

**[EX]POSING SIGHTLINES:  
THE STAGING OF POWER IN  
CHERRIE MORAGA'S *HEROES AND SAINTS***

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... the power relations that characterize any historically embedded society are never as transparently clear as the names we give to them imply.

—Avery F. Gordon

Agency and power constantly merge and mingle to give individuals various levels of choice and action. Many factors enhance or restrict an individual's agency, or power to act. Complexities of circumstance and human nature render the extremes in which one individual completely possesses agency or completely lacks it rare, restricting the extent to which power can be finally located. Avery F. Gordon's words invoke the difficulty of locating power and verbalizing that location. By limiting individuals to the categories of victim or victimizer, one neglects to acknowledge the various factors that blur and blend each category in a particular situation. Michel Foucault hypothesizes that location of power does not reside in the dichotomous categories of the oppressor and the oppressed, but rather exists fluidly in a cycle of power and pleasure:

The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpitates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself as in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting (45).

This cycle transcends the uncomplicated categories of victim and victimizer. Instead, it acknowledges that pleasure and power are inseparable—that power does not exist solely in domination but also manifests in the decision to resist or accept domination. It suggests that power is located everywhere waiting to be possessed.

Cherríe Moraga's play, *Heroes and Saints*, probes complexities

in constructions of power and acts of agency. The play is set in the fictional town of McLaughlin, a Chicano farmworker community in the San Joaquin Valley. It is inspired by real events in the town of McFarland, California where, from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, a disproportionate number of children were born with birth defects or diagnosed with cancer. Moraga presents the audience with intricate readings of the ways in which seemingly fixed power structures, maintained by the field's owners, oppress those who work the fields. She furthermore portrays the actions that the farmworkers use to subvert this power, claim rights and exercise resistance.

Throughout the play, different characters face obstacles in their attempts to assert an agency that owners seek to deny them. The play's protagonist, Cerezita, for example, was born without a body due to the pesticides sprayed in the fields in which her mother worked. Cerezita's image itself problematizes the viewers' assumptions of domination. Her physical condition and the degree to which she relies on and is controlled by others imply an extreme lack of agency. Moraga describes her in the play's notes, however, as, "a head of human dimension, but one who possesses such dignity of bearing and classical Indian beauty she can, at times, assume nearly religious proportions" (90). Cerezita seizes an immense amount of power in the force of her image and the brilliance of her mind. Yet she cannot effect the degree of change that she wants as long as her mother, Dolores, keeps her hidden from the world outside of their home. Therefore, Cerezita strives for an agency through visibility whereby she can affect an audience with her image and further McLaughlin's struggle against pesticide poisoning.

Cerezita's conflict exemplifies the ways that the play questions simplified explanations of power, which deny depth of feeling and contours of agency. Throughout the play, Moraga reflects structures of power that are both written by and against hegemonic narratives of the oppressor and oppressed as inherently dichotomized categories. Moraga maps this struggle onto the tension in the play surrounding the possession and manipulation of an object associated with visibility: the camera. Characters seek power through the camera because it enables (re)production or location of image. It furthermore problematizes the way in which agency is determined by ownership of these objects and images. The production of the play itself parallels the camera's presence in its struggle for agency through visibility while critiquing hegemonic conceptions of power.

The question of whether one is (in)visible suggests inevitable

complication of the subject's ability to control productions and readings of their own image. While many narratives express a desire for privacy—the right to make certain aspects of one's life inaccessible to spectators—there is also a counter-narrative that seeks representation as a means of forming community and support. These interrelated narratives often arise in the context of oppression in which visibility is repressed in order to make the process and results of domination indistinguishable or where privacy is denied in order to prevent rebellion and induce fear. Gaining control over one's (in)visibility exerts agency over the use of one's image by determining context and meaning while resisting appropriation through commodification.

In the setting description of the play, Moraga creates a visual image of McLaughlin's isolation that articulates the town's invisibility. She describes McLaughlin as a small town with a highway running through the middle:

From the highest point of the overpass, a large island of single-family stucco houses and apartments can be seen... Surrounding the island is an endless sea of agricultural fields which, like the houses, have been perfectly arranged into neatly juxtaposed rectangles (91).

