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Archival assemblages: applying disability studies' political/relational model to archival description

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Abstract This paper critically explores power structures embedded in archival description and re-conceptualizes archives and archival material as assemblages of politicized decisions specifically by utilizing Alison Kafer's political/relational model of disability as a framework. Kafer's model draws upon previous models of disability to open up contestation and politicization of disability as a category. This approach acknowledges that concepts of disability always already intersect with notions of race, class, age, gender, and sexuality. This article argues that cross-informing archival studies and feminist disability studies illuminates the long history that records creation and description processes have in documenting, surveilling, and controlling disabled and other non-normative bodies and minds. Furthermore, a political/relational approach makes possible the illumination of *archival assemblages*: the multiple perspectives, power structures, and cultural influences—all of which are temporally, spatially, and materially contingent—that inform the creation and archival handling of records. Through close readings of multiple records' descriptions, both inside and outside of disability, this paper focuses on the complexity of language and its politics within disability communities. A political/relational approach first promotes moving away from the replication and reliance on self-evident properties of a record and second advocates for addressing—not redressing—contestable terms, both of which illuminate the archival assemblages which produced it. By embracing the contestation of disability, and therefore the corresponding ways in which it is represented in archives, archivists and archives users are able to perceive and challenge the ways in which norms and deviance are understood, perpetuated, and constructed in public narratives via archives. Existing at the intersection of disability studies, feminist discourse, and archival studies, this paper builds theory around archival description and

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radicalizes traditional approaches to understanding normativized constructs within archives as it encourages reflexivity and shifts power relations.

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> A political/relational model of disability… makes room for more activist responses, seeing 'disability' as a potential site for collective reimagining. (Alison Kafer 2013)

Introduction

I begrudgingly open a record named, "Annual Return of All Insane Persons, Lunatics and Idiots…" (The National Archives) while scouring the UK Government's Archives online repository looking for records representing disabled people. As I read through the mid-nineteenth century ledger recording disabled people who were institutionalized in Tynemouth, England, I feel the familiar sting of reading the words "insane," "idiot," "lunatic," "dangerous," and "dirty" not only within the record, but also reproduced within its digital description. I think how words such as "insane," "dangerous," and "dirty" have been used against my disabled community, implying that we are lesser than others and how those words, for me, draw in all of those who participated in and were (and still are) affected by the creation of such archival records that were established around ableist, racist, and classist ideals. This record is a palpable example of how complex histories are underrepresented within archival description. By utilizing feminist disability studies, this paper explores how the multiplicity of people, places, politics, and materials can be illuminated through a new theoretical lens. My affective response—as a disabled person and an archivist—is an instance embedded in an archival assemblage—the complex personal, material, political, and collective histories and connections this record has—that produced and continues to (re)produce that record. I yearn for this digitized record not simply to transcribe the problematic terms within the physical record, but also to demonstrate its political and relational attachments, the multiplicities of which digital tools can afford to show. A connection to the history of oppression feels necessary to contextualize the potency of this record, to offer more to archival users. I am left wondering if other users will understand this record as nestled within a larger body politic. I am left wondering about the decisions made by the person(s) who created the record, who appraised it as worth being a part of the National Archives, and who digitized it, as the lack of transparency within the record as well as in its description is noticeable. I am left wanting more.

Disability studies provides critical models that recognize history, conceptualize oppression, and can expand the ways in which records are produced, processed, and understood. In particular, an application of the political/relational model of disability studies to archival studies first highlights an intersectional approach to power and oppression, and second, proposes understanding and defining archives

within the framework of *assemblage theory*. This project aims to build theory within archival studies to illuminate the political possibilities of archival description. I will first expand upon understandings of archival power by describing canonical models of disability—medical, social, and political/relational—and then utilize the political/relational model to uncover how archival processes uphold power and authority within archives. Through this application, I will examine two archival stages, records creation and description, to demonstrate that an assemblage-like approach to archives is crucial for politicizing archival material and can offer a nuanced starting point for contending with records description today. My aim for this paper is to look at the broad application of disability studies to archival studies through the amplification of voices of disabled writers, scholars, and artists, while acknowledging that those voices, and many like them, have been affected disproportionately by the violence of archives throughout history.

Stylistically, I choose to situate myself within two worlds. I choose to use "I" and "we" as both a queer, non-binary, disabled person, affected by forms of oppression, and as a white archivist, a participant in oppressive systems, while acknowledging that my experiences are not universal to the disabled or archival communities. Through this project, I hope to do what disability studies, feminist discourse, and archival theory have done throughout each discourse's development: build theory around practice and radicalize traditional approaches to understanding normativized constructs.

Why feminist disability studies for archives?

Over the past fifteen years, a shift has occurred within archival studies: archivists, traditionally depicted as neutral custodians of records, are now acknowledged as active participants in archival records who shape and are shaped by history (Cook and Schwartz 2002; Punzalan and Caswell 2015). Recent scholarship has challenged traditional ideals of neutrality within archives (Harris 1998; Gilliland 2011) and has explored how value is embedded in archival processes through the assumption that certain records have value for future use (Brothman 2001; Nesmith 2002; Schwartz and Cook 2002; Trace 2010). Sue McKemmish, Shannon Faulkhead, and Lynette Russell, for example, have challenged the bias engrained in colonialist description and identified a need for co-constructing the description and appraisal practices with Indigenous communities (McKemmish et al. 2011). Notably, many archival scholars have expanded these concepts by incorporating critical theory, such as feminist epistemologies, queer theory, and critical race studies to explore normative frameworks within archives (Wurl 2005; Dunbar 2006; Olson 2001; Drabinski 2013; Caswell and Cifor 2016; Lee 2016; Adler 2017; Caswell et al. 2017). These works are situated in a vast body of scholarship that has uncovered the notion that there are constructions of value, by certain people and for certain people, within all archival facets.

