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At the limit of the personal: The Kashmir conflict via explorations in the ethical space of film

ABSTRACT
This article is a critical appreciation of the often misunderstood and controversial filmmaker Ajay Raina, who frequently finds himself at a discursive crossfire, being criticized by both Hindu and Kashmiri nationalists. Through a discussion of Raina’s three Kashmir-related documentary films, I will indicate the limits of the personal film as a challenge to official or hegemonic conflict narratives. The analysis focuses on the mediation of exile narratives, conflict testimony and visual evidence in the ethical space of film. I will argue that, through ethical protocols of film production and the vérité-form, Raina opens a complex space for the negotiation of conflict narratives. These openings are, however, under threat of ideological closure because of attempts to anchor the audio-visual testimony through his personal voice-over and a narrative of secular nationalism. Finally, I am drawing on the concept of embodied memory to better understand these ambiguous moments when his intentions are crossed by divergent readings from different audiences.

KEYWORDS
Kashmir
Ajay Raina
personal film
conflict narratives
Public Service Broadcasting Trust
embodied memory
Introduction

In recent years, I have been looking at the ways independent documentary filmmakers create testimony of the Kashmir conflict. I was interested in their practices as filmmakers participating in the Kashmir conflict through their films. I wanted to know how their films were negotiated in terms of production-, regulating- and screening-institutions, as well as in relation to the films’ audiences, in order to narrate testimony and articulate subjectivities of and beyond the Kashmir conflict. I say ‘beyond’ because the emotions and imaginations that are narrated through the documentary form are never closed to change. Regarding the creation of testimony, I find it necessary to connect these moments where filmmakers mediate their films to phenomenological questions of sense-perception. By the latter, I mean different ways of sensing and making sense of conflict: how can a filmmaker transport her or his own sense and perception of living through a conflict via the form of film and thereby mobilize viewers to have empathy? I pose this question against the backdrop of the contested nature of (official or counter) histories and (personal or community) memories. Engagements with personal- and self-reflexive forms of narration promise a challenge to the dead ends of seemingly ‘intractable conflicts’ (Bar-Tal 2003) like the Kashmir conflict – a conflict tangled in the nationalisms of two large postcolonial states and one movement for political self-determination.

The filmmaker Ajay Raina is known for having a highly personal style in filmmaking, a style that – supported by the emergence of digital film – has received scholarly attention and appreciation in the last twenty years (Wang 2014; Renov 2004; Gómez 2014). Since the emergence of digital technologies in the field, filmmakers have gained a larger degree of control over the film form, and both the production and circulation processes. Thus, some scholars consider it to be a means for individual filmmakers and small film teams to intervene in state narratives and official history (Edwards 2015; Pickowicz and Zhang 2006; Wang 2014; Chanan 2008). Jyotsna Kapur (2003) observed that in the 1990s the personal, self-reflexive film made inroads into independent documentary practices in India while locating it within global trends towards first-person narratives. This tendency has grown stronger with filmmakers such as Amar Kanwar, Iram Ghufran, Paromita Vohra, Fatima Nizaruddin and Nishta Jain, who dedicate their intellectual and artistic capabilities to further elaborating the personal as political (Vohra 2011; Matzner 2012; Schneider 2013). These filmmakers and thinkers have challenged the independent documentary in India to go beyond activist representationalism that was long seen by many observers to be ‘the’ form of political engaged film practice in India.

In line with the general appreciation of the personal film, critic and scholar Shoma Chatterji (2015) calls Raina’s personal style the particular strength of his film, Tell Them the Tree They Had Planted Has Now Grown (2002; short Tell Them …). This article is meant to complicate this picture of Raina’s practice by engaging with the limits of the personal: moments of contestation and ambiguity between testimonial sequences, post- and embodied memory, and finally, between an official history of the Partition of British India and a vérité form. I will thus extend the question of the limits of the personal via a media-anthropological concern with sociocultural contexts, arguing for the importance of the ethical space of film being necessary for any practice in documentary ethics and reflexivity.
The ethical space and the voice of film

I take the concept of ethical space as central to our understanding of the workings of testimony: a specific form of the negotiation of sense-perception between audiences and filmmakers. The film phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack (2004) understands it as the negotiation of the commonly accepted documentary status due to the mechanical recording of the camera:

Documentary space is constituted and inscribed as ethical space: it stands as the objectively visible evidence of subjective visual responsiveness and responsibility toward a world shared with other human subjects.