By describing the grouping of houses as an island, Moraga accentuates McLaughlin's constructed isolation from other communities, both those who have little in common with McLaughlin and others that are similar to it. The multiple structures that obfuscate the community compound feelings of isolation. The position of the fields in the observer's gaze exemplifies efforts by the growers to make their consumers see the produce but not the process. Their image is deemed more desirable than that of the people who face the consequences of the agricultural process—the workers who are directly affected by pesticide poisoning. Furthermore, Moraga notes that a passer-by can only see the houses from the highest point of the overpass, which is also the furthest point from the town. In order to see the houses, therefore, drivers must be at their most distant from the town making any real connections with the circumstances impossible. Thus, the play is motivated by a need to break free from restrained visibility and actually make McLaughlin and its residents visible in order to expose the effects that the agricultural process has on them.

*Heroes and Saints* breaks through the visual barrier of the fields and reveals the intricacies of a very real political issue that is often hidden and ignored. Moraga sets the play entirely in that town, illustrating the ongoing struggle against pesticide poisoning in every day

existence and the effects of that struggle on human lives. She presents a situation in which characters try to make their oppression visible from a secluded location and therefore introduces a camera to act as a visual mediator between those characters and the people whom they are trying to reach. The camera, however, is inherently limited and limiting in its capabilities. When used as a mediator, the camera does not lend itself to the total control of one party or the other. Even if owned by the person creating the image, the viewer must absorb and interpret the image with which the creator presents them thereby complicating notions of absolute control in any mode of visual representation. Thus, as a tool of agency, the camera works to shift dominant notions of power while introducing its own complicated dynamics of agency.

Ana Pérez, a news reporter who does multiple segments on McLaughlin throughout the play, first comes to investigate a series of crucifixions that have occurred in the fields surrounding the town. This scene occurs in front of the house where Cerezita lives. Pérez stops Amparo, a leader in the McLaughlin farmworkers' movement and a close friend of Cerezita's family, on the street in order to ask her questions about the recent occurrences. In this scene, Moraga questions the productivity of performing power and agency through the visual tool of the camera. Before beginning her segment, Pérez talks to Bob, the implied but unseen cameraman who operates the also invisible camera. Pérez addresses Bob, saying, "Bob, is my hair okay? What? ... I have lipstick? Where? Here? (*she wets her finger with her tongue, rubs the corner of her lip*) Okay? ... Good. (*addressing the 'camera'*) Hello, I'm Ana Pérez ..." (92). Pérez's attention to the details of her appearance firmly establishes her report as a type of performance, thus illuminating the multiple ways that a camera necessitates the production of image rather than simply capturing an image that already exists.

Pérez also demonstrates the potential of the camera to establish a dichotomy of normalcy and Otherness. She opens with the statement "this is another edition of our Channel Five news special: 'Hispanic California'" (92). By identifying the segment as a "special," Pérez locates Latinos as existing outside the supposed norm and as Other to the white middle-class, English-speaking audience to which she is catering her segment. As a Latina herself, Pérez is included in the status of Other that she constructs in her statements. However, the fact that she makes that statement identifies her with the audience to which she is catering because she labels Latinos as other for her viewer. Pérez therefore occupies a middle ground in which she

cannot be fully identified with either group but instead mediates between them. She occupies the role of a transcultural mediator, and lends a degree of legitimacy to her segment in the eyes of her audience precisely because she presents herself as being able to translate the situation, just as she translates Amparo's Spanish phrases. As a transcultural mediator, Pérez obscures dichotomous power boundaries by identifying with two groups that the audience sees as inhabiting antithetical positions.

Moraga displays Pérez's performance as mediator between Amparo and the audience through Pérez's immediate translation of actual language. In her work on child translators, Antonia I. Castañeda observes that translation happens across cultures and therefore that translating language is, in effect, translating culture. She further elaborates that "the act of translation is informed by unequal power relationships. Translation usually occurs under conditions of conflict and stress" (207). By translating Amparo's statements, Pérez reveals her own feelings of cultural conflict. She resolves those feelings by choosing to translate Amparo's Spanish words rather than English, thereby establishing the primacy of an English speaking audience. By inhabiting the role of translator, Pérez establishes herself as sympathetic to, yet distant from, Amparo's statements, while demonstrating some control over the scene.