Disability studies, interinformed with other critical theory, conceptualizes the ways in which disability is irreducible to bodily and mental difference. The field explores how disability is produced, understood in society, and responded to in

cultural, environmental, and material ways. As Kim Q. Hall notes, "[b]uilding on [previous models] of disability… and feminist theory's analysis of the naturalization of both sex and gender, [feminist disability studies] can suggest an avenue for critique of reductive biological understandings of both gender and disability" (Hall 2011, p. 5). Feminist disability studies transforms feminist theory and disability studies by exploring how race, class, gender, sexuality, size, age, and ability are identified in relation to each other and in comparison with a white, cis, able-bodied, male "norm." Mia Mingus urges that "[a]bleism must be included in our analysis of oppression… Ableism cuts across all of our movements because ableism dictates how bodies should function against a mythical norm—an able-bodied standard of white supremacy, heterosexism, sexism, economic exploitation, moral/religious beliefs, age and ability" (Mingus 2011).

Not only do different marginalized groups share parallel histories of oppression such as eugenics, genocide, hate crimes, and domestic abuse, but ableism, racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia are also interinformed. Disability justice activist Patty Berne notes, "[w]e cannot comprehend ableism without grasping its interrelations with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism and capitalism, each system co-creating an ideal bodymind built upon the exclusion and elimination of a subjugated 'other' from whom profits and status are extracted" (Berne 2015). Such identities have been criminalized and contained through legislation, institutionalization, and sterilization (Schweik 2010), all of which, I argue, are intertwined with the power embedded in archives and processes of recording. Michelle Jarman, by integrating both race and disability critiques, traces the "long history of those benefiting by a power structure based upon white privilege using medical and psychiatric diagnoses to manufacture 'truths' of racial inferiorities" (Jarman 2012, p. 19). Archives, although not explicitly named, serve as the material embodiment of psychiatric (Aubrecht 2014; Geraci 2016) and racial injustice in many of these examples, as they exhibit power and control over marginalized lives through documenting and categorizing stigmatized people that are subsequently reinforced through archives.

Sara White, who began the conversation on how disability studies can influence archival theory, gestures at the power of archives and the history of oppression within different marginalized identities (White 2012). White's work incorporates disability studies' concept of embodiment and illustrates that how we understand disability heavily influences how we appraise, arrange, and describe fonds and collections (White 2012). Although focused around a method of "account[ing] for all disability experiences," she highlights the conflation of medicine and nationalism, citing the categorization of Black slaves, immigrants, and poor whites as "defective" and how archives served public anxieties around contagion (White 2012). Race and nationality, as well as sexuality, gender, and class have shared histories, both separate and interwoven, with disability.

A feminist disability studies framework is particularly valuable for archival studies because it provides a nuanced approach to marginality and intersectionality, interrogating how identities can be sites of privilege or oppression and can function differently in different spaces (Crenshaw 1991), including within archival spaces. Michelle Caswell cautions that archival pluralism should "avoid the pitfalls of

claims of universality, inattention to power, silencing dissent, and collapsing of difference" that happens in religious pluralism (Caswell 2013, p. 288). To claim disability, Alison Kafer confers, is "to recognize the ethical, epistemic, and political responsibilities" of such a claim (Kafer 2013, p. 13) and to draw *more attention to difference*, not less. An intersectional approach is crucial for understanding archival power as it highlights the differences in understandings of marginality as well as how, even if not recognized, disability has already been evident in critical approaches.

Most importantly, disability studies recognizes that many of the people affected by ableism and cultural oppression of bodies and minds may not identify as disabled. We can interrogate how people are affected by ableist ideals and cultural anxieties, and how those anxieties might intersect with other ways in which we conceive of ideal bodies and minds. "Anxiety about aging, for example, can be seen as a symptom of compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness, as can attempts to 'treat' children who are slightly shorter than average with growth hormones; in neither case are the people involved necessarily disabled, but they are certainly affected by cultural ideals of normalcy and ideal form and function" (Kafer 2013, p. 8). Although archival holdings may not contain records specifically on disabled subjects, I will demonstrate that records still can rely on descriptive practices of materiality that assume self-evident properties and thus risk universalizing experience. I will identify examples of disabled lives being affected by the power and authority ingrained in archives, and I will also apply this theory broadly to surface widespread forms of archival oppression. As Alison Kafer highlights, "rethinking our cultural assumptions about disability, imagining our disability futures differently, will benefit us all, regardless of our identities" (Kafer 2013, p. 8).

Models of disability: medical, social, political/relational

Within disability studies scholarship, many models have been developed to understand the ways in which disability is conceived, is constructed, and functions in society. I will briefly describe three models of disability: the medical, the social, and the more recently developed political/relational. Through these models, disabled bodies, minds, and lives are understood differently and the way in which disability is understood can have drastic impacts on the way it is met by individuals, societies, and cultures.

Despite the rise of disability studies scholarship and activism, disability continues to be predominantly conceptualized in medical terms and this, in turn, elicits misguided responses to how to solve the "problem" of disability. In this dominant framework, named *the medical model of disability*, disability is understood as a fixed, monolithic category comprised of self-evident facts. The experience of being D/deaf, for example, is simplified to the "fact" that one cannot hear and that of being blind to the "fact" that one cannot see. Through the medical model, the experience of deafness or blindness is distilled to a "knowable fact of the body" which "encompass[es] the whole of one's identity" (Kafer 2013, p. 109)

instead of being a component of a complex existence, socially and culturally situated, where not all individuals have the same experience.

When disability is considered a static character of the body or mind (not to mention a deficiency), it becomes not only a simplified "problem" to be fixed or normalized, but also an individualized problem. Simi Linton states that "the medicalization of disability casts human variation as deviance from the norm, as pathological condition, as deficit, and, significantly, as an individual burden and personal tragedy" (Linton 1998, p. 11). Each disabled person is therefore expected to navigate inaccessible spaces, either by adjusting their expectations of accessibility or by finding their own solutions. For instance, sexologist and disability consultant Bethany Stevens writes about attending an inaccessible venue, whereby, after agreeing to enter through an alternate back-door entrance, "tucked away near the trash bins," that is supposedly wheelchair accessible, she is still confronted with a staircase. The inaccessibility of the building leaves her needing to make a decision either to be carried into the venue or not to attend the event (Stevens 2015). Kafer notes that within the medical model, disability becomes "a personal problem afflicting individual people, a problem best solved through strength of character and resolve" (Kafer 2013, p. 4). And the response to disability is to "'treat' the condition and the person with the condition rather than 'treating' the social processes and policies that constrict disabled people's lives" (Linton 1998, p. 11).

