

## **Leaving the New World, Entering History: Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, John Smith and the Problems of Describing the New World**

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### ABSTRACT

Spanish conquistador Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and British explorer John Smith went to the New World for different reasons but both shared the experience of being a captive to the Native Americans. After their return to Europe, both of them undertook the task of putting pen to paper to describe their New World experiences so as to inform their fellow countrymen. Writing in different countries and separated by a century of colonial discoveries and experiences, nevertheless, they encountered very similar difficulties in being trusted by professional historians. Both had to strive in order to be regarded as authoritative and valid sources of knowledge about a continent where they, contrary to most historians, had actually traveled to and lived in. This essay examines what their problems were and the strategies they made use of in order to persuade their readers of their trustworthiness.

### **1. Introduction**

Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and Captain John Smith went to the New World for different reasons. The one in 1527 as a member of an expedition commissioned to explore and conquer the land between Río de las Palmas (nowadays, eastern Mexico) and Florida in the name of the Spanish Crown; the other in 1607, after having participated in a number of European military campaigns full of adventures and experiences, as a member of the group that was to found the colony of Jamestown in Virginia. Once they reached America, Cabeza de Vaca's

expedition got lost and dispersed, whereas Smith strove, as member (and later on, as president) of the council governing the colony to make it prosper despite the absence of gold. One experienced first hand the hardships of life in the Americas; the other greatly contributed to lay the stepping-stones of the English colonial enterprise in the New World. In spite of the dissimilarity of the course of their respective colonization projects, Cabeza de Vaca and John Smith had similar experiences (captives at the Native Americans' hands) and their careers followed similar courses after their return home, falling out of favor and into discredit.

As a result of their circumstances as well as their personal and national backgrounds, Cabeza de Vaca and Captain Smith wrote within different historiographical traditions. Born for adventures and noble enterprises, the two of them, upon their going to America, were completely ignorant of the New World realities, for all their experience in European military campaigns. After almost a decade in America in the case of Cabeza de Vaca and two years in John Smith's, they not only became experts on these lands newly seen by European eyes, but, through their writings, they became promoters of the potential of America.

This paper analyses Cabeza de Vaca's and Smith's experience in the Americas so as to illustrate the difficulties that participants in the process of exploration and colonization of the New World had in order to have their writings regarded as authoritative and serious sources of information. After a brief summary of the career of both of them in America, the next section tackles the issue of historical veracity in sixteenth-century Europe. Following, this essay explores the reception Cabeza de Vaca and Smith got as historians in contrast to the concept of historian held at the time, described in the final section.

## 2. The Narváez Expedition to Florida

Born in Jerez de la Frontera, Cádiz, in 1490<sup>1</sup> in a wealthy family, after being orphaned by both parents at a very early age, Cabeza de Vaca was put into the care of his maternal aunt. His paternal grandfather, Pedro de Vera, had conquered the Canary Islands, and he would cast a large shadow in Cabeza de Vaca's ambitions in America.<sup>2</sup> Cabeza de Vaca was soon employed in the service of the Duke of Medina Sidonia, one of the leading political figures in Andalusian society at the time. With him he fought in Italy, where the Spanish monarch was trying to preserve his rights upon certain Italian territories.

On June 17, 1527 the expedition commanded by *Adelantado* (governor) Pánfilo de Narváez sailed off Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Cádiz with Cabeza de Vaca as treasurer. Originally just a trading petition, Narváez eventually asked for (and secured) permission to "conquer, populate, and discover everything that there is to discover in those parts" (Adorno and Pautz, 1999: 11). That the wives of some of the soldiers and several friars took part in the expedition marks their intention of setting up a proper colony. Actually, this was designed to be one of the biggest and best-equipped Spanish expeditions ever; with its four hundred men and eighty horses, it outnumbered the army with which Cortés took New Spain (Horgan, 1963: 131). After two rather prolonged stops in Santo Domingo and Cuba due to storms and a series of misfortunes (among other incidents, they suffered the shipwrecks of two ships, resulting in the death of sixty men and the desertion of almost a quarter of their crew), they

eventually arrived in Florida on Maundy Thursday 1528, according to Cabeza de Vaca's account.<sup>3</sup>

Having landed in an unknown place their pilot, Miruelo, was unable to identify, they were completely at a loss about their exact location. Thinking they were somewhere close between Pánuco or Río de las Palmas,<sup>4</sup> Narváez took the decision of sending the ships ahead the terrestrial party. This, along with his decision to go further inland to find the province of Apalache, reported to contain gold, led to the ultimate loss of the terrestrial expedition, separated from the ships. After a series of unfortunate events (including conflicts with the Native Americans and the shipwrecks of the barges they had built with the materials available to them) and having lost contact with the ships, which returned to New Spain after searching for them for a year in vain, the expedition scattered.