(Sobchack 2004: 248)

This ‘shared world’ is, of course, one of symbols, and emotions that get embedded in narratives. In the mediation of a documentary sequence, two issues are often at stake: the opening and closing potential of visible evidence (often as testimony) and the narrative anchoring via the voice. Voice refers, in a more restricted sense, to the voice-over – commentary. But I will use it in a larger rhetorical understanding as the way a filmmaker addresses audiences with all of the available formal means at hand (visual tropes, editing, mise-en-scène, etc.).

So, this opening and closing potential of the ethical space as testimony of some reality is negotiated creatively by audiences through referring to both the voice and the visible evidence on-screen that is meant to back it up. When I speak of mediation, I thus refer to the instances where the presentational form, communicative events and contexts (production, reception, texts) interact (Corner 2011: 7). In the case of the ethical space, this contestation is aimed at what many consider to be the very heart of documentary: its reality reference.

I would like to conclude this short theory section with a few words concerning method. In my research, I undertook what has been common practice in media-anthropology for some time now: following the agents and the objects to understand what agents do from a close distance (Marcus 1995). Thus, I accompanied filmmakers to screenings and post-screening debates of their films where, I assumed, their practice to create testimony could be unfolded at its most palpable, visceral, intensely debated and contested – and, perhaps, where it unfolds into moments of political resonance, redemption and forgiveness.

Besides the observations I was able to note and partly record during my presence at film screenings, many production and reception instances needed to be reconstructed through interviews and conversations about previous screenings and about the process of production.

While I have been looking at other documentary filmmakers who engage with questions of the exile of Kashmiri Pandits, in this article I will focus entirely on the practice of Ajay Raina, whose engagement is marked by a number of contradictions that make his films an ideal setting through which to interrogate the complexities of both the creation of testimony and the articulation of conflict-subjectivities at the intersections of memory and history in the ethical space of film. A synopsis of Raina’s films is not necessary here because I will refer only to sequences that have been problematized in post-screening debates and personal conversations with me. I will also try to critically explain why the chosen sequences have become so problematic to some of the viewers.

5. Film scholar Bill Nichols has engaged with ‘voice’ through questions of rhetorics as an epistemological necessity of any documentary practice, which might speak with multiple purposes and to different ends but in ways that strive to compel belief as much as they might please or prove. Rhetoric gives a distinct voice to those who wish their perspective and their interpretation to enter into dialogue with that of others (2016: 106).

6. The ‘opening potential’ needs to be understood via the index as an event something has been recorded and was meant to follow an intended narrative within a larger cultural horizon of available narratives. It has, however, been addressed during a conversation between audience and filmmaker as something that was there in the frame but not properly embedded in the narrative. It somehow stood out from within the film in a material way. Thus, I do not use ‘opening’ primarily as a positively valued term in the sense of ‘opening beyond conflict narratives’, but it should nevertheless be understood as one possible challenge towards the imaginative dead ends of conflicting narratives.

7. In 2013, I had the chance to travel to one festival screening of Raina’s films, Tell Them... and Apour ti Yapour. I had, however, shown the film Tell Them... to a number of persons who were engaged in documentary filmmaking, the Kashmir conflict,
The filmmaker and the community discourse

The filmmaker Ajay Raina is known as one of India’s most distinguished documentary filmmakers. In most of his films, Raina has dealt with questions of the exile of the Kashmiri Pandit community, a subject-position to which he himself subscribes. While many people who speak as Kashmiri Pandits have joined the chorus of Hindu nationalism, Raina publicly distances himself from Hindu nationalist positions of the community as represented by filmmaker Ashok Pandit and star-actor Anupam Kher (Raina 2016). His films also investigate other marginalized communities within India and Pakistan that have suffered in the conflicts since the Partition of British India. His acclaimed film Wapsi (2005), for instance, shows Raina travelling by train from India to Lahore in Pakistan. He goes there to witness the first cricket match between India and Pakistan after a long conflict-related absence of competitions between the two nations. On the way, he encounters people whose lives have been in one way or another affected by the Partition of British India and the emergence of the two states of India and Pakistan.