Many disability studies scholars have rejected this simplification and individualization of disability and have argued "that disability should be understood as a minority identity, not simply as a 'condition' of lack or loss to be pitied or 'overcome'" (McRuer 2002, p. 223). Developed as a response to the medical model, *the social model of disability* addresses the social constructs that inhibit disabled people from having equal access to opportunities and resources that would otherwise help them to "participate fully in society, to live independently, to undertake productive work and to have full control over their own lives" (Shakespeare 2006, p. 4). Instead of lying within the disabled body or mind, "the problem of disability is located in inaccessible buildings, discriminatory attitudes, and ideological systems that attribute normalcy and deviance to particular minds and bodies" (Kafer 2013, p. 6). Therefore, according to the social model, the stairs in Stevens' example "create a functional 'impairment' for wheelchair users that ramps do not" (Garland-Thomson 1996). "Once we begin to realize that disability is in the environment then in order for us to have equal rights, we don't have to change but the environment has to change" (Harlan Hahn qtd in McRuer and Bérubé 2006, p. 52). Through this lens, Kafer says, "[t]he problem of disability is solved not through medical intervention or surgical normalization but through social change and political transformation" (Kafer 2013, p. 6).

Although the social model is useful for shifting responsibility away from disabled minds and bodies and onto the ways in which social and architectural barriers can be disabling, many scholars have acknowledged that the social model erases the fact that impairments can be disabling without such barriers:

> People with chronic illness, pain, and fatigue have been among the most critical of this aspect of the social model, rightly noting that social and

> structural changes will do little to make one's joints stop aching or to alleviate back pain… Focusing exclusively on disabling barriers, as a strict social model seems to do, renders pain and fatigue irrelevant to the project of disability politics (Kafer 2013, p. 7).

By problematizing the individualizing and normalizing qualities as well as the complexity of medical intervention of the medical model alongside the societal and cultural constructions of the social model of disability, Alison Kafer has more recently developed *the political/relational model of disability*.[1] The political/relational model builds off the social model by shifting away from framing disability as a purely medical "problem" of the body/mind by understanding how social and architectural barriers can alienate non-normative bodies, and also—working within Crip Theory, a cultural studies field coined by Robert McRuer that has reclaimed the term "crippled" (McRuer 2006)—incorporates queer and feminist critiques of identity. Kafer's model, unlike the social model, does not differentiate between impairment and disability. She states that "impairment refers to any physical and mental limitation, while disability signals the social exclusions based on, and the social meanings attributed to, that impairment. People with impairments are disabled by their environments" (Kafer 2013, p. 7). Instead, Kafer refuses the impairment/disability divide so that pain, fatigue, as well as desires for medical intervention can be included in understandings of disability. By applying a feminist and queer perspective of how bodies and identity can shift across time, place, and interactions, her model, as I will describe below, encompasses the relational and political aspects that comprise disability.

Kafer's shift to a political/relational model frames disability as a pluralized political site that is ever-changing and always in relation to other people, environments, and attitudes, specifically by proposing disability as an *assemblage*. Originally developed by Deleuze and Guattari, an assemblage approach is an ontological shift in understanding the social complexity and fluidity of bodies, specifically with relation to exteriority (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, pp 66–67). They note that "[t]he form of content is reducible not to a thing but to a complex state of things as a formation of power (architecture, regimentation, etc.)" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). An assemblage, on the one hand, is "machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 88). Working off of Jasbir Puar's use of assemblage theory, where categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and disability "are considered as events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than as simply entities and attributes of subjects," (Puar et al. 2008) Kafer highlights how an assemblage-like approach to disability links materials, processes, attitudes, and encounters across time. Disability

[1] Kafer is not the first disability studies scholar to use a relational model of disability. For example, Carol Thomas, Tanya Titchkosky, Allison C. Carey, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson have all written in detail about relational aspects of disability (Thomas 1999; Titchkosky 2010; Carey 2010a, b; Garland-Thomson 2011b). Additionally, there is a "Nordic relational model" of disability that came out of Scandinavian scholars such as Simo Vehmas and Anders Gustavsson.

is therefore *political*, "as a set of practices and associations that can be critiqued, contested, and transformed" (Kafer 2013, p. 9); and *relational*, involving understandings, encounters, and interactions with individuals, built environments, and governing bodies. Under this model, the assemblage of disability becomes a multiplicity: it is a fluid identity that shifts over time and in different situations.

An assemblage-like approach to disability emphasizes "how bodies move, meet, co mingle, and mesh with technology, architecture, and objects" (Puar 2007, p. 209) and how disability is connected to power and politics through materiality. Kafer emphasizes that "our bodies are not separate from our political practices; neither assistive technologies nor our uses of them are ahistorical or apolitical" (Kafer 2013, p. 120). She highlights Steven Kurzman's tracing of his prosthetic leg's components to materials that are based on military technology, have a history in post-Cold War production, and can only be accessed through a job which offers health insurance to reduce cost (Kurzman 2001). The materials in everyday life, including within archives and archival records, can be traced to power and politics.

I situate this intellectual project within Kafer's political/relational model of disability because, as these examples demonstrate, disability is always already political. Through the social model, we can see that certain constructs can be stigmatizing, but by using the political power of the formerly self-evident medicalized body and relational aspects of identity, we can open up archives and their processes as political as well as interconnected with other identities and within the society that produced them. Just as societal norms become embodied within the standardized practices of archives, so too do the definitions and understandings of people produced by archives become ingrained in society. By not rejecting the medical model, but politicizing it alongside the social model, archives can be considered a political entity and that politicization can expose the oppressive political power that archives hold over marginalized people and the society that defines them. Understanding archives as assemblages—of people, places, policies, attitudes, environments, and materials across time—we can draw in the multiple and expansive histories and entities that co-construct archival material and archives.