As they had lost all their possessions as well as their last hopes of escaping by their own means, the situation of Cabeza de Vaca and his companions was desperate:

those of us who survived were as naked as the day we were born and had lost everything we had. Although the few things we had were of little value, they meant a lot to us. It was November then and the weather was very cold. We were in such a state that our bones could easily be counted and we looked like the picture of death. I can say for myself that I had not eaten anything but parched corn since the previous May, and sometimes I had to eat it raw. (Cabeza de Vaca, 1993: 56)

Almost starving and with so scarce a knowledge of the American reality that survival on their own was impossible, Cabeza de Vaca and his companions were forced to rely on Native American hospitality, despite their suspicions of human sacrifices:

I told the Christians that, if they agreed, I would ask those Indians to take us to their lodges. And some who had been to New Spain responded that we should not even think about it, because if they took us to their lodges they would sacrifice us to their idols. But seeing that we had no other recourse and that any other action would certainly bring us closer to death, I did not pay attention to what they were saying and I asked the Indians to take us to their lodges. (Cabeza de Vaca, 1993: 57)

Helpless, with no means to go back to Spain on their own, they were at the mercy of the Native Americans' charity. Eventually, the Spaniards were separated and became slaves to various Native American groups.

Cabeza de Vaca would not return to Spain until 1537, spending the remaining years in between living among different Native American tribes, among whom he performed different roles until he was found by Spanish troops. Back in Spain, Cabeza de Vaca sought to be rewarded for his deeds in the New World, which he recorded in his *Naufragios*<sup>5</sup> (first published in Zamora in 1542; reprinted in Valladolid in 1555 along with the *Commentaries*). Failing to secure for himself the post of *Adelantado* of Florida that would go to Hernando de Soto instead, Cabeza de Vaca was rewarded with the appointment of governor of the Río de la Plata province (Argentina). This experience would turn out to be an even bigger disaster, ending with a coup d'état against Cabeza de Vaca led by the army. After being in confinement, Cabeza de Vaca was shipped back to Spain in chains.

### 3. John Smith's Experience in Virginia

John Smith, born in Willoughby (Lincolnshire) in 1580, felt the thirst for adventures very early in his life, which led him to leave his native village at age sixteen after his father's death. A mercenary at the service of several European powers, he participated in a number of campaigns throughout Europe in which his bravery earned him the title of captain. While fighting in Transylvania in 1602, he was made prisoner and sold into slavery to the Turks. Back to England in 1605, he became involved in the colonization plans of the Virginia Company and joined the 1607 expedition to the New World to found the first settlement of the Company. Troubles during the journey made some consider the possibility of sending him back to England immediately after their arrival. However, when instructions were opened after arriving in Virginia, as it was the custom, it was discovered that Smith was one of the seven-member council devised to rule the colony, which put an end to his enemies' plans. The group arrived in Jamestown on May 13, 1607 and began the task of colonizing.

It was in December that year when Smith fell prisoner to the Powhatan Indians. According to his words in *The Generall Historie*, he was rescued by Pocahontas, one of Powhatan's children. In September 1608, Smith was elected president of the Council of Virginia, imposing a strict discipline and a policy characterized by the motto "he who shall not work, shall not eat". However, Smith was not able to do much, for in October 1609, badly wounded, he had to return to England to receive medical treatment. After Jamestown, Smith sought to return to America, which he eventually did in 1614, when he took part in a three-month exploring expedition to the area that he would name New England. Until his death in 1631, Smith would write at length about Virginia and New England, promoting British colonization of the Americas. Further attempts on his part to return to America were unsuccessful, including an offer to the Pilgrim Fathers to guide them in their journey to America on the grounds that "having my bookes and maps, presumed they knew as much as they desired, many other directors they had as wise as themselves, but that was best that liked their owne conceits" (Smith, 1631: 21). Smith would devote the rest of his life to writing repeatedly about his New World experiences.

