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# Message from the Grassroots
## Scholarly Communication, Crisis, and Contradictions

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Special Focus on Refusing Crisis Narratives

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Article abstract

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# Message from the Grassroots: Scholarly Communication, Crisis, and Contradictions

**Camille Marcos Noûs**[1]

ABSTRACT

*Librarians have responded to the decades-long "serials crisis" with a common narrative and a range of responses that have failed to challenge the ideology and structures that caused it. Using Walter Rodney's theory of the guerilla intellectual, we critically examine the dominant understanding of this so-called crisis and emphasize the role that capital plays within it. The imperial nature of scholarly journal publishing and some of its many contradictions are discussed. "Transformative" agreements receive special attention as a hyper-capitalist manifestation of these contradictions at the heart of commercial publishing. The politics of refusal are one response to the commercialism, prestige, and power imbalances that drive the academic publishing system. Highlighting the differences between refusal and reform, this paper explores the protagonistic role that librarians can play in a protracted struggle within and beyond the confines of our profession. This paper is intended to move beyond the traditional discourse of laying blame solely at the feet of the academic publishing oligopoly and expounds on the bourgeois academy's use of knowledge production for capital accumulation.*

***Keywords:*** *big deals · crisis · imperialism · prestige · publishing · scholarly communication · serials crisis · transformative agreements*

RÉSUMÉ

*Les bibliothécaires ont répondu à la crise des périodiques qui dure depuis des décennies avec un récit commun et une gamme de réponses qui n'ont pas réussi à remettre en question l'idéologie et les structures qui l'ont provoquée. En utilisant la théorie du guérillero intellectuel de Walter Rodney, nous examinons de manière critique la compréhension dominante de la soi-disant crise et soulignons le rôle que le capital y joue. La nature impériale de l'édition de revues savantes et certaines de ses nombreuses contradictions sont discutées. Les accords transformateurs reçoivent une attention particulière en tant que manifestation hyper-capitaliste de ces contradictions au cœur de l'édition commerciale. La politique du refus est une réponse au mercantilisme, au prestige*

1. This work is the result of a collective and was shaped by generous contributions from editors, peer reviewers, and our communities. We recommend that readers resist the urge to speculate about the authorship and, instead, use your valuable time to engage with our analysis and conclusions.

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*et aux déséquilibres de pouvoir qui animent le système d'édition universitaire. Soulignant les différences entre refus et réforme, cet article explore le rôle principal que les bibliothécaires peuvent jouer dans une lutte prolongée à l'intérieur et au-delà des limites de notre profession. Cet article prévoit aller au-delà du discours traditionnel qui porte le blâme uniquement sur l'oligopole de l'édition universitaire et dévoile l'utilisation de la production de savoir pour l'accumulation de capital par l'académie bourgeoise.*

***Mots-clés :*** *accords transformateurs · communications savantes · crise · crise des périodiques · édition · grands ensembles de périodiques · impérialisme · prestige*

Revolution is never based on begging somebody for an integrated cup of coffee. Revolutions are never fought by turning the other cheek. Revolutions are never based upon love-your-enemy and pray-for-those-who-despitefully-use-you. And revolutions are never waged singing "We Shall Overcome." Revolutions are based on bloodshed. Revolutions are never compromising. Revolutions are never based upon negotiations. Revolutions are never based upon any kind of tokenism whatsoever. Revolutions are never even based upon that which is begging a corrupt society or a corrupt system to accept us into it. Revolutions overturn systems.

– Malcolm X, "The Black Revolution"

Despite an increase in the amount of scholarly literature that is open access (OA), readers and institutions are still unable to access (read and reuse, in formats that suit them) all of their desired journal articles. This lack of access is commonly described as a "serials crisis," and the narrative of this crisis has persisted for several decades. To understand how a crisis can persist for over 40 years, who it affects, and why the structural problems persist, we find it helpful to utilize Walter Rodney's (2019) theory of the guerrilla intellectual. Rodney tasked scholar-activists with challenging bourgeois knowledge and to begin by attacking the ideas within one's own discipline. As academic library workers, we will critically examine the history and dominant narrative of the serials crisis with special attention to the role library workers play in perpetuating the status quo and serving the power elite. Later in the first section we will introduce a materialist analysis to describe the underlying contradictions in academic knowledge creation and journal publishing as a counterpoint to the dominant liberal viewpoint. In the second section we will discuss the politics of refusal and protagonistic praxis as a means of responding to the crisis. This includes the need to collectively reject capital accumulation by *both* the university and scholarly publishers.

Prestige is the mechanism by which symbolic capital is transformed into material wealth. Because prestige is a currency in academia and implicated in the injustices we

discuss, we are publishing pseudonymously. Our pseudonym is both a commitment to collectivity and a refusal to self-promote (Grande 2018, 61). It is also conveniently provided by Subcomandante-Formerly-Known-as-Marcos of the Zapatistas, who reminds us that "everything that makes power and the good consciences of those in power uncomfortable—this is Marcos" (Marcos 1994). This is our small goal in this piece. We hope our creation of alternative epistemologies about scholarly production can be used both in refusal and in action.

## Where Are We and How Did We Get Here?

The serials crisis is a political manifestation of class structures. Social and economic inequalities (of purchasing budgets, of access, of who is represented in that access) are not natural. They are produced, largely by the university-as-employer and the larger system of capital accumulation that scholarly publishers benefit from. Looking at this system of inequality—not just the individual library workers who have some role in it—is crucial to identifying sites of oppression. It is possible to talk about the serials crisis without talking about these larger systems of exploitation, but one's analysis would be incomplete.

Two dominant and interconnected narratives regarding the serials crisis have developed over the past forty years and persist today—one of unsustainable costs and another of open access as a solution. As early as 1981, the word *crisis* was used to describe serials subscription prices rising faster than both inflation and collections budgets (Grathwol 1982, 408). One librarian wrote that a 1990 serials crisis at their institution gave them "a strong sense of *déjà vu*" and prompted them to revisit a 1981 serials crisis and journal cancellation project (Roth 1990, 123). A 1982 summary of what led to the so-called crisis blamed the 1970s hyperinflation, a greater quantity of publications, and space issues within libraries (Milne 1999, 74), but it is worth noting that this inability to afford subscription access to literature became a crisis *only* when it started to affect wealthier schools that were accustomed to having ready access. Less wealthy schools' and international readers' lack of access was never framed as a crisis—it was an acceptable inequality in a neoliberal "free market" framework.