Pérez inhabits the position of power to which Castañeda refers, and yet her obvious discomfort with her surroundings destabilizes this power. Neither woman completely controls the actions of the scene, but the camera intervenes in the two women's struggle for power by enabling Pérez to choose Amparo's audience and to shape her image into something that the audience can understand or digest. The camera, which must be owned and controlled in order to act, limits the object's agency with its gaze. Thus, the camera restricts the extent to which Amparo can enact agency as she attempts to break through the visual barrier that agriculture erects between McLaughlin and outside consumers.

Moraga gives the audience a "behind-the-scenes" look at the way that images are created for presentation and the ways in which this process of creation complicates ideas that representation is a useful tool for social change. Pérez does not broadcast her segment live, but rather records her story for later use. Thus, the camera allows Pérez to edit the exchange. The camera and nature of filming give Pérez power over the image that she will present later yet does nothing to alert the audience to the fact that the image has been edited. Gerald Vizenor, writing about the nature of photography,

observes that “the camera captures others, not the experience of the photographer; the presence of the other is discovered in a single shot, the material reduction of a pose” (129). Vizenor’s statement reflects the ways in which the process of creating an image is erased and forgotten in the final production of that image. The camera captures the image itself rather than the process that goes into creating that image, therefore fixing the image as reality and erasing the process altogether. Pérez’s final product, if it adheres to the general structure of news reports, may contain several cuts that reveal editing, but will erase the evidence of that manipulation. She therefore privileges a product that the audience will want and accept over the actual story in which she purports interest.

Because the camera allows Pérez to edit without drawing attention to the process, the image that she reveals to the audience appears to be a summary of the “truth” that she has discovered. To people who have never thought about pesticide poisoning or met a Chicano farmworker, Amparo, rather than Pérez, becomes a representative who is objectified and generalized. The image that she embodies will not even be of her own making since the camera puts the power to shape the interview in Pérez’s hands, as she states, “We’ll edit her out later” (94). In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag remarks that “in deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects” (6). These standards, especially in news reporting, are often based on ideas of believability and simplicity. Pérez must focus on what her audience wants to see and therefore shapes her segment to their standards of authenticity and reality. Moraga does not provide her audience with an image of the final product that Pérez creates but instead makes it clear that the actual interview is not the final image. Thus, film works within a cycle of the (in)visible in which a certain person holds power over the final constructed performative image; the power dynamics in the scene are enabled by the camera and therefore mediated through it. By employing the camera to speak to a previously unaware audience, Amparo does gain power. Yet while Pérez’s power over her message is limited, so is Amparo’s agency in producing the image and therefore controlling the story that her target audience will see. Thus, the camera acts as a tool through which concepts of hierarchical power structures are both disestablished and renegotiated.

Showing her audience the scene from which Pérez draws her report not only relates the actuality of the play and what obstacles the characters face, but also mimics scenes that are familiar to most

of Moraga's actual audience. The play premiered in San Francisco, a location very different from the one in which the play is set. With an urban audience, Moraga could expect that these types of news reports are the primary access that her audience has to images of farmworkers' lives. In the initial production, Moraga therefore acknowledged and challenged the filtered medium through which the theatrical audience had contact with the subject of the play. Moraga's purpose in writing and producing the play parallels Amparo's in that she seeks power and action through visibility. She accesses this power by presenting the medium that produces images with which most of the audience is familiar, and then shows the audiences the effects of and gaps in that medium, challenging their ability to see an issue presented in it. The flaws in the camera as a transmitter of agency highlight the agency that she has through the production of her own work. Moraga traces Amparo's progression as a political activist, spurred on by her television appearance, and illustrates the effects that this sort of media attention has through the conflicted reactions of multiple characters. By presenting the uncut version of Amparo's interview to the audience and showing a more complete picture of McLaughlin's situation, Moraga undoes the invisibility which the camera, in Pérez's hands, inflicts on Amparo by replacing it with a staged visibility. She furthermore disestablishes the audience's previous visions of the issues facing the farmworkers.