### 4. The Problem of Historical Veracity

Despite their first-hand knowledge of America, for both Cabeza de Vaca and John Smith, having their respective writings regarded as serious, authoritative descriptions of America, proved to be almost as tough as their very experiences in the New World. Writing was a fundamental aspect of the European colonizing enterprise in the Americas. The idea of writing New World accounts was best summarized by the sailing directions Henry Hudson was given – "send those on land that will show themselves diligent writers". The goal of New World expeditions was not reduced to discovering and taking possession of unknown lands but also included the necessity of writing reports to inform those who had stayed at home. This interest in reporting and giving word of the American enterprise is clear in many an account of the period. That "the discovery of the New World coincided with the invention of printing"

(Armstrong, 2001) was most fortunate for those wanting to promote their deeds in America. Preparations for the voyage were made with the intention of reporting it very much in mind; for instance, the failed 1517 expedition led by John Rastell, Sir Thomas More's brother-in-law, included among its members a printer in charge of establishing a publishing press in America (Boesky, 1999: 117).

From the sixteenth century onwards, there was a tendency to question (when not outright deny) the veracity of eyewitnesses' accounts. More value was attributed to men of letters with a formal background (that is, historians) than to less knowledgeable eyewitnesses. Only those statements coming from an authority were straightforwardly accepted; those coming from a first-hand testimony and unmediated were considered suspicious and untrustworthy on the grounds of a bias that those who had not directly participated in the event described lacked. It was the historian's trained eye the only one who could (and was sanctioned to) discern what might be exaggeration or amazement in order to render readers the naked truth in an objective manner. An eyewitness was just an "alma inculta a quien grandes hechos dictaron grandes palabras," as Menéndez y Pelayo (quoted in Esteve Barba, 1992: 21) said regarding Columbus; a historian, in opposition, was the best one to render those words.<sup>6</sup>

In order to make eyewitnesses' accounts acceptable by historical standards, historians had no qualms in extensively correcting and even rewriting eyewitnesses' accounts. These alterations were so common and widespread that armchair travelers (historians who had not been to America) corrected and denied the veracity of eyewitnesses' accounts. For example, Samuel Purchas, who never went to America himself, corrected eyewitness James Rosier's account in reference to Native American women's nakedness (Kupperman, 1997: 201). Not surprisingly, Puritan Thomas Hooker complained that "there is great ods betwixt the knowledg of a Traveller, that in his own person hath taken a view of many Coasts ... and another that sits by his fire side, and happily ... views the proportion of these in a Map" (quoted in Howard, 1971: 261). The historian was supposed to lack a personal interest or motivation in his telling the story whereas the eyewitness, in his telling his own story rather than allowing for a more qualified voice (i.e., the historian) to express it, did have a personal interest. But to find an account written with no more or less hidden intention or purpose underlying it was almost impossible. Just like the colonial endeavor itself "is always a means to an end, ... the narration of the events in the colonial space always must connect itself to some ultimate goal" (Scanlan, 1999: 3), be it the promotion of one's career, as it happened to Cabeza de Vaca and Smith, or of one's favorite cause (Las Casas).<sup>7</sup>

That way, only the professional historian was entitled to write histories, a confining vision of historiography that has largely persisted up to our days (Pocock, 1962: 210). What an eyewitness might write was a mere report, for a historian to criticize, use freely and re-write as he found convenient in order to turn this material into historical substance. At a time when formal knowledge was difficult to obtain and reserved just for the upper classes, eyewitnesses (being mostly soldiers and adventurers) were not likely to possess it. Communicating the knowledge of the New World to European addressees involved the skillful use of linguistic resources with which eyewitnesses did not feel comfortable. This shortcoming made eyewitnesses unable to render their visions in the expected writing mode, a flaw their critics exploited to the maxim.