A political/relational model for archival description

Through the political/relational model of disability, the politicization of archival processes can be revealed. Archival description, "the creation of an accurate representation of the archival material by the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, and organizing information that serves to identify archival material and to explain the context and records systems that produced it, as well as the results of these processes" (Society of American Archivists 2005), is just one layer of how implicit and explicit bias is embedded in records and archives. When a record is first created, language and terms are used to title, describe, and categorize its contents, which are culturally and temporally situated. Once that record is accessioned into an archives, archivists inevitably must make decisions around further description, what language to use and how detailed to be, all of which stem from the archivist's positionality–their experiences, language, and knowledge of the subject, not to

mention the positionality of the archives as reflected in its mission, anticipated audiences, and systems parameters. There are many other aspects that factor into how and if archival material is described, such as whether the processing of a fonds or collection is a priority, how the archive prioritizes processing material batches rather than individual items (Greene and Meissner 2005), or if a donor has an interest in or litigation requires the processing of a particular collection. A political/relational approach to archival description is crucial to understanding the complexity of the process because the ways in which archival material is represented affects "the creation of access tools (guides, inventories, finding aids, bibliographic records) or systems (card catalogs, bibliographic databases, EAD databases)" designed for internal, public and/or scholarly use (Yakel 2003, p. 2). And this, in turn, affects everything that happens afterward: how materials are found, understood, and subsequently used. I will show how, by linking archives to disability, the records description process, both at the time of creation and subsequent description by archivists, is always already political and that an assemblage approach to records draws in the multiplicity of their subjects' experiences and the many co-creators of records. Additionally, by exploring description as not self-evident, the political/relational lens surfaces alternative contexts, histories, and affects of archival material.

Many scholars have explored the purpose descriptive language serves within archives. Archival materials are often created and described by people in a position of relative power, in anticipation of the use to which those materials will be put. Ciaran Trace emphasizes how the creation of records and their description is not merely reactive, but also proactive; records can be created as by-products of activity, but are more often created "in anticipation of the uses to which they may be put" (Trace 2002, p. 144). Trace gives examples of how law enforcement utilizes selective language in the production of arrest and interview records with a goal in mind around their future use. Records are described in order to seem authentic, "save time,… avoid unwanted scrutiny,… [and] document cases that can be successfully resolved" (Cochran et al. 1980, p. 13). Similarly, not only can the words used about disability be harmful through the stigmatization of difference, but they have also historically been deployed, specifically within archives, as a means of enacting political authority.

A connection of archival description to feminist disability studies initiates a critical understanding of the political aspects of language. Disabled people have historically fought against oppressive language originating from non-disabled people: D/deaf people against "hearing impaired," wheelchair users against being "confined" to a wheelchair, people with chronic illnesses as "suffering" from illness, not to mention the infantilizing language that is often used to describe people with disabilities. Furthermore, language used to historically oppress disabled people is often deployed in day-to-day language to imply a negative connotation. Words such as "crippled, lame, dumb, idiot, moron" (Garland-Thomson 2011a, p. 35), and "crazy" have histories in the categorization of bodily and mental difference (Aubrecht 2014), however, are used outside of that context to demean a person or object. Lydia X. Z. Brown articulates that

> Using the language of disability to denigrate or insult in our conversations and organizing presumes that (a) people who hold undesirable or harmful viewpoints must hold them because they are mentally ill/have psych disabilities/are mentally disabled/are disabled in some way, (b) having mental illness/psych disability/mental disability/any disability is actually so undesirable and horrible that you can insult someone that way (the same underlying reason why socially embedded linguistic heterosexism lets people use "gay" as an insult), (c) it's acceptable to use ableism against one disability group while decrying ableism against another disability group (creating horizontal or intra-disability oppression) or another form of oppression against another marginalized group (creating horizontal oppression), and (d) and that no one who is disabled in any way might actually share your opinion or be on your side (Brown 2014).[2]

The ways in which language about or around disability is used can affect people negatively—by perpetuating stereotypes and ableist assumptions, and by further stigmatizing difference—all point to the political aspects of language.

As Christopher Bell highlights, "disability shares much in common with other maligned identities insofar as departures from the norm are seen as threats to the mainstream body politic" (Bell 2012, p. 1), and those anxieties became embodied within laws, regulations, and archival records through the criminalization and institutionalizations of disabled people. Nirmala Erevelles articulates that "Human variation (e.g. race) is deployed in the construction of disabled identities for purely oppressive purposes (e.g. slavery, colonialism, and immigration law)" (Erevelles 2011, p. 119). White highlights how the creation of archival material was a product of cultural anxieties around "defective" categories such as racial minorities, lower socioeconomic status, and disability (White 2012), and disability studies scholar Sue Schweik, in her book *The Ugly Laws*, explicitly shows how archival records were produced for the criminalization and containment of disabled people at the intersections of gender, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, and race (Schweik 2010). The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century legislation, named "the ugly laws," identified, targeted, and policed marginalized people. Because of the laws, records were produced through the arrest and institutionalization of people found "unsightly," essentially making it illegal to be disabled in public while also creating a public acceptance of the categorization and fear of disabled and poor people. Archival description was wielded as a deliberate strategy to identify and justify discrimination against categories of people. For example, laws stipulated what types of behavior and bodies, such as "infirm and physically unable persons," were illegal in public (Schweik 2010, p. 26), so that marginalized people were arrested, marked as dangerous, and often institutionalized (tenBroek 1966). Melissa Adler, who critically assesses how disability has been categorized in Library of Congress subject headings, highlights "the role that language and categories play in perpetuating and dispelling dominant myths and attitudes that sometimes do harm" (Adler et al. 2017, p. 121). In White's identification of the "deviant" (White 2012),

[2] Lydia X. Z. Brown has also developed a glossary of such terms to encourage people to reflect on their own uses of ableist language (Brown 2012).

Schweik's tracing of people categorized as "unsightly" (Schweik 2010) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's historical mapping of the word "monstrosity" (Garland-Thomson 1996), description, representation, and categorization have worked as a means of power and control of not only disabled but also raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized bodies. The use of feminist disability studies for archival description facilitates an immediate connection to how the creation of a record and the assumptions and intentions of those who created it engenders power into a record by surfacing the scrutiny of language and historic violence disabled people have endured through archives.