While I was conducting my research in 2013, I heard from many recipients of his films – particularly young women and men from the Kashmir Valley who were studying at universities in Bombay/Mumbai or Delhi – that they did not see much reflexivity in the textures and did not trust his personal voice-over. Some considered it to be outrightly ‘islamophobic’. But his ways of making sense of exile differ markedly from other filmmakers and writers who identify themselves as Pandits. Many contextualize – at least in some of their works – exile by drawing on the frontal depictions of atrocities and the emotional value of nostalgic tropes of houses and seasons, as well as the horror of camps and the terror of the adhan (the Islamic call to prayer). It has been noted by scholars (Bose 1997; Duschinsky 2007; Datta 2017) that the mainstream of exile narratives of Kashmiri Pandits stabilized very fast after they left the Valley, while in the beginning they were highly divergent accounts that then became rapidly streamlined (Bose 1997). This has led to the establishment of a post-memory for many members of the community who never witnessed the events firsthand, and for others who took over narratives provided by Hindu nationalist groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), which welcomed the refugees in Jammu in the early 1990s with some financial and institutional support (Duschinski 2007). But the narrative that was eventually established in the community discourse was at the same time nativist and of an all-Indian Hindu nationalist brand, it being tied together by a common enemy: the Muslim aggressor (Datta 2017). Now, these aggressions are stretched back in history by some established writers and filmmakers making this the general feature of the fate of the Pandit community (see especially Pandita 2013).

For Raina, however, this is not the narrative knot that connects the sequences of his film as an exile story, and nor does he rely heavily on the tropes mentioned above. In spite of his personal distance from this rather loud community narrative, Raina told me that some people from Pandit nativist organizations invited him to screen his film at their venues (Raina 2013a). As an outspoken opponent to the nativist discourse, he declined, but I wonder whether Tell Them… not only generates heated debates on the representations of memory and history of India and Kashmir, but also enables these widely divergent subject-positions to come into play because of its form. I am well aware that conversations about films are often based
on a discursive terrain, which is external to their presentational form. You do not need to see a film to denounce it. His films, however, have been seen by many individuals over the last sixteen years and, as films, they have been intensely debated. Their similarities in subject matter and style allow me to address some overarching issues concerning form and ideology in the oeuvre of Raina. In my eyes, these highly divergent ways of making sense of his films partly emerge from their form and the way the films’ representations are linked to both the discourse of the Kashmiri Pandit community and a narrative of Partition.

**Producing with the Public Service Broadcasting Trust and the film form**

When you consider the mediation of a film, the ethics of production are central to carving out an ethical space in the form and narrative of a film. I will suggest that the normative production discourse of the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) may have played a role in the creation of the formal boundaries of this ethical space by giving principles according to which an ethical relation between filmmaker and subjects could and should be established.

The PSBT is a trust that is largely funded by the public broadcasting agency, Prasar Bharti. It, however, produces films that are largely independent of its primary funding source. Rajiv Mehrotra, director of the trust, says on the homepage of the PSBT, in something like a mission statement, that the organization:

> is impartial, balanced and works to meet the information and entertainment needs of the community, particularly of the disadvantaged and the marginalized; it synchronises with the principles of a good ‘public enterprise’ committed to transparency and accountability. [...] Public Service Broadcasting is not merely the supply push of development support programs: of what a centralised bureaucracy or a group of ‘experts’ believe the community must be told. The imperative is to create a public culture through the airwaves that is plural and equitable in its representation.

(2011)

These statements are in line with globally circulating guidelines of public service broadcasting (Hendy 2013). Since the 1980s, special importance has been given to the value of ‘cultural plurality’ (Rodrigues 2010). On the PSBT website a list of production ethics begins with the following principles:

1. **Accuracy**, Filmmakers should take care not to include inaccurate, misleading or distorted information/material in their films.
2. **Opportunity to Reply**, a fair opportunity for reply should be given to individuals, groups or organisations, directly or indirectly implicated in the film for some misdeed or wrongdoing.
3. **Comment, Conjecture and Fact**, filmmakers, while free to be partisan, should distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact.