Early strategies to mitigate the effects of rising prices included consulting faculty on journal cancellations, conducting citation analyses of faculty publications, gathering journal usage statistics, and developing core title lists (Grathwol 1982; Roth 1990). Such strategies are still employed in present time, especially among schools looking to end their Big "Deal" contracts. Promising more robust interlibrary loan and document delivery services as a means of managing crisis-induced serials cancellations is a relatively old strategy as well (Kilpatrick and Preece 1996). In the 1990s, the discourse expanded to incorporate a more managerial, business-minded

body of research. Kimberly Douglas (1990) explored a "practice of entrepreneurship," integrating the ideas of management consultant Peter Drucker. Ross Atkinson (1994) discussed crisis and opportunity in an Age of Transition. In the 1990s, the crisis discourse became more alarmist: after 454 journal titles were cut at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, Jeanie Welch (1996) authored an article asking, "Is there life after serials cancellation?"

### *OA Responses to Serials Crisis*

The crisis was largely described from the 1980s to 2000s as one of an unsustainable market, imperfect or subject to distortions such as lack of direct price sensitivity of academics, where universities and their libraries were separated out from their role as producers to just that of consumers. Free markets as the only possibility for the distribution of goods and services are, of course, inextricably linked to the capitalist ideology of neoliberalism. This framing of commercial scholarly publishing as an imperfect market (that still must remain commercial in nature)—rather than as evidence of the commodification of knowledge, collective imperialism,[2] and some of the deep contradictions within capitalism—also frames many of the responses to the serials crisis.

The second dominant narrative of the serials crisis, focusing on open access, began in the late 1990s. E-journals were discussed as a way to "survive the crisis" as early as 1995 (Davis 1995), but open access would become thought of as the cure for the crisis at the turn of the century. Three very influential statements were issued in a short span that would shape the subsequent discourse: the Budapest Open Access Initiative public statement in 2002, the 2003 Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities, and the Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing. One of the impacts of framing the serials crisis as a market issue—either a market failure, or an oligopoly market doing exactly what it is supposed to do—is that the solutions often focus on "access." Access itself is a broad term that encompasses things like physical access, access in a suitable format, persistent access, culturally or linguistically appropriate access, and access in a way that is barrier free depending on one's race, class, housing status, or perceived sobriety. While scholars such as April Hathcock (2018) and David James Hudson (2017) have critically interrogated access, it is more often treated by librarians and administrators as a neutral good that libraries as consumers are striving for.[3] Hathcock points out that access is intertwined with exclusion and that access should not just mean online, but

2. Used by Samir Amin (2014) to describe the post-70's imperialism characterized by a Global North collaborating to ensure the continued exploitation of the Global South.

3. Sam Moore describes how the focus on access to information is one particular lineage of Open Access, distinct from approaches that derive from open source and remixing (2019, 63).

truly access*ible*. And Hudson notes that "universalizing access" (205) is part of the way the language of practicality in librarianship obscures and normalizes the whiteness at its purportedly neutral roots. In this case, access is reduced to a subscription and open access becomes a lever to lower the price of that access. The neoliberal goal becomes (in their language) using market mechanisms to effect cost savings on the consumer good of scholarly articles *for the given library*. Access is provided through purchasing or licensing (don't mention SciHub) for a narrowly defined set of users. As Charlotte Roh, Harrison Inefuku, and Emily Drabinski (2020) say, "access does not necessarily mean equality, and sometimes does not even mean equality of access" (41).

The dominant way of approaching cost reduction in libraries is through breaking up Big Deal agreements, maintaining access to key resources while reducing library spend. In reaction to austerity budgets in the last decade, individual libraries and consortia are trying to negotiate or apply market mechanisms in large enough numbers to have an effect on the market. Open access is seen as part of a consumer response to publisher prices (Moore 2019, 76-77) and is used with increasing frequency as a tool to provide alternative access and/or to pressure publishers to lower prices. This instrumentalist (or, as David James Hudson might say, pragmatic) position does little to interrogate or question whether knowledge should be treated as a commodity in a commercial market and whether capitalist markets are ever at the mercy of consumers.

Open access is in itself not a politics. There are innumerable political positions within the open access movement; some openly stated, some masked. There are a number of strategies around open access that recognize that part, if not all, of the serials problem lies in oppressive and exploitative models and practices of publishing. Typically, they target the concentration of capital and wealth in the hands of a few oligopolies, and therefore couch themselves in some sort of redistributive language, including:

***Redistribution of budgets.*** Invest in Open, the 2.5% commitment (Lewis et al. 2018), and other forms of "divest and rebalance" all imply a redistribution of library spend, to try to prioritize open access projects and infrastructure, to divert some funds away from the obvious oligopolies. A lot of the little organizations that fill this space are very much at the mercy of grants from philanthro-capitalist NGOs—organizations that are themselves a redistribution of the gross profits made by capitalists.

***Changing the balance of power.*** This includes strategies that try to rebalance power relations by forming blocs large enough to counter the oligopolies. Regional or national consortia, or even cOAlition S, sometimes imply they are strategies to redistribute power. These consortia are usually composed of administrators, directors,

and other senior decision makers from research-intensive universities, so while they may try to counterbalance power, there is very little grassroots redistribution. And they still fulfil their *real* redistributive function, that of transferring public money to private corporations.

***Stopping the (complete) transfer of intellectual property (IP).*** Recognizing that IP is an asset valuable to capital, some strategies are aimed at ensuring that authors' IP transfer is non-exclusive (e.g., Creative Commons licenses, publication addendums, university policy that authors retain rights, and even the Taverne Amendment[4]). The approaches don't necessarily challenge the property nature of IP but try to redistribute the rights to it.