Many scholars have highlighted, unpacked, and pushed back against the simplifying aspects of archival description that can be harmful to the records' subjects. Wendy M. Duff and Verne Harris point out that "[s]omething in the event being represented is always lost. There is always some distortion, even if only through incompleteness" (Duff and Harris 2002, p. 275). Contemporary work in archival studies has illuminated how a pluralized lens would liberate description from some of its oppressive power. Caswell has proposed a pluralized approach as "the acknowledgement of and engagement with, multiple coexisting archival realities—that is, fundamentally differing but equally valid ways of being and knowing—most commonly made manifest in the archival realm by (sometimes) irreconcilably divergent—but still credible—ways of defining, transmitting, and interpreting evidence and memory" (Caswell 2013, p. 277). Similarly, Yakel has proposed that "[a]rchivists should begin to think less in terms of a single, definitive, static arrangement and description process, but rather in terms of continuous, relative, fluid arrangements and descriptions as ongoing representational processes" (Yakel 2003, p. 4). Incorporating queer theory into archival studies, Emily Drabinski points out the complexity inherent in description and that although librarians have worked hard to correct against incorrect classification, there is never a single stagnant answer to the question of how to describe archival material (Drabinski 2013).

Thinking alongside these scholars, I propose a political/relational archival approach to further a pluralized, relational understanding of records description, and more so, to expand upon the politicization of seemingly self-evident categories. A political/relational model, specifically around language, makes possible the surfacing of *archival assemblages*. An assemblage approach to archives not only draws in how language is wielded as a political tool, as aspects of life are not always axiomatic, but also how description can include aspects such as people who may not be considered as either subject or creator of a record, a material's history and alternative uses, evolving social understandings of difference, and an archivist's positionality. Deleuze and Guattari caution against "considering tools in isolation: tools exist in relation to the interminglings they make possible or that make them possible" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 90), so situating records description among archival assemblages is crucial to illuminate how description is (and continues to be) a tool tied to cultural, temporal, and political conceptualizations.

Using Deleuze and Guattari's frameworks, Wendy M. Duff and Jessica Haskell argue that archives should adopt the concept of *the rhizome* in order to develop a less hierarchical approach to generating a multiplicity of descriptions and therefore

user access (Duff and Haskell 2015). A rhizome, which is the organizational structure of an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), helps dismantle the authoritative voice of archives by lacking traditional tree-like hierarchies. And, as Duff and Haskell demonstrate, this structure can be embodied in social media and web-based technologies to aggregate user-generated content. Just as the rhizome resists normative hierarchical structures, which is useful for organizing multiple perspectives, so too do assemblages, especially through a feminist disability studies lens, draw in the historical, social, and material aspects of descriptive processes. However, diverging from Duff and Haskell by focusing less on the *structure* of the rhizome and more on the *power* embedded in the layers of assemblages, this project takes a few steps back in order to instead center the layers of politics in which a record is situated.

Illuminating archival assemblages

It is to note that an assemblage approach toward archival description illuminates the complexity, power, and politicization of the mechanism of description, which functions not only in oppressive but also liberatory ways within disabled peoples' lives. Medical records are prevalent and persisting examples of how disabled minds and bodies are classified, controlled, and regulated through archival description. Medical records often describe people according to their difference from the (mythical) norm, as "ailments" and "abnormalities" are usually the predominant aspects documented. Although medical language is used to categorize people in medical records, the terminology permeates within archival descriptions (as seen in the ledger). Language used within medical categorization and terminology is not isolated to the medical profession. As Kafer highlights, "what characterizes the medical model isn't the position of the person (or institution) using it, but the positioning of disability as an exclusively medical problem and, especially, the conceptualization of such positioning as both objective fact and common sense" (Kafer 2013, p. 5). The simplification or complexity of disability represented within the language of description therefore has great impact on identity, understanding, and the relations of disabled people. Through diagnosis, medical providers can simplify the complex experience of disability, as well as control access to assistive devices and support systems. A politicized understanding of description surfaces the power of medical providers in potentially perpetuating limited understandings and rehabilitative approaches to disability. However, a diagnosis can also validate one's experience and provide language through which one can seek community. People with chronic illnesses, for example, can go their entire lives without having a diagnosis. Anna Hamilton writes about her ongoing experiences with getting a diagnosis when her symptoms were not "*consistent* with a textbook definition of *any* type of rheumatological issue" (Hamilton 2014, p. 33). Similarly, Rhonda Zwillinger highlights stories of the identification and diagnosis of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity that open up a world of community and resources for those who struggled to have their illness recognized (Zwillinger and Heuser 1998). Naming, therefore, can be understood as an oppressive and limiting force vis-à-vis

the medical model, a way to gain access to medical care and assistive devices, or a liberatory affirmation of experience and connection to new relations, people, and resources.

Building off of a complex notion of naming, archival assemblages challenge the self-evidentness of the archival description. Sharon Barnartt explores how the words used to describe disability "are categorical. They do not allow for a range. But impairments are not dichotomous conditions, in which one either has it or one does not" (Barnartt 2010, p. 2). Puar "argue[s] that the contradictions and discrepancies rife in this endeavor—creative mistakes, perhaps—are not to be reconciled or synthesized but held together in tension. They are less a sign of wavering intellectual commitments than symptoms of the political impossibility to *be on one side or the other*" (Puar 2007, p. 209). Just as the language we use is attached to history and politics, so too does the multiplicity of experiences in archival description have various connections, connotations, and histories. As Drabinski notes, "[t]he entire project of library classification and cataloging is at odds with queer [and I would add crip] ideas about historicity, contingency, and the impossibility of a fixed system of linguistic signs that would contain identities that are always already relational and contingent" (Drabinski 2013, p. 101). Just as the ways in which disability functions among individuals, in different social contexts, and is constantly changing, so too do the words of description continually shift and hold contradictory perspectives.

The fluidity and situatedness of disability are useful mechanisms by which to critique any objects' description and to expose the archival assemblage attached to a record. Like disability, records are culturally situated, multiply understood, and often contested between individuals. A political/relational approach to archival description expands upon scholarship that has identified some of the ways in which archival processes ingrain and inscribe biases, and surfaces assemblages by challenging the self-evidentness—what is thought of as objective and inherent to an object—and focusing on the semantic, epistemic, and ontological changes in language. In the following examples, I will show how description's reliance on the self-evidentness of archival material misses the complex, competing, and contradictory aspects of archival material. The fundamental contestation of description initiates the archival assemblage by drawing attention not to only how archives are, quite literally, assembled collections of material, but also how they are temporally, spatially, and materially contingent. A political/relational approach first promotes moving away from the replication and reliance on self-evident properties of a record and second advocates for addressing—not redressing—contestable terms, both of which illuminate the archival assemblages which produced it.