In her interview, Amparo articulates the ways that a forced invisibility makes social change difficult if not impossible. Pérez asks her about the crucifixions in which someone places the body of an already-dead child on a cross in the fields as a statement on the effects of pesticides. Amparo replies, "If you put the children in the ground, the world forgets about them. Who's going to see them, buried in the dirt" (94). Her statement incites the act of seeing as an acknowledgement of power as well as the way in which the invisible is forgotten. Forgetting becomes the fundamental barrier to McLaughlin's progress toward safe living conditions. The agricultural process effaces its harmful elements in order to maintain consumer interest. Therefore, agri-business makes consumers ignore or forget the extent to which it exploits its workers in order to create profit. The crucifixes (because of the shock that they induce) and the camera (as a visual recorder through which images can be reproduced and therefore remembered) are both necessary tools of visibility if Amparo wants to access the power that the consumers have over the growers. Talking to Pérez is therefore a way for Amparo to bring McLaughlin out of the dirt and make sure that the town and its dying children are not forgotten.

Amparo's attempt to make McLaughlin's struggle visible in a larger context is analogous to Cerezita's struggle to become visible in her own community. Yet, Cerezita desires not only to be seen but also to see. Her mother, Dolores, worries constantly about how people will react to Cerezita, and to her, if they are able to see her daughter's striking image for themselves. Dolores therefore keeps Cerezita in the house by controlling Cerezita's raite<sup>1</sup> and allows few people that come into the house to see her. In a plea to Dolores to let her out of the house, Cerezita asks, "if nobody ever sees me, how will I know how I look? How will I know if I scare them or make them mad or ... move them? If people could see me, 'amá, things would change" (113). Her statement reveals crucial factor of the gaze that the camera eliminates; if Cerezita allows people to see her she can also observe their reaction and use that reaction to gain agency and power. Thus the gaze, absent of tools of reproduction such as a camera, is inherently cyclical in that one must see and register a person at whom they are looking and that the object of the gaze has the power to witness the response to their image. Thus, Cerezita wants to be seen in order to reinforce her belief that her image is powerful and use that power for the town's benefit.

The camera threatens the power of a cyclical gaze because it does not allow the subject to witness, and therefore react to, the implications of what it shows. By using the camera to make herself visible, Amparo relinquishes the power that direct contact may give her. The camera makes her a visible target, giving her a degree of power while simultaneously making her vulnerable. She can gauge some reaction to her statements, because she is physically threatened by the growers when they shoot through her windows after her interview, but the fact that the camera makes her own image inaccessible to her increases the difficulty that she may have in protecting herself against retaliation. The fact that the camera transmits images to a location and situation to which she does not have access suggests that she can never gain the kind of knowledge that Cerezita seeks.

As Dolores' panic at the possibility of Cerezita entering the cycle of visibility and power increases, so does Pérez's actual participation in the struggle of McLaughlin residents. The "camera" next appears

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<sup>1</sup> The raite, or "ride," refers to the wheeled table-like structure that Cerezita uses to move. It is operated by a chin piece, which can be removed at any time by another character, eliminating Cerezita's mobility. In the "Notes on Cerezita" that Moraga includes, she states that, "Her mobility and its limits are critical aspects of her character" (90).



during a rally that Amparo leads to make the school board reverse its decision to decline free, clean drinking water (Act 1, Scene 9). Unlike the last meeting between Pérez and Amparo, in this scene the camera takes a much more passive role. Although Susan Sontag claims that “photography is essentially an act of non-intervention” (11), she continues, however, that “even if incompatible with intervention in a physical sense, using a camera is still a form of participation” (12). Pérez’s decreased intervention in the creation of the scene that she records, however, indicates Amparo’s need to find a more direct outlet of power. Rather than lead Amparo through a conversation, Pérez simply introduces the scene and films Amparo’s speech, recording a protest created and performed in accordance with Amparo’s vision. Her increasing silence as the urgency of the play increases highlights the camera’s impotency, since, as the play gains momentum, the significance of the camera’s presence decreases. The action, thus, falls to Amparo who again enacts a performative stance in front of the camera and surrounding crowds. Pérez also leaves Amparo to use her own words and relinquishes her roles as translator. The shifting focus of the lens, from Pérez to Amparo, signifies the shifting focus and possession of power as Amparo obtains more strength and control in her fight.