### 5. Cabeza de Vaca and John Smith as Historians

Cabeza de Vaca and John Smith belonged to this tradition of conquistadors and explorers who turned to writing in order to record their deeds in America and whose lack of a formal instruction or of narrative excellence did not prevent them from writing (Beltrán Llavador, 1994: 22). Dissatisfied with the way in which accounts of events in which they had played an active role had been recorded (Adorno, 1992: 227; Adorno, 1988: 243) or eager to record their participation in events still unrecorded by historians, men like Cabeza de Vaca or John Smith, decided to fulfill the role of historians themselves in order to vindicate personal claims or denunciations (Pupo-Walker, 1992: 91).<sup>8</sup>

Eyewitnesses' turning to writing was far from unusual in the course of the Spanish conquest of America. As pointed out by Friederici, "in no country is there so great a number of soldier-chroniclers as in Spain. Characteristic of these is their scorn for bookish erudition, even though they try to exhibit their own ingenuously and repeatedly" (in Iglesia, 1940: 525). Cabeza de Vaca, though not openly criticizing those more qualified than himself, did not include any Latin term or any classical reference in his text, thus making obvious his own lack of formal training. In the same manner as Spanish conquistadors had been doing for over a century, John Smith showed his scorn for bookish erudition in *A Map of Virginia*, when he accused calumniators of having received a formal education without any military instruction:

Some infirmed bodies, or tender educars, complaine of the piercing cold, especially in January and February, yet the *French* in *Canada*, the *Russians*, *Swethlanders*, *Polanders*, *Germans*, and our neighbour *Hollanders*, are much colder and farre more Northward, for all that, rich Countryees and live well. Now they have wood enough if they will but cut it, at their doores to make fires, and traine oyle with splinters of the roots of sire trees for candles, where in *Holland* they have little or none to build ships, houses, or any thing but what they fetch from forren Countries, yet they dwell but in the latitude of Yorkshire, and *New-England* is in the height of the North cape of *Spaine*, which is 10. degrees, 200. leagues, or 600. miles nearer the Sunne than wee, where upon the mountains of *Risky* I have felt as much cold, frost, and snow as in *England*, and of this I am sure, a good part of the best Countries and kingdoms of the world, both Northward and Southward of the line, lie in the same paralels of *Virginia* and *New-England*. (Smith, 1631: 27-28)

Cabeza de Vaca also reiterated the validity of his testimony and asserted the truthfulness of his words:

Since my account of this is, in my opinion, prudent and not frivolous, for the sake of those who go to conquer those lands and also to bring the inhabitants to a knowledge of the true faith and true Lord and to the service of Your Majesty, I wrote with great certainty; although one may read some novel things, very hard to believe for some, they can believe them without a doubt and accept them as very true, for I am brief rather than long-winded in everything. (Cabeza de Vaca, 1993: 28-29)

One of the main claims that their detractors used against Cabeza de Vaca and John Smith was that they were fond of exaggerating, if not outright lying. Especially controversial in Smith's case was the Pocahontas episode. Many accused him of using the fascination that Pocahontas had stirred up during her brief stay in London to his own benefit, since he did not include this

episode in his historical writings till the publication of *The Generall Historie* in 1624, with Lady Rebecca (the name Pocahontas adopted after her marriage to John Rolfe and her becoming English) dead by then. The main arguments used for attacking Cabeza de Vaca's trustworthiness and reliability have been the reports of his miracles and the more fabulous episodes – the mora de Hornachos' prophecy,<sup>9</sup> the attack by pirates on the way back home<sup>10</sup>... Surprisingly, these “miracles” have been given credibility enough to be included by historians in their works (among others, by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo in *Historia natural y general de las Indias*, Francisco López de Gómara in *Historia general de las Indias* and Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas in *Décadas o historia general de los hechos de los castellanos...*) and even mentioned in lawsuits (Pupo-Walker, 1992: 19; Lafaye, 1978: 174). Cabeza de Vaca's hyperboles, which Ferrando (1985: 28) pejoratively calls *andalucismos*, contributed to making readers suspicious of his words. All these exaggerations on Cabeza de Vaca's side are not too different from Smith's visualization of the new world “in broad and bold historical terms” (Ziff, 1996: 514).