The records created because of the ugly laws, such as arrest records, asylum documentation, and evolving legislation, give a clear example of the political/relational assemblage embedded in records. The ugly laws produced and were produced by city and state ordinances, public service surveys, and newspaper articles all of which create and influence stigma. Such records often describe marginalized people from a place of power. For example, Schweik explores the Chicago Code of 1911, an influential ordinance that not only built off previous city codes that criminalized disabled people, but also became a well-known symbol of

the ugly laws (Schweik 2010, p. 69). The ordinance's description, currently digitized within the HathiTrust Digital Library, simply reproduces the contents of the record. Kim Anderson notes that "many social transactions are not physically captured, and thus the records retained in the archive will tend to emphasize institutions or communities that communicate or conduct interactions in ways that can be captured" (Anderson 2013, p. 357). The Chicago Code of 1911 record demonstrates just this as it is described within its title as "The Chicago code of 1911 : containing all the general ordinances of the city in force March 13, A.D. 1911, together with an appendix containing all prohibition and local option ordinances in force on said date; also certain material provisions of the statutes of the state of Illinois relating to municipal governments. Passed March 13, 1911…" and by its physical properties as "ix, 1270 pages; 25 cm" (Chicago (Ill.) et al. 1911). Missing are the voices of those whose lives were affected by the ordinance as well as the cultural assumptions and legislation that produced and were produced by it.

Understanding this record through a political/relational lens links it not only to its creators and subjects but also to the many other types of records. This lens facilitates framing this record within a body of documents produced for hegemonic oppression, across city and state borders through local, national, and global political climates operating throughout its life. Thinking through this record as an assemblage extends *broadly*, to the systemic and dominant discriminatory attitudes across time that formed and perpetuated the ugly laws, and also hones in *specifically*, to "each specific moment of ordinance enforcement—each encounter between policeman, judge, friendly visitor, or sympathetic rabble-rouser and a particular person being found unsightly—and the broader social order that framed, ignored, fought over, and accepted the state and city codes" (Schweik 2010, p. 141). The current description of "self-evident" properties of the ordinance, such as date of effect, lacks the acknowledgment of how records are created in relation to each other (e.g., how this ordinance was the source for hundreds of arrest records, newspaper articles, and additional legislation around the documentation of disabled, racial, or ethnic minorities), to other people (e.g., those who enforced it, made public outcries around "safety," and those who were criminalized), to society (e.g., the ways in which this record is situated among an evolving body of legislation and in complex histories in relation to societal norms, other events, and wider contexts), and to archives (e.g., the influence archivists have over the creation, selection, and contextualizing of records). This all points to how the creation of records is designed to produce an effect (Trace 2002, p. 155), whether that is for the oppression of particular communities or for the efficiency of the record keeper's job, that archival description can risk perpetuating.

A political/relational archival approach can also be applied broadly beyond records that explicitly contain disabled people and to many types of collections. Museum objects, for example, can also be records, as they provide evidence of an activity that persists throughout time (Yeo 2007) and also use descriptive practices to represent material. Krmpotich and Somerville (2016) describe the evolution of a museum artifact known as the "S BLACK" bag. And Laura Peers traces its multiple catalog descriptions, stating that "[s]ince its arrival at the [Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford (PRM)] it has been identified as '1893.67.183,' and first as

'Embroidered bag with bead ornament' and later as 'Black cloth "octopus" bag, bead-edged, with floral and double-curve motifs and the name "S BLACK" embroidered in coloured thread, and beaded wool tassels'" (Peers 1999). Through its sparse and decontextualized description in the PRM catalog, the bag's history, specificities, and cultural affect have been erased (Krmpotich and Somerville 2016).

Native communities have long worked to decolonize multiple facets of museum material as well as problematize settler colonial language used to describe cultures (Hoobler 2006; Denzin and Lincoln 2008; Faulkhead 2009; McKemmish et al. 2011; Lonetree 2012; Smith 2012; Duarte and Belarde-Lewis 2015; Littletree and Metoyer 2015; Onciul 2015; Turner 2015; Anderson and Montenegro 2017). An assemblage intervention in no way intends to erase the vast and effective work being done by Indigenous peoples. Utilizing a feminist disability studies approach alongside these works thinks through how anti-oppression projects can work in tandem to provide multiple avenues for archivists to critically reflect on power structures and reach beyond simplified descriptive practices in intersectional ways.

Similar to the medical model of disability, description can be problematic because it oversimplifies the experience of one's existence, either because it is assumed to be self-evident or because their experience is not known. As Krmpotich, Somerville, and Peers point out, the descriptions in the PRM catalog rely on the axiomatic materiality of the bag. Through their analyses as well as through a critical assessment of the medical model of disability, we can begin to appreciate "the limitations of existing controlled vocabularies" as well as "the language and the scripts in which description is rendered" (Wood et al. 2014, p. 408) as limited to western understandings of Native peoples' realities and the complexity of their material culture, not to mention the "lost and acquired meanings when it began this part of its life as a museum artefact" (Peers 1999, p. 297). The description, "Black cloth 'octopus' bag, bead-edged, with floral and double-curve motifs and the name 'S BLACK' embroidered in colored thread, and beaded wool tassels," reduces this object to only its materiality, as if self-evident. Without acknowledgment of the bag's political and relational properties, as within the medical model, archival description documents material according to its material difference, assumes self-evident properties, and thus risks universalizing the experiences of those who made or use(d) this type of bag.

Through a political/relational archival approach to description, the S BLACK bag's complex histories can resurface. An assemblage perspective multiplies understandings of the material and situates it as defined by western societal and cultural norms. Politicizing the bag's representation illuminates the colonialist imperatives of the fur trade that displaced the bag and the multiple changes of hands that took place for it to finally make it to the PRM. Understanding this artifact as relational means noticing the specific materials, processes, and relations that went into the making of the bag as well as drawing in those who co-constructed its meaning. This style of bag, Peers notes, was usually an intimate gift and a symbol of kinship and care. Through a relational approach, the bag's affective history and familial and communal ties are located by situating it with who made it and for what reasons. If archival description is considered a politicized effort, then the reduction of its complex histories to its materiality is a political move, made by someone with

a specific positionality. Politicizing this description can reintroduce these complex histories and produce a contestation of the language and methods used to describe material as well as the authoritative voice from which it came.