(Public Service Broadcasting Trust 2015)
When we read these first three principles closely, together with Mehrotra’s mission statement above, a couple of contradictions emerge among the terms ‘balancing’, ‘partiality’ and ‘impartiality’. In other words: these are the kinds of problems that happen between the garden of media culture and the jungle of political assertions. But these are productive contradictions, which – when translated into the filmic form – can lead to complex, open textures.

Now, let us turn to what Raina himself has to say about the form his films take. He calls it a vérité form, and we should take the film-teacher Raina by the word and not confuse it with observational documentary. The French term famously put forward by Jean Rouch refers to instances where a particular truth could be established or revealed through formal practice.9 This can be squared with the above-mentioned production discourse: you can move from truth moment to truth moment and accept a plurality of voices into your film. Raina says about the form of Tell Them…:

[[I]t was very basic cinéma vérité. It is about homecoming, it is about exile […] See, it was supposed to be a very different kind of film, you know. Much more thoughtful, much more planned. Much more formally cinematic. But when the film actually happened, the film was dictated by my situation here, my situation of fear that I could not place my camera firmly on the ground anywhere for a longer duration. So, when the camera is mostly handheld and you are scared to be at one place for a longer time. So, those things have dictated the film. You know, the camera became a, really, a recording instrument. There was no formal decision that I must take a shot like this. It was just off the cuff; it was just a record and there is a character. So, the camera is just following one character and what he does.

(2013b)

So far, I have spoken about some aspects of the production of the film, which arguably contributed to giving his films a number of highly contested sequences and images. Now, let me discuss one such sequence of the film Tell Them….

In ethical space

The sequence I would like to discuss here has been problematized by many viewers of the film. These viewers were often young men and women who had grown up in the Kashmir Valley and, on several occasions (e.g. after festival screenings), mentioned this sequence to me to point out what they understood as Raina’s ‘islamophobia’. The sequence begins with Raina visiting the village of Sirnoo where his uncle lived, and where Raina spent parts of his childhood together with his brothers. He is meeting Rahman, the retainer of the house of his uncle, who invites him to his home. In the conversations that follow at Rahman’s house, Raina points out his fear of being there – a fear that he constantly evokes throughout the film and that has its discursive connection to the exile discourse of Kashmiri Pandits. Then, after meeting his former neighbour, Raina leaves the house and is surrounded by villagers who invite him over to their homes, and ask him to greet his parents on their behalf. The cameraman is walking in a semicircle around the group of people that again
surrounds Raina on the village square. A claustrophobic atmosphere is evoked that gets anchored in the voice-over, saying:

I didn’t really feel safe here, with the crowd of people around us. […] I promised Rahman, I would be back soon, but then I did not believe in it myself. At the time of leaving, when I asked Rahman if he had any message for my grandmother in Jammu and for my parents, he said: ‘Tell them the tree they had planted has now grown’.

(Raina 2001)

Audiences have sometimes not read this sequence in the way Raina wanted them to understand it, and in the way his voice-over suggests it is to be understood. One viewer told me that Raina must have had a lot of time to think about it at home in Mumbai, where he was not afraid anymore. So, with that in mind, why does he still evoke so much anxiety, when all we see is that people are just being friendly and asking questions about his family’s well-being? I will return to this question later, not because it is typical of the film’s reception – it is not, since many recipients have been very appreciative of his exile narrative – but because it allows me to speak about the temporalities of the ethical space of film (we have to remember that in its mediation the ethical space is a time–space nexus). Towards the end of the sequence, the camera establishes eye contact with a boy in the group. He answers the camera with what seems a sceptical gaze: an open-ended answer built into the image by Raina’s vérité-style. I read this eye contact as a signature of Raina’s film form that opens in the moment of narrative closure. The dynamic camera movement and the voice-over seem to enclose a much more open image within a discourse of fear and claustrophobic space that is characteristic of many exile narratives (Naficy 2001).