***Redistributing prestige.*** While prestige as a concept is constantly under attack in academia, often this critique has to do with the *distribution* of prestige—skewed towards legacy journals and the anglo, white male authors that predominate the "prestigious" rankings in given fields. Whiteness, and the priority given to English language and cultures (anglo supremacy), cloaks itself in prestige by becoming an obscured assumption and baseline (only occasionally made evident when we look at what is indexed in Web of Science and SCOPUS [Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2015], for example). Critical bibliometrics and their critiques of the journal impact factor (JIF), universities signing the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), and the inclusion of commitments against JIF in tenure and promotion assessments, are some strategies that attempt to redistribute prestige. However, these strategies are constantly undermined as the same players continue to pursue prestige/competitive advantage in other forms. The relationship between prestige and the surplus value extracted by the university-as-employer is, however, difficult to address in its entirety, particularly when there is a split focus on the additional surplus value extracted by publishers.

As Philippe Askenazy reminds us, "To redistribute is not to distribute" (2021, 26). Fundamentally, redistribution can only happen *after* an already unequal allocation of power and resources. While most of the strategies to address the serials crisis are redistributive to some degree or another (whether in a deeply challenging way or in a more surface approach), some do also try to approach changing the primary distribution of power itself (or to allow scholars to directly commodify their labour-power themselves). Such approaches sometimes implicitly also challenge the commodity nature of knowledge and our reliance on commercial markets for its distribution. These include:

***Institutional repositories (IRs) and preprint servers.*** IRs and preprints are sometimes positioned almost as a way to build dual power—an alternative system that can fulfill

4. A Dutch law that prevents academics from signing away exclusive rights to their academic works.

the same needs as the publishing oligopoly. However, IRs in particular are not as fully separate from the rest of the publishing system as they may seem and still do not have the primary trust of users, particularly those still in search of prestige.

***Collective ownership.*** Particularly around scholarly communication infrastructure (which might be interpreted as the means of production), projects like the Public Knowledge Project's Open Journal Systems attempt to collectively design and contribute to infrastructure that can be used by anyone. Projects like ScholarLed also seek collective governance and sharing solutions collaboratively rather than competitively.

***Organizing labour.*** There have been various attempts to organize boycotts of "free" labour given to publishers (with Elsevier as a common target), mass resignations of editorial boards, as well as calls to unionize the specific labour that is done for publishers. This type of organization has not had much notable effect, possibly because, as Sam Popowich (2021) points out, the "upper strata of academics refuse to see themselves as workers at all," limiting how academics are willing to organize and take action.

Capital has been remarkably adaptable in the face of all these strategies, with new ways to exploit and extract labour constantly appearing along with new ways to extract profits from library and institutional budgets (a process akin to privatization, as public funds end up in privateering coffers). Capital's response to institutional repositories provides a good example.

Early champions of open access (the authors included) often saw self-archiving/green open access as a subterranean way of meeting an access need that could occur outside of the market. After ePrints came out in late 2000, IRs were frequently positioned as a parallel option that addressed reading *access* issues easily with low cost and increasing funder buy-in in a way that didn't necessarily directly challenge legacy publishers. For "developing" nations, Leslie Chan, Barbara Kirsop, and Subbiah Arunachalam (2005) proposed that IRs would enable not just international, but domestic access to scholarship produced in those countries, while also increasing prestige and research impact (4-5).[5] While many IRs in North America still struggle with uneven and low uptake (Peter Suber's question in 2002, "So if it's easy, free, useful, and ready right now, why isn't it spreading faster?" now seems eternal), some flourish. IRs have become instrumental in meeting Research Excellence Frameworks (like REF21) for universities in the UK, which has increased access (though likely not anyone's actual happiness with IRs). Indeed, Heather Piwowar (2019) made a compelling argument for the rise of repositories, showing that open repository data is reaching more users than ever. Samuel Moore sees the zero-embargo push for

5. Later, Albornoz, Okune, and Chan (2020) recognized that OA often replicates the power imbalances it was seeking to challenge.

repository copies in Plan S as progressive (2021), at least compared to the APC-based open access options.[6]

But as the "low-cost" option of IRs rose, so too did the pay-to-play options for open access, further commercializing academia. Article processing charges (APCs) have become ubiquitous, some with astronomical prices like the $10,000+ cost for a single open access article in *Nature* journals (Brainard, 2020). Bjorn Brembs warned us that high APCs were predicted early on by many leading open access scholars—not least because of the continued separation of researchers from the direct costs of scholarly publishing (2020). In 2013, Stephen Pinfield recognized that APC inflation may be the new serials crisis. Rising far faster than inflation, APCs have given rise to thousands of hybrid journals—charging both open access fees for certain articles as well as subscription fees for entire issues—and provided a new form of profit extraction in the already very profitable industry of scholarly publishing (Khoo, 2019). Elsevier, for example, created 100 open access journals in just nine months in 2020 (Abrahams, 2020).

### *"Transformative" Agreements*

The dominant response to APC inflation has, unsurprisingly, focused on market-based tactics of negotiation (from those with the power to negotiate) and has resulted in the massive increases of consortia and library systems (and costs associated with them) entering into "transformative" agreements—or what Meg Wacha has termed "Big Deals for APCs" (2019). Transformative agreements (TAs) are a variety of different types of large contracts that typically cover subscribing to an entire publisher catalogue (or subset thereof) and having university (or national) articles published open access for free with that publisher. Costs may be based on historical subscription prices (read & publish), historical publication amounts (publish & read), an offset or a discount on APCs, or a hybrid of these. However the costs are set, they still represent monumental amounts of money. Like the rest of the neoliberal market / access-based solutions, the larger political economy of TAs is usually ignored by universities and consortia in the Global North. Meanwhile, scholars such as Arianna Becerril-Garcia and Eduardo Aguado-López (2020) and Joy Owango (2020) continue to show who is excluded from these agreements—countries and libraries that cannot afford to pay the costs, predominantly in the Global South, and systems like those in Latin America that have historically resisted commercialization and APCs entirely.

TAs show us, perhaps even more starkly, that these pricing crises are manufactured by capitalism and the important role that imperialism plays in

6. This is not by any stretch a complete history of Open Access, which is a very contested and contradictory ground. See *Reassembling Scholarly Communications* (Eve and Gray 2020), Moore (2019), and Lawson (2019) for some of that work.

maintaining systems of inequality. Capitalism constantly creates crises as capital seeks to extract more from labour and stave off the decline in the rate of profit. The increasing focus on extracting value from scholarly publishing is inherently a focus on exploiting labour (Popowich, 2021), but the limits to value extraction have historically also been addressed by increasing debt or finding new markets through imperialism. This is part of a long history of what David Harvey (2004, 74) calls "accumulation by dispossession"—the ability to gain profit not by increased productivity but by finding new rents to claim. As George Chen, Alejandro Posada, and Leslie Chan outline, "rent relations are social relations of value distribution that the owner of an asset enjoys as a result of the ownership of the asset rather than of its production" (2019, 8). Scholarly publishing is particularly prone to rent-seeking and value-grabbing forms of capital accumulation, and we are seeing it become increasingly financialized by speculative shareholders.

