material, they would have a foundation for perceiving and living differently. It was the very necessity of addressing disability studies and cultural expectations for "normalcy" that brought the material home for our students.

So, our first goal was to impress upon our students the consequential nature of the material. We did that by enlisting a variety of genres and perspectives from a wide range of speakers including scholars, activists, people with disabilities, and TABs. We used writing blogs, poetry, fiction, and historical research. Stephen Kuusisto's "Blind Blog," helped counter assumptions that disability is a horror anyone would want to be rid of. Through the form of a poem, Kuusisto exposes the multiple valences of loss (his sight, another's life), ability (to see, to understand) and value (the worthwhile life). Rosemarie Garland Thomson's conceptual piece "The Politics of Staring" was useful in categorizing and analyzing common means of "seeing" disability as variations of an ableist perspective. Thus, her visual rhetorics of disability, "the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, and the realistic" (58), provided students a taxonomy to apply toward future analyses of discourse, both in class and in their own lives. Katherine Dunn's novel *Geek Love*, the final reading in the course, pushed students to consider an alternate approach to normalcy where disability embodies power, cunning, creativity, and drive. The setting of a carnival freak show provides a dramatic and complex backdrop for juxtaposing the binaries of disability and ability, strength and weakness, success and failure, in original and thought provoking ways. Through these and other selections we intended to make explicit the everyday consequences of ableist assumptions in various arenas.

The second meaning of critical thinking to emerge from our praxis involved the idea of analysis and unique, deep reflection or metacognition (Willingham 19).

As Willingham suggests, critical thinking requires a fair amount of discipline specific content knowledge coupled with metacognitive strategies — which include making sense of relevant personal experience through poignant questioning. Our honor students seemed to feel quite comfortable with "critical thinking" listed as an expected mode of engagement. They were already familiar with questioning

scholarly assumptions and revising their understandings to create new knowledge and were motivated to do so. But, missing in their academic brand of CT was the often uncomfortable experience of interrogating their own assumptions. On one level, they needed disability studies theory to be pushed from a medical model view of normal bodies, reflecting Willingham's content piece. On the next level, students needed to be pushed from their ineffective and "safe" metacognitive strategies into developing personally relevant habits of inquiry — that is, ways of challenging their notions that were previously invisible to them.

In retrospect, their ease with the concept of CT should have been a red flag; "critical thinking" had become another easily mastered game for them. They seemed to search our eyes for the right answer to queries posed in discussion as if to say, "What do they *want* me to say?" It proved an important question to ask ourselves as well. If critical thinking is engaging new understandings, taking into account new voices, asking what stories haven't been told and why, then there is a potential for contradictory agendas. For instance, disability studies does want to undermine a medicalized model that fortifies normalist assumptions and the status quo. But what happens when students, using metacognitive strategies informed by their unique experiences, come up with the "wrong" answer?

Was there a space in this class for a student to conclude that normalization serves a useful social function — or is a product of our symbolic nature? Would that student be "successful" as a critical thinker if her conclusions went too far astray from the assumptions of accepted disability studies dogma? Can it be a critical class if the answers are already set? Or is the goal to engage our students in such reflection so that they may better grasp their own assumptions and their consequences for themselves and others; to begin rather than end conversations; to leave (students and teachers alike) with more questions than when we started? While others (Yoon, Villanueva) have engaged these or similar questions, it was only through the lived experience of the classroom that these questions became salient to us.

Such an occurrence revolved around what we both thought would be an interesting but not particularly incendiary reading about Helen Keller. Students were asked to read Ruth Shagoury Hubbard's 2003 article, "Who's Helen Keller? Do Children's Books Distort the Truth about Helen Keller's Life?" and come prepared to discuss it. We felt confident that the reading would garner interest, since most experiences with students have shown that they have little knowledge of Helen Keller's life story beyond her childhood. The assignment and our goals seemed straightforward. Yet, from the first comments made in class, we were quickly faced with what felt like an uprising. Students didn't find it interesting to learn that Helen Keller was a vocal Suffragist, a politically active Socialist, an advocate for birth control, or one of the founders of the American Civil Liberties Union. Instead, they took offense at the author's critique of children's books about her. They vehemently argued that Keller's contribution to society *was* learning to communicate, and that there *wasn't* anything troublesome about ignoring her significant accomplishments as an adult. For them, Helen Keller was perpetually the child at the well, a seemingly permanent child. We were flabbergasted. How could our students forget everything we had learned? Where were their critical minds as they argued that Helen Keller's greatest accomplishments were learning a language and riding a bike? And why was *this* reading the one that changed everything? We wrestled with our disappointment as we walked out into the fresh air after class, knowing we had some thinking to do before we met the students again.