The attention drawn to the multiple histories of the bag, like many of the examples in this article, temporally ties the current description to its colonial history, which highlights both the interconnected oppression between Indigenous peoples and disabled people and the ongoing processes that *maintain power* in archives. A feminist disability studies lens draws in the ways in which "colonists tied ablebodiedness to compulsory productivity and racialized heteronormativity" (Imada 2017), how projects of civilization and normalization are historically linked through endeavors such as colonization, eugenics, and institutionalization (Kelsey 2013; Senier and Barker 2013; Warrior 2014; Jaffee 2016; Puar 2017). In other words, the medical model of disability has been and continues to be used in the service of settler colonialism. Furthermore, contemporary archival interventions that simply replicate past descriptions (or versions thereof) risk a temporal separation from oppression, threatening both an object's dynamism and contingencies to time and place as well as how the violence of the past can be understood as an ongoing settler colonial project (Rifkin 2014) that is sustained through archival description.

Not only through this lens would an archivist be more likely to reflect on their own positionality and the assemblage of people, interactions, and decisions that went into making the object itself, but also archivists and archival users alike would consider all of the people, governing bodies, interactions, attitudes, and decision-making processes that produced the object within an archives and could contend with it in the present. Moreover, this framework can facilitate archivists in further understanding how language used within archival description erases Indigenous knowledge around affect and relationality as well as can illuminate the parallel and intertwined oppressions of settler colonialist projects with ableism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism—the ways in which settler colonialism obscures certain knowledge, erases certain histories, enacts violence on certain communities, and flattens or essentializes material.

So, what can we as archivists do? The power of description, when viewed as an assemblage, highlights old and creates new relations in different contexts. "In describing records, archivists are working with context, continually locating it, constructing it, figuring and refiguring it." (Duff and Harris 2002, p. 276). Contextualizing archives as assemblages makes space for the inclusion and recognition of counternarratives and also recognizes and makes apparent other influences, such as budgetary limits and archival traditions, on how descriptions are (re)produced. Retroactively exposing the complexity and multiplicity of the creation of some records may be almost impossible for archivists; however, it is possible to research subjects, creators, institutions, and political climates around the creation of a record and reflect that complexity within archives. This paper, alongside Native communities that have long advocated for the decolonization of museum and archival material, advocates for community leadership in complicating, renaming, and redescribing records. This article encourages archivists to seek out expansive

counternarratives that connect related records, expose the politics of an archive's intervention(s), and challenge seemingly self-evident categories.

What might this look like? By utilizing feminist disability studies, this paper—instead of identifying solely functional problems and thus providing concrete solutions—aims to offer a theoretical starting point to encourage archivists to seek creative solutions to how the multimodal inclusion of multiple perspectives, material histories, and assemblages of disparate connections might be implemented. Duff and Haskell, through digital technologies, emphasize "develop[ing] collaborative frames supported by nonhierarchical, acentric systems that foster open, dynamic, radical, political, and subjective access" (Duff and Haskell 2015, p. 42), which is a valuable start to thinking through systems design (Geismar and Mohns 2011). However, focusing only on the democratizing aspects of the rhizomatic structure of archival material, while elevating voices who may have been previously devalued (Duff and Haskell 2015), risks erasing the history of the power embedded in archival material. Equalizing all contributions to a record's description to the same level gestures at "correcting" previous power structures, whereas an assemblage approach highlights how power is always already (and continually) involved in description.

Evoking Drabinski once again, who advocates against going beyond the "fixing" of problematic or outdated descriptive terms, this project does not promote the preservation of the power relationships, but does not advocate for the erasure of them either. Angela DiVeglia notes, "[b]ringing a painful past to light can be legitimizing in that it allows community members to recognize and mourn for ways in which their predecessors have been harmed, while producing accountability for governments and social forces that have persecuted LGBT [and other marginalized people] people throughout history" (DiVeglia 2012, p. 75). Highlighting the power relationships in archival description keeps these histories at the forefront and places the responsibility on the archivists to continually address them. An assemblage approach, therefore, instead of flattening all perspectives to the same level, asks how the history of power can be represented. Moreover, this project advocates for the inclusion of that which may not be obviously considered in a record. Just as Kurzman traces his prosthetic leg's material to military technology, so too can an archivist research a material's alternative uses and think through how to represent these expansive power dynamics that may not be immediately conspicuous. This is a call to create more complex archival systems to represent all of these relationships. Should we create separate sections in databases for an archivist to list their positionality? Should there be guidelines for what to include within an record's assemblage and how far outward to expand? How might we create links to other records that may seem unrelated and what are the implications of connecting them? And how might these new connections create new questions around privacy and identity?

With the current ubiquity of digital technologies in archives (for both internally used digital databases and catalogs, as well as public facing digital archives), a political/relational archival assemblage is a jumping-off point to consider how we can incorporate as much of the assemblage as possible. It is an epistemological shift in what archivists consider when describing material and who they seek out to assist

them. By thinking through the multiple models of disability, feminist disability studies shifts the responsibility away from the individual, who is relied upon to navigate relations to power (by having materials, experiences, and subjects listed as self-evident)—as is the case with the medical model—toward the collective responsibilization of access and attitudes (to actively engage with communities to participate in describing material)—as through the social model—and furthermore, addresses the modes of power that operate in order to produce cultural understandings of difference (by asking how we can represent the complex histories and expansive connections of a record)—as with the political/relational model.