Now, the above-given analysis of ruptures may be too topographical, too much at the surface of subjectivity (so far understood as subject-positions
distributed in social-discursive space). In other words: it may wash over a crucial aspect of Raina’s practice by contextualizing it only within competing narratives and not within possible depths of trauma and longing. Could we instead (or also) understand the ambivalences and ruptures of his film as resulting from embodied memory? This would surely help to regard these moments as more than ideological closures driven by fear – an emotion that has a rather bad reputation when it comes to issues of cultural identity, since it is often regarded as regressively closing the self against the world of the others (Jensen 2017: 100). But what if these communicative lacunae may indeed manifest the difficulties of subjectivities in conflict situations to construct narrative coherence (Vasallo 2008: 191)? Michael Humphrey (2002: 143) points out that people who survive violent conflict – and even second generations who are living the post-memory of it (Vasallo 2008) – are haunted by memories that will not fit into the public memory of different conflict groups:

Consequently, their experience cannot be commemorated, preventing them from reconstructing the self through narration. Instead, the mnemonic of violence leaves the mark of repression buried in the individual; through terror and trauma the victim is silenced.

(Humphrey 2002: 144)

This quote allows me to return again to the question of temporalities posed by the young man, who commented on Tell Them...: the assumed calm of the editing room vs the immediately felt fearful situation and the anchoring of the filmmaker’s voice. By deepening our understanding of subjectivities through the notion of embodied memories, we can re-read this sequence beyond vérité and retrospective ideological inscription. However, we should also be wary of the
idea that a reflexive and highly acclaimed filmmaker like Raina would not have wide control over his voice, and understand that this formal complexity and ambivalence may also be deliberate – a deeper sense of subjectivity requires that we think of both possibilities: the intentional ideological inscription and the embodied memory. It is Raina’s own perception that he is often not able to forcefully articulate his voice in contact with young people from the Valley of Kashmir. And, indeed, many young Kashmiris complained to me (in a stereotype about Kashmiri Pandits; see Datta 2017) that he would be ‘too fearful’ – the trope being used to suggest that ‘they (‘the Pandits’) ran away’ instead of being driven out by forms of (sometimes religiously legitimated) violence.

The Partition of the ethical space

A particular understanding of the Partition of British India (from now on ‘Partition’) is crucial for Raina’s narrative construction of the conflict. It is entangled with these ambivalent moments of the film *Tell Them...*, when Raina’s voice tries to establish narrative coherence for the experience of returning home from (inner-)exile to encounter former neighbours and friends who stayed in the valley. In a personal conversation, Raina told me that he sees the Kashmir conflict as the ‘unfinished business of Partition’ (Raina 2013b). At the beginning of *Tell Them...*, his warm voice-over announces: ‘I’m going back to my home in Kashmir after eleven years. I want to find out if it is possible to break the walls of mistrust and of hate we built in a once beautiful valley that was Kashmir’. His voice promises a reflexive engagement linked to a nostalgic vision of his lost homeland. But the voice firmly anchors the narrative in an engagement with ‘fear’ since this emotion continues to haunt *Tell Them...* right from the beginning, and shapes his experience of the return journey. Now, why does he have to fear, and what is the object cause of the fear?

Kashmir, in 2000–01, was much more volatile than it is today (2018), and members of his community have been fleeing since early 1990 under threats and somewhat unclear circumstances (Bose 1997; Datta 2017). However, the memory, and even more so the post-memory of these times, have been linked to Kashmiri Islamist assertions. In particular, the slogan ‘ham kya chahta: nizam-e-mustafa’ (‘What Do We Want: The Order of the Prophet’) is now closely linked to the reason for exile when one examines community narratives (Pandita 2013) – and this is where the question of Partition comes in. When Raina refers to the Partition in his films, he establishes an identification with a national–secular assertion, where from a contemporary concern, ‘the growth of Islamism’, the moment of Partition is read ‘back’ (or rather towards) the dislocation of his community in the year 1990. Of course, with this understanding, he alienates the Hindu nationalist and nativist narrative of the Kashmiri Pandit community, just as much as it also distances him from many young Kashmiris who he – as he told me – wants to address through his film. The word ‘secularism’ is mentioned a couple of times in all of his films, but I would here like to draw attention to its usage in connection to a secular-nationalist trope of Partition in his national award–winning film *Wapsi*:

The nostalgia and a sense of loss for things and memories left behind that any Pakistani would feel in India is no different from what an Indian feels in Pakistan. [Now on the screen, you can see a video sequence of the dancing going on at the *urs* of Data Ganj Baksh, MK.] Even most of our festivals and the way we celebrate them are the same. My trip
to Pakistan coincided with the urs of Data Ganj Baksh, the patron saint of Lahore. He was among the first mystic saints to have come here to spread the faith through the sufi message of love and brotherhood. It was heartening to see a centuries old Indian tradition in full flow. A tradition in a way my own, but now under threat. [...] In the one thousand years since the coming of Islam to India, Sufism, various Bhakti movements, Sikhism, and even the core values of Hinduism have impacted each other in ways profound to create a culture which is uniquely Indian, but at some point of time there was a breach, a breakdown, a turning away from a common belief in the oneness of human kind.