What we hadn't been considering as we entered class that day was that, unlike all of the previous readings or topics, students felt connected to and knowledgeable about Keller. Helen Keller was, in a sense, theirs; and from their point of view we had tried to take that away. Keller wasn't simply a topic; she was a reality in their worlds. So the critique offered by the reading wasn't simply a critique of children's books, representations of disability, or ableist worldviews; it was a critique of *them*. They had read those books, saw the movie and believed those things about Keller. The disability studies critique proved to contain a significant threat to their own subject formations. They were unwilling or unable to question and revise their understanding of Keller using the metacognitive strategies that had, up to this time, proved so successful. We hadn't seen Keller as a threat because we weren't asking the right questions or considering the personal consequences of challenging students' deeply held beliefs.

Yet, the very idea of having discussion goals, like the ones we had for the Keller reading, served to remind us that teachers cannot fully impose a logic or agenda on a pedagogical engagement. A memorable example from our first reading day of the class illustrates this point. We had assigned three readings designed to challenge normative assumptions about "the disability experience" and introduce the critical lens of disability studies through non-academic arguments. The first reading, a transcript of both sides of a debate between Christopher Newell and Christopher Reeve on stem cell research and curative measures for spinal cord injuries, seemed to us to be a perfect discussion prompt, and one that we hoped would lead us smoothly to the next two readings. However, as students responded to the readings, it became quickly apparent that far more important, and meta-level, concerns were being raised. Rather than getting to the content of the material, many of our students expressed discomfort with Newell's sharp critique of Reeve. After all, they said, Reeve is disabled and so necessarily offers a more legitimate claim. Moreover, Reeve directly states that his goal is to help other people like himself, so how, they wondered, could Newell argue against Reeve's selfless efforts? What we saw in our students' reluctance to listen to Newell's disability studies critique was ultimately a desire to protect Reeve against what they assumed was an able bodied academic's attack. In their eyes, Reeve needed to be protected, both from Newell and apparently from any class discussion that shared Newell's assumptions.

We asked class members to explain their hesitancy, their concerns and their motivations for these reactions, all of which revolved around Christopher Reeve and his disability. When we disclosed that Newell himself was disabled, a hush fell over the classroom. We then began a discussion around how that fact altered both their reactions to the debate itself and their willingness to discuss its content more directly. This delicate classroom interaction (it was the first day, after all!) took more than half the class period and served to remind us of our role as facilitators — not directors — of classroom discussion. Thus our original critical objectives for the class failed precisely because we considered them ends in themselves; instead, through the class interaction, we saw critical progress as a reflective and emergent process, one that could not be mandated or forced. From then on, our preparation for each class was a bit more humble and our expectations (of the material and each other) were more fluid and dynamic.

This is where the two aspects of "critical" turn in on themselves, mobius-like, and our jobs as professors call us to thoughtful reflection. We were asking students at each class meeting to take new positions and interrogate the assumptions around them, yet we ourselves had failed to fully do the same. Freire argues that the classroom, to be ethical, must create a context of empowerment where both teacher and student leave changed (Freire). We argue, like others have before us (Price, Lee) that the same could and should be said for critical thinking. For teachers, critical thinking isn't a simple act; it is instead a *critical progress*. At times, we turn and twist to accommodate or challenge ideas, but it is the movement, and the interconnectedness of the process that, with reflection, changes us. We believe this idea of critical progress helped us contextualize and, ultimately, teach from moments like the Helen Keller discussion and the Reeve/Newell debate. Along with our students, we turned, moved forward, and doubled back in a critical progress towards learning what representations are and do and discovered how thinking through a disability studies perspective generates a part of that movement.

Part of disability studies' success in facilitating critical thinking has to do with making the invisible visible (Brueggemann, et al.). The experiences students bring to the course eventually help them understand complex concepts. As teachers, we do that all the time in our classes — take an abstract theory and show students familiar examples they can relate to. Here, disability studies content gives students repeated opportunity to practice critical thinking strategies using their own lived experiences as they see these experiences in new ways. As one of our students, Brianne, said after a particularly heated class discussion, "I'll never look at […] children's books in the same way again." Disability studies forces students to question the validity of their old assumptions and complicates notions that most students believed were settled prior to the course, e.g., Christopher Reeve *was* justified in seeking a cure; of course, if given a choice, everyone would *want* to see; disability *is* the worst thing that could happen.