Conclusion

There is inherent power in the creation of records, the formation of archives, and the ways in which archival material is described and processed. Feminist disability studies opens up archival processes as sites for contestation and exposes the layers of power within an archives. A connection to disability, through a political/relational archival approach, first provides an immediate politicization of archival processes by surfacing the power of language as well as how archives have been historically used against disabled people. This connection also challenges archival description as fixed and self-evident. As description happens at multiple times, such as when a record is created and when it enters archives, this framework is a starting point to critique the reliance on self-evident qualities and thus has the potential to further replicate historic power structures. Most importantly, this framework expands and connects the assemblage of people, places, politics, materials, attitudes, and histories that may or may not be obvious in archival material by acknowledging how ableism, racism, patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, classism, and colonialism are all interinformed and influence descriptive practices as well as cultural understandings. It resists simply correcting outdated terms and instead turns toward the inclusion of multiple complex and possibly contested perspectives. As the process of describing materials is linked heavily to the development of catalogs and finding aids, an epistemological shift through a political/relational approach to archives helps draw in the assemblages to which a record is connected and therefore how materials are found or used. As a practical framework, it is a jumping-off point for a criticality of language used in description and an expansive representation within a record as well as another avenue for archivists to think through intersectional anti-oppression projects. However, this is not a singular solution but rather a call for archivists to think creatively about how digital tools can represent dynamic relations and politics of archival material, which could include the acknowledgment of multiple authors in different aspects of the description, the tracing of a particular material's history to its alternate uses, or links to other records that were created through the same power structures.

I cannot ignore the power of naming in this archival assemblage of the "Annual Return of All Insane Persons, Lunatics and Idiots…" ledger. Duff and Harris articulate that "[w]hat we name we declare knowable and controllable" (Duff and

Harris 2002, p. 281). Those labeled as "dangerous to himself or others," or "of dirty habits" (The National Archives), were stigmatized through the use of these words within the record and most likely had the rest of their lives dictated by this categorization. Linton says that "[i]t has been particularly important to bring to light language that reinforces the dominant culture's view of disability" (Linton 1998, p. 9). A person documented as "whether a lunatic or idiot," not only becomes permanently labeled as such, but also, the use of these words in archival records creates a public standard of acceptance of the categorization and fear of particular people. The reproduction of these words in the digital description, without context or connection to their political assemblages, reinforces how the medical model manifests and has the potential to further stigmatize people with disabilities. Through this close look at an institutional record, we can understand how records creation and description define and "(re)enforce[s] racial [and other] bias and the interests of dominant power structures" (Dunbar 2006, p. 116). Archival processes are not only influenced by cultural attitudes, biases, and norms, but they also create them.

In some ways, I am grateful for the aches I feel when reading the harmful language used in the ledger. To feel so deeply the pain of language used against people that affects so many lives, feels like an appropriate affective response to systemic violence. To acknowledge the use of harmful language within records and illustrate the history of oppression instead of ignoring it or correcting it becomes a valuable task for archivists to involve those affected by that language. Like the term "queer," "crip" (as in crippled) has been reclaimed as a political identity by many disabled people. Nancy Mairs saliently states "People—crippled or not—wince at the word 'crippled' as they do not at 'handicapped' or 'disabled.' Perhaps I want them to wince" (Mairs 1992, p. 9). This project, like the projects of Puar and Drabinski, promotes acknowledging the prevalence of discrimination against certain identities and holding conflicting perspectives in tension instead of erasing or obscuring them.

Moving away from the medical model, the social model facilitates in locating the oppression in this record as manifested within physical, linguistic, institutional, and societal biases. However, a political/relational archival approach helps me recognize that the lives represented in each line of the ledger are connected to each other, as a body of evidence of the violence endured by those incarcerated, and to a larger cultural climate that encouraged the institutionalization and labeling of disabled people. This lens allows me to keep in mind the history of ableist oppression while simultaneously realizing that the experiences of the record's subjects, as well as of each doctor, orderly, archivist, or witness, are differing and diverse. The history, context, and diversity of experiences are absent from this record's description, and I know that providing the context and complexity of an archival record within its description is not an easy feat.

An assemblage approach draws attention to positionality and leaves room for archivists to invite subjects and those affected to co-create and reclaim their narratives. Corbett O'Toole points out how some disability studies scholars have decreased their involvement with disabled community members, those who "are in dire need of useful scholarship that can help us articulate critical issues, develop

new ideas, and quantify community experiences in order to drive both conversations and policies" (O'Toole 2017). Her words resonate for archival practitioners as well. The well-known phrase from the disability community, "nothing about us without us," calls to action the involvement and agency of disabled voices in material about our communities. A diverse array of disabled people, from both inside and outside of academia, should be involved in (and compensated for) describing archival material around disability, not only to produce an expansive assemblage around archival material, but also to address, as O'Toole highlights, "[t]he ongoing and entrenched barriers facing community scholars within disability studies [that] include: economic barriers to participation, structures that prioritize nondisabled people or people with the least impairing disabilities, an embedded and unacknowledged focus on white people, and a refusal to provide economic compensation for the contributions of community scholars" (O'Toole 2017). To conceptualize an archival assemblage is to consider one's participation and positionality in it, thus encouraging archivists to educate themselves, link to outside sources, and invite the participation of disabled people and marginalized communities in the description and representation of records about them or their community (Shilton and Srinivasan 2007; White 2012; Wood et al. 2014)—all of which would provide users with a broader and more complex experience while resisting the erasure of past harms.

This project is intended to be an epistemological starting point to politicize archives by connecting the long history of those who have had the power of producing records to how systems that were built to exclude are perpetuated; how histories of erasure and oppression are interinformed; and how multiple contradictory, contestable, and complex narratives can be held in tension to transform archival practice. As archivists, we are responsible for not only the preservation of material but our interventions in how that material is used, understood, or complicated. Although it only addresses a few archival concepts, applying feminist disability studies broadly to build off previous archival theory, I hope this paper initiates future theoretical and applied change within archives. I am interested in how this model might expand upon the politicization of other archival processes and concepts such as provenance, respect des fonds, or appraisal. I also wonder where this model might fall short or work against marginalized people when put into practice. And I wonder how this model, and critical theory in general, might affect the ways archivists relate to their profession (Caswell et al. 2017). By politicizing and expanding upon archival concepts through this model, do we inevitably make archival work impossible? Or does offering a model to open up the problematic aspects of archival processes imply that colonialist and authoritative archives can ultimately be recuperated and/or appropriated? We, as archivists, can simultaneously understand the discrimination, oppression, and inequity baked into archival systems, while recognizing that not every individual is oppressed or privileged in the same ways, identifies with their marginality, and/or desires the same outcome. My aim for this project is a generous one: not only to politicize archives and archival processes but also to open up a plural, relational, and flexible understanding of individual experiences and archival power.

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