The characteristics of journals as mini monopolies are important for understanding the economy of prestige in scholarly publishing: Roger Noll and W. Edward Steinmuller (1992) describe *monopolistic competition* as one way to understand the proliferation of journals we have seen since the 1970s. Everyone wants to publish in the "best" journal in their field, which has limited space, so the solution is for more journals to enter the field and jockey for that best position—"each specialized journal is the combined second best through worst outlet in a narrow subspecialty" (36). Scholarly publishers engage in practices to establish monopoly rent through market concentration, vertical integration, and the exclusivity of journal prestige. These forms of capital extraction are considered more in line with profiteering rather than the genuine production of value. Rather than producing more value, they are redistributing it to the capitalist class (Chen, Posada, & Chan 2019).

TAs throw significant resources at trying to "rebalance" the oligopolistic market. As Brianne Selman (2020) outlines, people coming from a position of *oligopolistic critique* argue that this leads to a contradiction between the supposedly neutral goal of TAs (shifting library subscription spend to open access spend) while still sending the same amount of money (if not more) to the same powerful oligopolies. Critics of TAs from this particular perspective point out that continuing to give huge sums to oligopolies allows them to continue market consolidation and price fixing—exacerbating the very problem they are trying to solve. This concentration of capital (and, relatedly, the concentration of wealth) that leads to the formations of oligopolies are relatively widely accepted by economists as a logical outcome of capitalist markets (Piketty 2014). Critique of oligopolies must therefore be a full critique of capitalist markets, but the oligopolistic critique does not often go this far. The problem is frequently portrayed by institutions as an unfair concentration of capital, not the

entire system is designed for that accumulation. As Dave Ghamandi (2020) states, this helps obscure the continued structure of exploitation. He argues that:

> 'Transformative agreements' are counter-revolutionary. That is, they are contracts that strengthen the oligopoly's power by appearing to meet the needs of authors and readers. A counter-revolution makes the existing system of power more resilient, especially now that the oligopoly has found a new way to create profit.

The rhetoric of TAs has become that of battle, sometimes that of the good university against the evil corporation, and the University of California (UC) have intentionally placed themselves in a role to dominate the discussion in North America. But this battle is one of might against might, a metaphorical arms race with consortia trying to do everything they can to approximate the power of the large publishers. Still, the power imbalance—even when one side is a large consortium or an entire nation—is staggering. If Elsevier is willing to play dirty pool with the large, prestigious UC system (with press releases, direct communications with Faculty, and calling UC liars [Ghamandi, 2020]), what hope do smaller institutions / consortia have when it comes to negotiating strategies? The celebrations after a "hard fought" TA is signed are simply celebrating the transfer of public funds to private companies, no matter the morally righteous language employed. Ultimately, the criticism of the oligopolistic state of the market isn't that the power and capital need to be better distributed among an appropriative class in a market, but that we need to find our way out of commercial markets altogether.

TAs include just as much uncertainty and being at the mercy of publishers as Big Deals do, especially for smaller/poorer institutions, where they continue to represent a massive part of a budget and reinforce dependency on external forces. And as evidenced in JISC's agreement with Taylor and Francis, institutions may suddenly find themselves unexpectedly paying hefty bills for taxes on ostensibly free articles (Lawson, 2021). If TAs are too successful (i.e., are used too much for publishing), will authors get accustomed to this arrangement and pressure their libraries to accept future price increases? On the flip side, Joseph Esposito (2018) warns that if publishers engage in TAs "too well" with large players (the UCs and Harvards of the publishing world), they will start to see the long-predicted decline in subscriptions due to "too much" open access. These constant calculations of cost also need to include the valuable researcher data that is often included in these deals (Moore 2020), something that no consortium or university is winning on.

Cost neutrality, a frequent goal of these agreements, is far from neutral when the costs are already higher than many can afford. In addition to continuing to reify the high prices of APCs and subscriptions, leaving huge swaths of the world out, TAs also reinforce internal inequalities. Only certain article or author types are allowed under

some offsetting agreements and some, such as the recent capped TA between Wiley and JISC (Vernon, 2020), have overage clauses. Potential consequences when overage clauses kick in after a certain number of articles have been made open access may be that only grant-funded (by specific, prestige grants), higher-echelon researchers (i.e., first or corresponding authors but not adjuncts, grad students, or otherwise precarious academics) may be selected for the no-APC deal, leaving the mess to library workers to sort out on the ground. We can see how these kinds of TAs re-enforce the usual hierarchies of academia, including their deeply encoded white and anglo supremacy.

Rather than change any of the systems of inequality we find embedded in the serials crisis, TAs make many of these issues bigger and bolder for those left behind (or rather, intentionally subjugated), and in the end decreases access while the crisis continues to find new ways to extract profit from labour.

***Capitalism Crisis, Core/ Periphery***

It is no exaggeration to say that the dominant scholarly communication systems reflect the highest forms of capitalism and imperialism, which, as Kwame Nkrumah and other Black socialists point out, is neocolonialism. These systems are predicated on racism and take international exploitation to new extremes. Over the years and in different disciplines, there have been a number of terms used to describe the global political economy of economic exploitation: core, semi-periphery, and periphery; colonizer and colonized; first, second, and third worlds; developed and intentionally underdeveloped; and Global South and Global North. These concepts variously describe economies, relations of power, and geography, and don't necessarily overlap in a one-to-one way. We generally will use Global North and Global South to describe the relationships of global imperialism and neocolonialism, in keeping with current common usage. While this may mask internal regional differences (such as the position of South Africa), it is still useful to help us understand *collective imperialism* Samir Amin's preferred term to globalization (2014), where the transnational alliances from the Global North are ever stronger and effectively united to keep down the Global South, continuing the twinning of racism and capitalist exploitation.