Our development as critical teachers in this class was prompted by our conscious attempts to frame the course and our teaching in alternative ways. Anticipating the

assumptions students bring to course topics and format — for instance, that the title is a direct representation of the precise topic addressed, or that team teaching is a unified "front" of two teachers acting as one — we sought to subtly challenge these notions and others. One example is our omission of the word "disability" in the course title. Afraid the term itself might dissuade some students who perceived the course to be medical or intervention oriented, we took "disability" out. Besides, we thought that placing "disability" in the title might prove more confusing than informative. The course was grounded in a disability studies perspective, but to make it more relevant to students we stressed the dynamics of normalcy using scholars such as Lennard Davis and Michael Warner to lend theoretical support.

We don't know if the change of course title worked as we originally intended, but it had some interesting consequences. We were receiving requests for overrides the second day of registration. The course clearly piqued an interest in the student body. The ensuing challenge was figuring out how to keep twenty-three students engaged in a disability studies course when they may have thought the course was about their individual struggles to be "normal." That conundrum became a touchstone throughout the course. What does disability have to do with normalcy? What are our individual roles in creating difference? If normalcy was to be the topic of discussion, using disability studies as the critical lens, then students needed to recognize it as a product of social engagement, agreement and participation. Keeping students at the critical center, students who, after all, harbor great reserves of cultural expertise, helped us avoid some of the problems commonly reported in articles about disability-infused curriculum (see Brueggemann, et al; Price) — problems of silence or disengagement and claims that they (students) personally don't know enough about disability to join in on a discussion. College students are authorized knowers of their own culture and have an invested interest in normalcy. Understanding that dynamic went a long way to advance our efforts to interrogate the construction of difference.

Our students, for example, as scholars of the sports page, quickly realized the dilemma of fairness when invoking high tech prosthetics. Students generally seemed uncomfortable granting equal status to a runner with a speedy prosthetic leg because it gave an advantage of technology that none of the other runners had. Yet, they weren't bothered that class differences between runners work in a similar way to give privileged athletes access to better equipment, facilities, nutrition, and coaches. Both the high tech prosthetic and the high income programs achieve the same result — a competitive edge. Because students were comfortable talking about issues of fairness in sport, their arguments against runners using the new flex foot and beating runners without prosthetics opened up significant points for discussion. In this case we focused on cultural assumptions of inferiority applied to disabled athletes (hence the "regular" and "para" Olympic games, where world records are differentiated by the bodily status of the persons who set them). By activating the students' own prior knowledge base (as in this example, sport) and their own expressed, situated understanding, we were able to help them consider the things they were taking for granted. Doing this helped them see their own construction of difference at work. In the case of the runners, it wasn't difference based on ability, since all the athletes could run. Instead, the construction of difference they were using was based, in part, on bodily similarity and a sense of "real" bodies as opposed to prosthetic bodies.

Team Teaching

By looking back over our own teaching processes, we enacted the same critical progress we hoped for in our students. When we decided to write about our unique experience, we invited students into the conversation, devoting the last day of class to a debriefing. Sharing with them our pedagogical and personal questions, fears, and issues felt strange. Hearing many of their perceptions was a surprise as well. Having a frank discussion about our team teaching and voicing the different beliefs we each came in with provided a fitting case for questioning assumptions in general, and once again necessitated a melding of private and public, personal and intellectual. During our debriefing day we described the difficulty we had in negotiating the physical and discursive teaching space. One of us is a more directive talker while the other is more relaxed and patient, sharing time more equally with students. Admitting this difference as a topic for discussion gave them not only permission to acknowledge these differences openly (there were also many head nods as we broached the subject), but it also invited them to express their own interpretations of those differences and our enactments of them in the classroom.

Many students voiced an appreciation for the differences in our teaching styles and personalities. Because of these differences students had the opportunity to consider and express their own learning preferences. This discussion also led students to interrogate their own assumptions about team teaching specifically, and teaching and learning more generally, and how those assumptions and beliefs fit with our teaching differences.