Smith was well aware that his writing about his own deeds would arouse criticism:

I know, I shall be taxed for writing so much of my selfe; but I care not much, because the judiciall know there are few such Souldiers as ... [those who] have writ their owne actions, nor know I who will or can tell my intents better than my selfe. (quoted in Jameson, 1891a: 647)

Likewise, Cabeza de Vaca was also careful in his proem to defend his book. The proem thus serves a double-fold function. On the one hand, to stress that Cabeza de Vaca actually lived in America and, therefore, his testimony was a first-hand testimony:

an account of what I learned and saw in the ten years that I wandered lost and naked through many and very strange lands, noting the location of land and provinces and the distances between them as well as the sustenance and animals produced in each, and the diverse customs of the many and very barbarous peoples with whom I came into contact and lived, and all the other particulars which I could observe and know. (Cabeza de Vaca, 1993: 28)

On the other hand, Cabeza de Vaca pursued to assert the veracity of his words: “I wrote with great certainty although one may read some very novel things, very hard to believe for some, they can believe them without a doubt and accept them as very true, for I am brief rather than long-winded in everything” (Cabeza de Vaca, 1993: 29).

Given that they were unable to use conventional historical modes in their shaping their own writings, Cabeza de Vaca and John Smith had to resort to other modes of writing. For Cabeza de Vaca, that was the *relación* (or account), a genre which he modified for his own purposes (Pupo-Walker, 1992: 86). Thus, for Sánchez (1997: 10), *The Account* contains as much poetry as chronicle. Smith made use of the models of historical reporting available to him at the time, and “a spirit of knight-errantry and the yearnings of a self-made man are interwoven in his conception of America and its possibilities,” along with the literary conventions of the chivalric romance (Rozwenc, 1959: 28), the influence of the popular romances of the Elizabethan Age being most visible in *The Generall Historie*.

## 6. The Concept of Historian

If they could not fight historians in the field of historical writing, then, eyewitnesses had to find ground where they could fight historians to their own advantage. In discrediting professional historians Cabeza de Vaca and John Smith had to re-define the conception of 'historian' to create a new definition that accommodated their own situation. John Smith came to accept "the historian's role as equal to that of soldier-statesman and of history as the site of the meanings that unmediated experience alone cannot yield" (Ziff, 1996: 517). That is, as he was giving up his role as soldier and becoming more of a professional historian, constantly writing and re-writing his works, he felt compelled to re-define his concepts of both, and thus consider both aspects (soldier and historian) not as mutually exclusive, but as complementary. Thus, "Smith further enhanced his reputation as a great wizard by manipulating the technology of writing" (Cañizares-Esguerra, 2006: 66).

In his *A Map of Virginia* (1612), John Smith attacked his opponents by indicating how accounts that differed from his own should be evaluated:

Being for the most part of such tender education and small experience in martial accidents, because they found not English cities, nor such faire houses, nor at their own wishes any of their accustomed dainties, with feather beds and downe pillows, Tavernes and alehouses in every breathing place, neither such plenty of gold and silver and dissolute liberty as they expected had little or no care of any thing, but to pamper their bellies, to fly away with our Pinnaces, or procure their meanes to returne to England. (quoted in Ziff, 1996: 513)

Also, Smith bitterly resented that the deeds of Englishmen in Virginia were not receiving the same treatment as the Spaniards in Peru or New Spain (Rozwenc, 1959: 31) – that is, one of the reasons prompting him to write is giving testimony of what English historians had failed to record. Though Smith was right, for the most part, in affirming that Spanish conquistadors were better off when it came to material rewards, in regards to the historical consideration of their writings, their English counterparts fared much better. What American historian Jameson (1891b: 726) wrote, "the sixteenth and the early seventeenth had been an age of great historians who were also great men. Prominent statesmen and soldiers wrote brilliant accounts of events in which they had borne an active part," would have never been said by any Spanish historian, back then or even much later.