The deep interconnections and vertical integrations of scholarly publishing are one manifestation of Monopoly Finance Capitalism, a modern form of capitalism in which monopolies form "an integrated system, and consequently now tightly control all productive systems" (Amin, 2019). This stream of economic analysis has been developed from work of Paul Baran & Paul Sweezy (1966), and John Foster (2014), among others, who argue that capitalist markets tend heavily towards concentration into monopoly or oligopoly forms. Monopoly, in this view, is a feature of capitalist

markets, not a bug. Monopoly Finance Capitalism is reliant on a global system of exploitation, centered on bringing profits to the core at the expense of the periphery. This phase is distinct because of the degree of collusion of corporations in the Global North, as well as the transnational finance supporting it. "Capitalism is not only a system based on the exploitation of labor by capital. It is also a system based on polarization in its development on the world scale" (Amin, 2019). This polarization is clear when we look at who is participating in the latest phase of the serials crisis.

Globally, the conversation on TAs is shaped by the Efficiency and Standards for Article Charges (ESAC) registry hosted by the Max Planck Digital Library. The earliest TA in ESAC is between Austria and IOP in 2014 with Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden entering TAs over the next few years. Institutions in the US, beginning with the California Digital Library, started signing registered TAs in 2019, and Canada, via the CRKN consortia, signed their first with Wiley in 2021. While ESAC naturally skews towards European representation (because of the Plan S requirements to register), it still tells a starkly Eurocentric story. At the time of writing, 88% of agreements in the ESAC registry were signed in Europe, 5.2% in the United States, 2.4% in Australia, 2% in Asia, 1.6% in the Middle East, and less than 1% in Africa (two, both in South Africa) (ESAC n.d.). There are none registered for Central or South America.

This uneven adoption of TAs is not just leaving the Global South behind, it is making it actively harder for the Global South, by building an even bigger commercial and prestige-based pay-to-play system with bigger barriers and exclusions. No longer just pay-to-read, TAs are part and parcel of a pay-to-publish system that actively disadvantages the Global South (Chan 2019b; Aguado López and Becerril García 2019) by prioritizing and legitimizing the commercial APC model. One of the features of an oligopolistic market is the possibility of price fixing (rather than driving down prices through competition), which makes all negotiation-based strategies highly unlikely to succeed. To adopt Samir Amin's (2009) characterization of the global energy crisis, the real crisis is

> the product of the will of oligopolies and a collective imperialism to secure a monopoly of access to the planet's [scholarly publishing] . . . in such a way as to appropriate the imperialist rent. This is true whether the utilization of these resources remains the same as it is now (wasteful and energy-devouring)—or whether it is subject to [price caps] and new correctives.

The crisis lies in the globalization of the capitalist market form itself, not its expression.

We caution that the "revolutionary and redistributive" (Grande, 2018, 55) aims of many scholars on the periphery and semi-periphery should not be co-opted into

the limited liberal understanding of recognition and inclusion. As Sandy Grande (2018, 54) notes, "the settler state has an array of strategies—recognition being one of them—to placate dispossessed people while evading any effort to change the underlying power structure." Calls for bibliodiversity, which are occurring internationally (Shearer et al. 2020; Toledo et al. 2019), can be easily co-opted into this type of surface recognition/representation, while ignoring the calls for more radical, participatory, and redistributed epistemic *structures* underneath.

### *Contradictions & Crises*

By early 2021, major research universities such as University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Virginia were cutting serials subscriptions and relying on the decades-old strategy of interlibrary lending as well as green open access. Despite nearly four decades of crisis, librarians are repeating/advocating for many of the same old approaches (e.g., ILL, developing core lists, consulting faculty on cuts, and trying to put pressure on the market). Considering the fact that we're still cutting subscriptions and still don't have access to all the literature that we need, the problems must be more structural and something that digital formats or open access itself cannot solve. How did we reach a point where the publishing oligopoly remains well-established despite so many different strategies to challenge it? We suggest that the historic function of librarianship—to serve existing power structures including the dominance of capital and the state—and the liberal theory it is grounded in makes it difficult for librarians to recognize and understand the contradictions that are at the root of the serials crisis. Popowich (2019), Fobazi Ettarh (2018), Kaetrena Kendrick & Ione Damasco (2019), Hudson (2017), Drabinski (2018), are among the many librarians that have asserted that the profession is made to serve the status quo, which is why the following contradictions are mostly ignored, misunderstood, or deliberately obscured.

The present state of scholarly journal publishing is largely the result of an underrecognized contradiction within research institutions playing itself out over many decades. Aspects of this process have been explored by others (Eve 2014; Moore 2019; Winn 2014; Winn 2015), but perhaps without emphasizing the same set of contradictions that we discuss. Popowich's (2018) analysis of librarians' labour being subordinate to capital also serves as a solid foundation for our theorization.

Any analysis of the contradictions in serials publishing must begin by examining the university's relationship with knowledge and knowledge producers. The university, especially if it is research-intensive, needs knowledge to continually be produced, published, and made accessible in order for it to accumulate more capital. It accomplishes this through teaching, research, grant writing, and the commercialization of intellectual property like patents. More specifically, university

employees execute these functions within an exploitative, wage relationship with their employers. The knowledge producers do not own any shares of the university and are virtually never granted a vote on governing boards. These boards, with ultimate authority over a university and adhering to a neoliberal capitalist agenda, outsourced journal publishing to the private industry: it is no coincidence that the neoliberal age, which began in the 1970s, has produced both a wealthy, private publishing oligopoly *and* a serials crisis-ridden, mostly-public university sector.

The relationship between elite schools and the commercial publishing oligopoly has mostly been mutually beneficial. Commercial publishers profit from the acquisition of free manuscripts and the free labour of reviewers and many editors. This represents an immense transfer of public wealth to the private industry. In return, the research-intensive and relatively higher-ranking universities receive (1) the access to the literature they need to reproduce capital via teaching and more research and (2) symbolic capital in the form of prestige. JIF is the primary mechanism by which symbolic capital is generated by the publishers and which elite schools utilize to maintain higher rankings over other universities. This prestige is converted into financial or real capital in the forms of increased future tuition and grant revenue, donations, and other rents. The capital conversion is accelerated/catalyzed by university communications and advancement departments, branding, marketing, reputation management, and political lobbying.