Pérez abandons her passive role behind the camera during her coverage of the next McLaughlin protest and instead focuses on the actual events at hand. Unlike previous appearances, she does not comment on or judge the actions of the protestors; she simply states their demands to the audience. It is in her most inactive moment as a reporter that she begins to take active steps as an ally of McLaughlin residents. Amparo steps out of line to help her daughter Bonnie after she slips. The police begin to beat her with nightsticks and Pérez, witnessing the scene, begins to use her role as reporter to help her and cries, “She’s been struck! Amparo Manríquez ... oh my god! The policeman ...” Yet her cries have no consequences at the moment and Amparo continues to be beaten. Pérez therefore ceases her address to the audience to which she has no immediate connection and begins to address the people around her: “Stop him! Jesus! Somebody stop him!” (133). As Sontag observes, the camera does not allow Pérez to intervene directly, thus she abandons the type of participation the camera provides and acts directly in the scene. Pérez’s move toward action, transcending the passive observance of the camera mirrors Moraga’s expectations for her own audience. The political nature of the play implores its audience to transcend a role of passive observation, which Pérez embodies, and become active participants in the struggle for basic human rights.

The police reaction to Amparo's protest highlights the extent to which visibility as a tool of power can incite an increased reaction from those who believe that they benefit from the supposed hierarchy of domination. It also exemplifies the ease with which struggles of power can escalate to violence. Dolores' worry for Cerezita's safety escalates after Mario, her son, leaves the house. She fears that they are more vulnerable without a man to protect them. In the beginning of Act 2, the audience sees Dolores hiding in the bushes outside of her house attempting to see into the house. Juan, the local priest who becomes close to the Valle family, finds her there and asks why she is doing this:

DOLORES: To know what you can see inside the house at night. The peepo going by can see through the windows. ¿Qué vió, Padre, when you were coming up the street?

JUAN: No sé. I wasn't paying attention.

DOLORES: Next time, Father, you pay attention, eh? So you can tell me from how far away you can see wha's going on inside the house (127).

Dolores equates the act of seeing into the house with knowledge about Cerezita's physical reality, which, if seen, could have a tremendous effect on the viewers' involvement in McLaughlin's movement. In her own way, she attempts to gain the type of knowledge about which Cerezita speculates; the only way that Dolores can know what others see is to put herself in the position of the viewer whom she fears. Her action both legitimizes Cerezita's quest for visibility and acknowledges the way in which the cycle of the gaze is inescapable. Attempting to see Cerezita and formulate possible reactions to her image, Dolores becomes those whom she so fears will look at her daughter with cruelty. She perpetuates cycles of shame and surveillance that conform to the notion that power is delegated by social factors rather than possessed by the individuals that access it.

Both Cerezita's invisibility and immobility as well as the fact that she is female, Chicana and disabled in a culture that privileges male, white and able-bodied people implies, through the hegemonic conceptions of power, that Cerezita is severely limited in several areas of her life—that she is oppressed. Yet, while these combating forces give her seemingly insurmountable odds, Cerezita does find both power and agency. Who erected the crucifixions that prompted Pérez's interest in McLaughlin remains an enigma. The opening scene of the play shows Cerezita watching a child hanging on a cross, his clothing flowing in the breeze. This scene foreshadows a connection. It implies that Cerezita is involved in the child's crucifixion

but does not let the audience know definitely who is responsible. In Act 2, Scene 6, Moraga reveals that Cerezita and the children of McLaughlin construct the crosses. They are never suspected of the act and in fact, it is exactly their invisibility in the community that makes it possible for them to carry out their task. By conforming to the idea that power is inherently dichotomous, the growers are unable to see those whom they oppress as potentially and effectively powerful. Cerezita uses this blindness to her advantage and acts completely without suspicion until she reveals herself. She refuses to accept that any position, no matter how seemingly helpless, is absent of power just as Foucault asserts that power cannot be located ultimately in any one position but accessed by all positions. Thus, in contrast to Amparo's attempt to draw attention to McLaughlin, Moraga asserts that agency can also come from being unseen thus complicating binary constructions of power that place agency of action in only one category or the other.