In England, although Smith's writings were suspected, it cannot be said that this tendency to distrust eyewitnesses in Spanish historiography was thoroughly shared by English historiography. As an example,

latter-day historians, anthropologists, ethnologists, and the like have been so willing to trust early English eyewitness accounts that, for instance, they construct virtually their entire picture of the Powhatan society out of them, right down to telling us its settlement patterns, political forms, burial and marriage practices, tribute systems, sumptuary rules, puberty rites, and the like, on the basis of little more than the perceptions of thoroughly Anglocentric and prejudiced men, not one of them trained for the track. (Sale, 1990: 389)

In contrast, *The Account* has been paid much less critical attention than Smith's writings and when it has, it has been regarded as a fantastic, adventures text rather than as a proper historical text for the advancement of the knowledge of sixteenth-century America. The most obvious example of the historical neglect in which Cabeza de Vaca has been for centuries is that, *The Account* has until quite recently in Spain, being published, more often than not, as a children's book. However, John Smith is accepted as a more reputed historian by English historiography than Cabeza de Vaca is by Spanish historiography. Statements like "he [Smith] also has an important place in the early history of New England" (Craven, 1972: 479) are hardly to be found in Spanish historiography regarding Cabeza de Vaca.

## 7. Conclusions

Despite the great interest for learning more about the New World that prompted the publication of many works describing the Americas, eyewitnesses' accounts were rejected in favour of the writings of historians, who had never set a foot in America. This scorn for participants' direct experiences was a source of distress and trouble for Cabeza de Vaca and Smith, who strove to have their credibility asserted and their books respected. Cabeza de Vaca and Smith had to defend themselves from accusations of exaggerations, when not outright lying while at the same time creating a literary space of their own, different from contemporary notions of what a historian was. The dissimilar standards applied to Cabeza de Vaca's and Smith's respective works due to the different national historical and historiographical traditions in Spain and Britain at the time had largely influenced the subsequent historical consideration of the one and the other. All in all, for Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and John Smith, leaving the New World came to mean entering an even more dangerous world, that of history. If harsh had been their experiences in America, when they decided to go to another "new world" for them, the world of historians, they found no smaller share of perils.

## Notes

1. There is some controversy in regards to the accuracy of this date, though, and some authors place his birth as late as 1506. However, 1490, the date defended, among others, by Adorno and Pautz most recently, seems to be a much more accurate figure than 1506. We have to take into account that, prior to going to America, Cabeza de Vaca had already participated in several campaigns in Italy; had he been born in 1506, it would be highly unlikely that a man in his early twenties at the time of his embarking in the Narváez expedition, would have already reached the post of treasurer, one of great responsibility and social prestige.

2. At the end of his *Account*, when he writes down the name of those who survived from the Narváez expedition, Cabeza de Vaca (1993: 121) alludes to his relation – "the third [survivor] is Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, son of Francisco de Vera and grandson of Francisco de Vera, who conquered the Canary Islands".

3. The accuracy of the date is questioned by Sheppard (2005). However, we should bear in mind, though, that Cabeza de Vaca had no writing material or any means to record his experiences during his

time in the Americas.

4. The pilots reckoned that Pánuco was 10-15 miles away and Río de las Palmas was more or less at the same distance, when in fact they were when over 600 (Covey, 1961) and 900 miles away, respectively (Krieger, 2002: 25).

5. In English it is alternatively known as *The Account*.

6. Eyewitnesses faced multiple problems to be trusted by historians, fond-of-chivalric-romances audiences and even other eyewitnesses, who often were the fiercest critics of their former companions. For instance, Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, himself an eyewitness (which he repeated over and over again [Pagden, 1991: 154]), doubted that some of the events Columbus himself reported were accurate (Murray, 1994: 33). For an in-depth analysis of this situation, see Gurpegui and Gómez Galisteo, forthcoming in 2009.

7. For more on the strategies used by eyewitnesses to be trusted and the arguments they used against their critics, see Gómez Galisteo, 2006: 34-58.

8. Ironically, later on, Smith's defenders, to defend him from having invented in his later rewritings of his experiences in America passages that he never included in the former versions (especially the Pocahontas story) claimed, as an excuse, that *True Relation*, Smith's first account, was extensively altered by a London editor (Puglisi, 1991: 103). Certainly, the *True Relation* was published in 1608, when Smith still was in Jamestown and without his consent or knowledge. The *True Relation* was a compilation based on the reports and letters Smith had sent to England from Jamestown.

9. Cabeza de Vaca claims that, although he only learned about this after his return to Spain, a Moorish woman from Hornachos predicted to the women partaking in the expedition that their husbands would get lost and die in America.

10. Pupo-Walker (1992: 84) considers that the pirate episode might be invented.

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