However, for most schools a contradiction manifests and intensifies as a result of the university's neoliberalization and privatization of journal publishing: neoliberal logic backfires as the price of licensing the literature becomes more than the university wants to bear and impinges on its profit-making abilities. Malcolm X would have described this—public universities finding themselves under the monopoly power of commercial publishers using revenue largely obtained from those universities—as chickens coming home to roost. The major corporate publishers understand how JIF and the symbolic capital they generate are used by the elite universities to maintain their higher education hegemony. The purposefully underfunded and rather insignificant university-based journal publishing programmes allow the oligopoly to extract more revenue, grow, and develop new models such as TAs. While some of the repercussions of these processes, such as expensive subscriptions, are easy to see, we hope that this brief explanation of the circulation of capital and resulting contradictions allows others to deepen a counter-narrative and focus on the exploitation and disciplining of knowledge producers throughout academia.

### *Librarians, Coercion, and Consent*

Librarians' role in the aforementioned serials crisis and broader knowledge production and international publishing processes warrant further examination. Librarians are reduced to being the caretakers of the contradictions that we describe. We find Antonio Gramsci's concept of coercion and consent to be a useful framework for this part of the analysis (Ramos Jr., 1982). Gramsci argued that the ruling class maintained its hegemony through a mixture of coercion and consent. In our context, coercion partly explains the pressure that collections and acquisitions librarians feel to fulfill the institution's demand for scholarly literature. The disciplinary nature of the wage system steers these librarians away from disrupting article access and the university's capital accumulation process.

However, the ruling class maintains its hegemony more seamlessly through consensus than coercion. This means that librarians' ideological alignment with the elites helps to significantly perpetuate the status quo. When librarians share the same system of values, beliefs, and ideals with the ruling class they do not need to be coerced into trying to find a cure for the serials crisis that preserves the establishment's power. Sam Popowich's (2019) exploration of liberalism in the profession is insightful and provides a useful context. If librarians and employers mainly agree in their core beliefs, including liberal tenets of individualism and respect for private property, then the acceptable parameters of thought and behavior remain fairly narrow. Freire's conception of adhesion to one's oppressor and Ettarh's (2018) theory of vocational awe both apply here as well. Librarians' belief in the inherent goodness of the profession, as Ettarh expertly elucidated, combined with Freire's observation that the oppressed tend to follow the ruling class's ideology helps explain why many work towards reforming serials publishing rather than replacing the structure. The seemingly natural response to a serials crisis is to work towards restoring the system to its former state, which benefited elite universities and to sidestep issues of hierarchy, racism, and exploitation. Mediating scholarly communication in a market system is unproblematic from a liberal perspective because liberalism respects individual choice, private property, and capitalism. Once again, change becomes just a matter of tinkering at the edges.

The power of consent, however, may be waning as the existing contradictions heighten and new ones appear. As more librarians become conscious of the fact that OA is not by itself liberating, the ruling class propaganda becomes less effective. As is often the case with crises, the private sector is often bailed out with a large cash infusion from the state. So, in some respects, TAs are no different than bailing out the housing and auto industries. Being "too big to fail" is a profitable condition, and the state treats the publishing oligopoly in that manner.

## Where Do We Want To Go & How Do We Get There?

Given the assumptions built into a crisis narrative and the inability of mainstream open access efforts to address root causes, what role might the politics of refusal play? Faced with intensifying contradictions and the recognition that the university, like other workplaces, is a site of domination, hierarchy, and exploitation, grappling with refusal theory seems appropriate. If we decentre ourselves and recognize the university's broader historical function as "the institutional nexus for the capitalist and religious missions of the settler state, mirroring its histories of dispossession, enslavement, exclusion, forces assimilation, and integration," (Grande 2018, 47-48) then the politics of refusal could have major implications for scholarly communication. We begin this final section by differentiating between refusal and reform before moving into a discussion of librarians as protagonists. We will introduce Walter Rodney's model of the guerilla intellectual and his groundings methodology. Finally, we will examine particular publishing efforts through the lens of refusal.

### *Reform, Resistance, and Refusal*

Crisis rhetoric in higher education and other public sectors often instils fear: fear of less tuition, fear of lack of public funding (and more intangible support), fear that the only solution is to become a more aggressive competitor, to turn more to the private sector, to market more and more to students as consumers. In libraries, the serial crisis feeds on a fear of decreasing budgets, loss of access for angry consumers (faculty and students alike), fear of a university system that doesn't see libraries (and their subscriptions) as valuable. The same solutions—turning to the private sector, increasing competition for prestige by maintaining collections/access, and marketing libraries as part of student satisfaction—keep the crisis narrative going.

TAs simply come to the aid of capital while giving the appearance of redistribution. Status quo defenders and liberal reformists adhere economically and ideologically to the existing power structure, typically benefiting from it so that their role becomes to contain opposition and blunt the calls for change. But as Samir Amin points out, we need strategies that are not just "exits from the crisis," but rather strategies that are aimed at an "exit from capitalism in crisis" (2009). While reformism smooths over the contradictions of capitalism, and enables power relations to remain fundamentally unchanged, other approaches challenge and create alternatives. There is a long history of various forms of counter-hegemonic thought and struggle that seek the cracks in hegemony and create alternatives within them. We appreciate the *politics of refusal* coined by Audra Simpson and outlined by Sandy Grande because past reformist efforts have failed to centre power, exploitation, and

material structures, wasting collective time and energy and continuing to be rooted in the same neoliberal logics that have produced and sustained the crisis.

Resistance, rather than refusal, may be a more familiar strategy. Resistance in the academy typically gets reduced to critique, rather than strikes or labour action (Popowich 2019, 269), but there are a wide variety of forms resistance can take. Riyad A. Shahjahan (2014), building on work from David Jeffress, delineates particular strategies of resistance in the academy, using four main types of resistance frameworks.

The first, *cultural resistance*, focuses on writing from the margins and keeping alternative epistemologies alive and active. Critiques that focus on the lack of diversity/representation would fall in this category, such as many of the critiques around bibliodiversity (Chan 2019a) or the lack of diversity in publishing (Roh 2016). We recognize, as many critical scholars do, that while representation and inclusion have some value, inclusion in repressive structures like the university does not constitute power and is not inherently liberating. The distinction between being anti-discriminatory and being anti-oppressive is important. It is the difference between wanting change that gets rid of roadblocks to your own advancement and wanting change towards justice and liberation.