Our particular brand of team teaching challenged us to scrutinize our pedagogical choices. We planned the course together, both of us contributing content pieces to the list of readings. We agreed on a discussion-based approach, on daily readings, three essay exams, and a team project presentation rounding out the semester. We both agreed on the importance of teaching together each class meeting, for the most part side-by-side, in front of the class. Through such public collaboration, even without dramatic differences, students could see how two professors, with sometimes varying interpretations, worked through this material together. We felt it important for students to notice that we disagreed about certain ideas, and thus to recognize that our goal for them was not to come to a unified agreement but to articulate an informed view. Presenting ourselves as individuals with differing interpretations and noting particular shifts in stances or revised understandings of course material within the space of the semester, we think, encouraged students to search for their own understandings.

As we reflected on our roles as individual speakers in relation to the other we acknowledged an imbalance. The teacher more used to facilitating student-centered activity was continually amazed at the other's skill in continuing a line of questioning until students came to insightful answers to their own questions. We did, however, try to balance the in-class speaking roles (in-part perhaps to meet student expectations) and, by the time the semester ended, thought we had succeeded. However, we are not convinced that the team teaching relationship, like marriage, is always fifty/fifty, nor should that necessarily be desirable. Thus, we evaluated our daily performance as a sum total, not necessarily as individuals, and most days felt our complementary teaching styles and unique contributions were working well together. If our agreed-upon discussion goals were being met, then we had a good day in the classroom. If not, we looked for ways to insure our success for the next time.

Our different teaching styles worked as pedagogical lessons for our students, too. The students had to learn from two different teachers, individually and simultaneously. Moreover, they had to observe how we negotiated our physical and pedagogical spaces. When given the opportunity to provide feedback to us, both in anonymous course evaluations at the end of the semester, as well as in our open class discussion on the last day of class, most students voiced an appreciation for the team teaching format. Some did not. What we learned from the mixed review was that teachers can explain and defend their choice of a particular teaching practice; but if it is not what students expect, that difference alone seems reason enough for some students to resist it. This desire for classroom "normalcy" extends even into a course whose goal is to expose hegemonic systems of normalcy and our participation in them. For instance, students had to negotiate us (as professors) as both a team and individuals. Office hours were individual, though students could meet with both of us together, before class. They wrote reaction papers to work through complex readings, and both of us read and commented on the papers. Students received a single grade but knew it was from two different professors. The dynamic nature of multiplicity in the professorial role not only challenged them to consider a more diverse audience than one, but also asked the same of us. Students wanting the comfort and ease of a "traditional" course would either be overwhelmed or adapt. It wasn't meant to be easy.

Looping Back

Through our reflection on the course, and in the writing of this essay, it has become apparent to us that disability studies doesn't automatically lend itself to critical thinking the way we thought it would; rather, we and our students had to take a much more active role in the critical process. We all had to consider multiple perspectives in ways that pushed us to enact what we call here critical progress. If disability studies did facilitate critical thinking, it happened through a focus on the consequences of our work (as students and teachers). It became clear to us that the import of our questions, and the answers we suggested, led us to take particular

actions and make certain choices. In this way, critical progress wasn't an outcome or an entelechial end; it was a beginning, a habit of thinking developed as our thinking turned in on itself. Thus, our metaphorical mobius strip was not a thing but rather an undulating activity. Though a more traditional use of "progress" has been critiqued by some DS scholars (Linton) as imposing a normalized end, our usage of the term — and its connection to the mobius strip — takes a different path. Specifically, it is the ongoing intertwining of reflection and action without a set or standardized "final" point. As such, critical progress doesn't hit a saturation point, since the context, the participants, and the material at hand are all in flux. For us, the spirit of the mobius strip lies not in the visual object but rather in the active tracing back, the fluidity of reflection and its continual, recursive movement.

Like our students each semester, we must take the learning from before and carry it through as we start the next class. Teaching the course and then writing this article allowed us to reexamine how our ideas of critical thinking changed throughout the semester, from the idealistic notions of teaching social justice to the pragmatic understanding that results from the doing. And as a result, we find ourselves at a new, yet familiar, starting place for our own teaching.

Bios

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Endnotes

1. The mobius, the deceptively simple loop with a twist, is used to symbolize various concepts, i.e., narrative forms, rejuvenation, counter intuitiveness. Here we employ its structure as a metaphor for singularity and multiplicity, specifically the interplay of critical thinking and thinking about disability that exemplifies our concept of "critical progress." Rather than a linear move toward some illusive end, the mobius also symbolizes our own reflective progress revisiting our experiences as teachers.
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2. For a well-known measure of critical thinking, see Washington State's critical thinking rubric at http://wsuctproject.wsu.edu/ctr.htm.
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