(Raina 2005)

The history of South Asia is folded into a spiritual Islam – again, something that we could read as somewhat similar to the attempts made by state institutions to fashion the term ‘Kashmiriyat’ as the Kashmiri Sufi version of an Indian idea of religious tolerance (Zutshi 2004): secularity as sarvadharmasambhava (literally ‘the being together of all religions’). But this spiritual Islam transcends physical boundaries; it renders – as in his third PSBT-produced film Apour te Yapur (2010), inspired partly by Manto’s short story ‘Tetwal ka Kutta’ – the boundaries arbitrary, cutting through lived religious practice. When we think of secular nationalism as an ideology (Casanova 2010) – e.g. instead of seeing it as a state principle and legal practice – we may approach it as the answer to the question: ‘why do we need secularism?’. The answer in the case of Raina implies the normativity of the nation state form, where different groups can be ‘integrated’ into the national container, even when physical boundaries are challenged on the surface.

**Conclusion**

I will draw a few conclusions about these tangled issues of film form, history and memory, sociopolitical context and ethics. First, Raina importantly challenges a dominant community discourse of Kashmiri Pandits by pointing towards the contingency of national boundaries and the troubles with sovereignty that emerged with Partition. He also addresses the dangers of the radicalization of political Islam in the Valley of Kashmir.

Secondly, he limits the assertions and demands of political self-determination put forward by many of those people he explicitly wants to engage in a dialogue with to notions of legitimate and illicit claims. Some recipient’s remarks about ‘islamophobia’ that I heard several times after screenings of his films are surely misplaced when put in the context of nativist or Hindu nationalist discourses. But by constantly referring popular assertions in the Valley of Kashmir to ‘Islam’, an ideology of secularism is reiterated that defines an irrational Islamic Other as central to the conflict. Of course, I do not claim that some languages of Islamism are not important to understand the way popular assertions are rhetorically put forward. However, there is a chance that the critique of the language through which popular demands are postulated (e.g. Islamism) is conflated with an argument concerning the structural conditions from which these articulations emerge and the larger discourses in which identities are negotiated in the Indian polity (e.g. secularism as a rhetorical trope of the nation-state, not as a principle of governance). As I have shown in the commentary on Wapsi, this secularism can sometimes be understood as a form of Sufi humanism. Other times its semantics is left more open.
Having said that, I suggest that the contradictions of Tell Them... cannot be properly contextualized only within cultural frameworks of different narratives and ideologies. Indeed, the appeal Tell Them... holds for many members of the audience could be based on the formal aspects of the vérité-openness that characterizes the film: arguing over and discovering the ethical space together with the filmmaker. On the other hand, some of the tensions that establish the ethical space (and the viewer’s appreciation) could be understood via the concept of embodied memory: the difficulty of linking one’s own personal memory to the discourse that makes collective memory and history official.

However, I am rather drawn to see the central conflicts surrounding Tell Them... as a result of narrative anchoring. This happens via an understanding of the ‘original catastrophe of Partition’ seen as conflict of religions in need to be overcome by ‘secularism’. I have often witnessed the capturing of conversations on the Kashmir conflict – especially when it comes to debates on ‘the Pandits’ by tropes such as ‘Islamophobia’, ‘secularism’ and ‘Muslim vs Hindu’. This is surely part of the limitation of the personal film to authenticate conflict testimony in the Kashmir conflict.

Finally, beyond the embodied memories of conflict, two subject-positions seem to be held in productive tension in Raina’s form: his voice-over commentator is anxiously dreaming of a cultural garden in which his community may return to a composite secular idea of Kashmir that is elided during the mediation of the ethical space that the filmmaker Raina artfully establishes.

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**SUGGESTED CITATION**


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