The second framework, *resistance as opposition*, includes actions like protests, social mobilization, and direct challenges to labour practices including demanding more equitable hiring or mobilizing to resist restructuring. Some of the distributive strategies fall within this category of resistance, such as direct opposition and mobilization against increasing metrics of prestige. Shahjahan recognizes that while these struggles may necessarily be broad and mask heterogeneity, sometimes strategic essentialism is useful in order to unite people's opposition (2014, 227).

The remaining two forms of resistance, *resistance as subversion* and *transformative resistance*, include everyday refusals of the neoliberal project and its logic. These frameworks normalize new relationships and change oppressive narratives and material structures, all of which may be better suited to the politics of refusal than of resistance.

Grande cautions that resistance in itself is not necessarily against the interests of the state or capital. Power structures will often recognize, negotiate with, and, therefore, weaken resistance. However, *refusal* offers a model that cannot be easily subsumed and is a more dangerous threat to the system because of the radical doubt it casts on the institutions and their authority (2018, 59). With refusal, the power of the gifts and concessions of reform is stripped from the institution. They can no longer be in the role of reasonable benefactor or benevolent authority. Refusal in academia,

in scholarly communication, means ceasing to negotiate, ceasing to recognize the extractive publishers and give them the benefit of our engagement.

A politics of refusal for scholarly communication should refuse whiteness and the practicality we disguise it with. As David James Hudson explains, "the exaltation of practicality certainly connects at some level… to our explicitly articulated commitment to access, to a politics of inclusion that seeks to structure resources, services, and spaces so as to eliminate barriers for users" (Hudson 2017, 211). We need to reject that our roles are only to offer access to literature, and we should refuse to acknowledge structures such as APCs that continue to deny the ability of all to participate on equal terms. We also should reject the idea that the only way to address inequality in scholarly communication is through redistributive efforts and refuse to continue participating in and celebrating these deals on our campuses. We need to refuse to keep funding the sketchy data practices of our vendors. Many of these companies need to be defunded. We also need to refuse the notion that the only alternative to paying into commercial oligopolies is accepting philanthro-capitalist guilt-money, and we definitely need to refuse the IP restrictions that come with that funding.

We need to refuse the individual premise of intellectual property entirely, while still recognizing our debts to the communities of knowledge that have come before us. We need to find practices that refuse individuality and prestige,[7] that cease to engage with the myth of heroes and saviours in open access, and that cease to accrue citations and prestige for the critics. We need to refuse crisis narratives that serve capitalism, particularly when they imply neoliberal solutions. We need to start collectively refusing our labour and time as solidarity. And as Grande notes, instead of using our time to call for more diversity, inclusion, and safety within the academy and publishing, we need to build guerilla spaces of sovereignty outside of academia (2018, 60) (possibly by pirating its funds). All of these forms of refusal are *generative*, maybe even *transformative* (!), to the degree that they imagine (and in many contexts, remember) communality, collectivism, solidarity, and liberation.

### *Protagonistic Practice*

Because refusal has been theorized as a protagonistic action by Robin D. G. Kelley (2016), Grande (2018), Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013), and others, we must discuss what librarians could actively bring forth in our words and deeds. Walter Rodney (2019), a Guyanese Black Marxist scholar, contributed the theory of the guerilla intellectual and a groundings methodology and pedagogical praxis to this area. Rodney's guerilla intellectual begins their journey with refusal: of capitalism,

7. We suggest, for example, writing collectively and pseudonymously.

the (white) bourgeois academy, and the comforts these afford many scholars. This intellectual is a scholar-activist who "must actively wage a struggle for the terrain of academia, of knowledge production, of knowledge distribution" (Benjamin and Springer 2019). They do not seek to reform bourgeois institutions and instead have three tasks. As Jesse Benjamin and Devyn Springer describe, Rodney proposed to Black audiences that one becomes a guerilla intellectual:

> (1) by attacking within their own discipline the distortions which white bourgeois cultural imperialism has brought about, (2) to then move beyond their own discipline to challenge social myths concerning racialized society and history, and lastly (3) they must attach themselves to the activity of the Black masses.

The guerilla intellectual-librarian redistributes critical knowledge and histories in our communities while aiding in constructing new and liberating knowledge. Rodney's method for accomplishing this was done through a groundings praxis. This methodology aimed to transform power and upset hierarchies through participation in non-hierarchical grounding, or reasoning, sessions within one's communities. In these sessions critical knowledge and histories are shared and produced with the goals of increasing political consciousness and supporting liberating actions (Rodney 2019). Librarians are well positioned to expropriate knowledge and resources and, when necessary, disregard copyright law to share them. Sharing DIY methods of knowledge distribution like zine-making is an example of skill sharing that can be used towards political goals.

It is impossible to engage with the guerrilla intellectual's third task on paper. It is also worth noting that Rodney had an expansive definition of who is Black. "[They] are non-whites—the hundreds of millions of people whose homelands are in Asia and Africa, with another few millions in the Americas" (Rodney 2019, 10). Black folks, therefore, are the masses, the global majority, and the historically colonized people, which includes the US's internal colonies. Black guerilla intellectuals must commit class suicide in order to truly ground and be in solidarity with the Black masses (Adeleke 2000, 48). And aspiring white guerilla intellectuals must accept leadership from Black folk, who are experts in their own oppression. Only after this solidarity is built can we begin to, among other things, co-destruct the academy (Benjamin and Springer 2019).

Some librarians are already subverting the academy from within and can do so in better ways by working collectively. Putting these ideas into motion is a difficult task, even for the Zapatistas: Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés said "we say 'collectively,' but one needs a lot of practice in order to figure out how to do that" (2015). How collective practice looks can differ from participation in trade unions to working in smaller affinity groups. Either way, building networks of solidarity, support,

communication, and defense is a necessity for those who refuse. Some librarians are capable of redistributing money to closely aligned outside groups, while others may only be able to share their time, expertise, and energy. Working collectively helps us develop stronger counternarratives for the never-ending propaganda, lies, myths, and distortions that we face. It also provides a hedge against the trap of individualism, egos, and the dominance of charismatic, messianic (white) figures.