Similarly, the way that Moraga chooses to stage the growers reflects the power that can be exercised from a position of invisibility. The growers are not represented by actors but by helicopters and crop duster that are suggested by lighting and sound. They are represented by the threat that they suggest (the helicopters that surveil McLaughlin and the crop dusters that poison it) rather than their actual physical forms. By using these objects to enact threat, the growers take advantage of the power that invisibility can afford them. The fact that these objects shield the growers' identity makes it more difficult for protestors to implicate any one person as performing the actions that threaten their health. It also physically removes the growers from the problems that infest McLaughlin thereby giving them the choice to ignore or address the protestors' concerns rather than having to deal with them on a daily basis. Yolanda, Cerezita's sister, expresses their seemingly unending power when telling Cerezita that "they" shot through Amparo's windows:

CEREZITA: Who?

YOLANDA: Who knows? The guys in the helicopters... God (96).

By invoking the image of God in relation to the helicopters, Yolanda equates them with an omnipotent and omnipresent power against which there is little hope. She furthermore states her frustration with knowing that pesticides killed her daughter, Evalina, but that she is unable to identify the people that caused her death. She cries to Dolores that she must, "... find her killer. Put a face to him, a name, track him down and make him suffer the way we suffer. I want to kill him, 'amá. I want to kill some... goddamn body!" (132). Yolanda

expresses her need to have a body present that she can blame for her daughter's death. The helicopters and crop dusters, however, make this sort of accountability impossible for her to enact.

In the final scene of the play, Moraga disestablishes the camera and the cycle of visibility in which the characters negotiate power as the ultimate tools of agency and replaces it with something that is much harder to manipulate—direct action. Cerezita finally leaves the Valle home and appears as a vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Only in this form does Dolores allow and even encourage Cerezita to be seen. Pérez appears with the camera to cover Evalina's funeral, at which she was told there would be a crucifixion. The fact that Juan invites Pérez to the crucifixion signifies the extent to which McLaughlin continues to value the camera as a way to make their story heard in a broader context. Once Cerezita appears, however, Pérez does nothing but silently signals "Bob" to begin filming. As Cerezita and Juan exit to erect the cross, gunshots are heard. Led by Cerezita's brother Mario, El Pueblo<sup>2</sup> runs out and begins to burn the fields, yelling, "Asesinos!" (149). Pérez abandons her role as "objective" reporter and transcultural mediator and joins in the uprising. These actions directly break the cycle of visibility that dominates the play until that point. This fact is signified by the empty stage at the end of the play. All of the characters run off stage, leaving the audience to see the red glow of their flames, but their actions are invisible. El Pueblo no longer attempts to make its struggle known; it simply destroys the one thing that gives the growers power over them—the grapes that are valued more than their lives.

Moraga reveals intricacies in agency over (in)visibility that confront hegemonic conceptions of power and investigate the tools by which those concepts are negotiated and subverted. Using the camera to distribute image traverses enforced invisibility that complicates an attempt for social change. The camera also subjects the object of the image, however, to new power dynamics that complicate the object's agency in the use of that image. Furthermore, invisibility can produce power by overthrowing expectations of power and transcending a monitored existence. The production of the play also asserts agency and power by presenting an audience with a visual image of a political movement. It also allows the audience to react and formulate their own conclusions, thereby subverting a dichotomy of gaze and spectacle.

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<sup>2</sup> Moraga's collective term for the protestors of McLaughlin.

The last scene of the play removes the characters from a cycle of (in)visibility that constantly reproduces itself. Continuing to work within that cycle has limitations in that characters attempt to subvert it by participating in it. Moraga resolves this paradox in the last scene by reinforcing the importance of direct action in creating change. The play also reduces itself to direct action by ending with an absence of image. Rather than showing the burning of the fields, Moraga places the action off stage. In its production, however, it emphasizes the necessity of visionaries in bringing the characters, and the audience, to this point. It asserts that one must be aware of issues in order to act. Thus, while (in)visibility is constantly problematized and renegotiated, it remains a crucial part of the social change that Moraga, as a visionary, endeavors to inspire.

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