### *Final Interrogations*

Philanthrocapitalism describes the tendency of philanthropy to resemble for-profit entities, with emphases on returns on investment and quantitative results (Ramdas 2011). One could argue that the elite's use of philanthropic enterprises to shape the library and information science world in their ideology and morality is not new. Andrew Carnegie's legacy of libraries was built on the exploitation of his workers and the natural world. He patronizingly stated to workers "what you needed, though you didn't know it, was my libraries and concert halls. And that's what I'm giving to you" (Stamberg 2013). Criticism of Carnegie's effect on local communities is longstanding (Mickelson 1975). Today's philanthro-capitalists, however, have global (meaning imperial) ambitions. Ramdas (2011) summarizes the critique of these ambitions as "[opposition] to the policymaking and agenda-setting powers that tend to accompany this new global elite." In scholarly communication, grants are not charity, but rather capital set in motion to create a return for the philanthro-capitalist.[8] This comes in the form of reputation laundering and, we speculate, future commercialization of open access research and accompanying open source tools and infrastructure. Despite any good intentions, grant recipients are influenced by the philanthro-capitalist's ideology. One must prove themselves to be trustworthy to the grant-maker, which may include compromising one's values along the way. Either willingly or unknowingly, by accepting a grant, the recipient becomes a tool of the philanthro-capitalist and their imperial ambitions. Any good that comes from a grant-funded project cannot be fully realized while we are collectively subordinate to capital and the ruling elite.

No discussion of refusal in serials publishing (and scholarly publishing more broadly) would be complete without identifying some efforts making honest attempts to challenge the status quo. Redalyc, a university-based OA publishing platform based in Mexico but now open to journals from any country, is rooted in a non-commercial and no-APC model. It is a major constituent of AmeliCA, a broader coalition that provides publishing tools and services. These groups are explicitly designed to be by and for the Global South. Their efforts are striving for self-determination and represent a collective fightback against global knowledge systems rooted in white

8. Philanthropies lower their taxable income as well.

supremacy and are counter-structures to the commercialized journal oligopoly and efforts like Plan S (Aguado López and Becerril García 2019). Their approach is state-based, however, and it is not clear what level of decision-making and control lies directly with rank-and-file knowledge producers. African Journals Online, a non-profit organization, was initiated by INASP, a who's who of philanthro-capitalists. This organization increases access to African journals, but is entangled in many of the contradictions that we previously discussed. The Open Library of Humanities, a registered charity, also publishes without APCs and relies on library members for funding. It also has leaned heavily on philanthro-capitalist grants from the Mellon Foundation and Arcadia, which may push and pull it in certain directions and forms.

ScholarLed's member presses are worth paying attention to, especially as they continue work on the Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs (COPIM, see COPIM n.d.) project. The presses demonstrate a high-level of autonomy and some have been in existence for over a decade. Three of the presses are either charities or community interest corporations and, interestingly, meson press is a worker-cooperative. ScholarLed (ScholarLed n.d.), which Moore (2019) explored in his dissertation, is purposefully *scaling small*, which has the potential for more experimentalism and refusal of neoliberal pressures. The question of access to capital, without becoming subsumed to it, is a recurring challenge to autonomous, more radical organizations. For ScholarLed this means having to navigate the contradictions of working with philanthro-capitalist money in their COPIM project. The more state-based AmeliCA, unfortunately, always risks a reversal of progress depending on the will of future governments (and the imperial pressures on them).

## Conclusion

Crisis narratives don't always serve us, especially when they narrow our options down to fear, scarcity, and perpetual crisis. This is particularly true of the serials "crisis," which happens in a university system where the major players frequently have a vested interest in competition, power, wealth, and hegemony, rather than a commitment to truth, justice, community, and knowledge sharing. Indeed, crisis is an engine of capitalism, or as Dario Gentili calls it, crisis is the art of government (2013). Crisis all too often becomes a process of furthering even deeper, more violent capitalism. As Alain Badiou (2014) says, "Capitalism is expanding everywhere around the world—it is doing wonderfully. Wars and crises are part of its means of development. These means are as brutal as they are necessary for wiping out the competition and allowing the winners to concentrate the greatest possible quantity of disposable capital in their own hands." It comes as no surprise, then, that the serials crisis and the responses to it have resulted in higher concentrations of market share

for the oligopoly and stronger collective imperialism. Reducing the crisis to one or two boogeymen is not only lazy. It's also deceiving.

While open access efforts and redistributing budgets give us the illusion of choice and action within the system, they do little to overcome the ultimate dictatorship of capital and the need to accumulate. More wealth is continually redistributed *upwards* than we are capable of redistributing *horizontally*. And as much as we may have the urge to reform, it is important to remember that the system isn't broken, it was built this way. Exclusion, inequity, and privilege are at the heart of many academic systems. Hegemony, however, is never complete, and refusal of neoliberalism in our universities can help us escape our reformist tendencies. Refusal of the complete colonization of knowledge can help us recognize and cultivate alternatives, like the scholarly publishing projects in Latin America or more collectivist projects. We can find cracks in the hegemony, and nurture the projects that can grow in them. We need new barometers for judging whether our OA projects are successful. Has this improved Black people's lives? Has this improved Indigenous people's lives? Does it build power and/or lead towards liberation?

The greater amounts of money being thrown at the unstable publishing system are a sign of both the capitalists' continued commitment to it and its probable collapse. The misleadership class will defend it and prop it up for as long as possible, which often involves co-opting the detractors' own language. The privileged academics, who enjoy being near the masters, have shown no solidarity and will be further weaponized against less fortunate workers. However, a system's collapse does not guarantee a better replacement, and the time has never been more ripe for organizing. The system cannot hide its rottenness, especially as the contradictions keep expanding. There is only so much profit left to be squeezed from us. The majority of faculty are precariously employed, and their working conditions will increasingly resemble those of non-academic workers, potentially allowing them to see common cause. This creates more space to explore, adapt, and protagonistically deploy Rodney's groundings methodology. Creating greater ideological independence from the ruling elite is an urgent task. We will only be free when the masses are conscious, organized, and accept nothing less than complete liberation. We should be prepared for this to be a decades-long struggle. We should also be prepared for reactionary responses and the disproportionate harm they historically cause to Black and Indigenous folks. In the meantime, we build power collectively by struggling and refusing. ¡Ya basta!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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