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**Linking Arms, Linking Tongues  
– How to Protest amidst Global Fragmentation?**

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[exergue:

“In meiner Sprache heißt Zunge: Sprache.  
Zunge hat keine Knochen, wohin man sie dreht, dreht sie sich dorthin.“  
EMINE SEVGI ÖZDAMAR – *Mutterzunge* (1990)<sup>1</sup>]

“**Linking Arms, linking tongues – How to Protest amidst Global Fragmentation?**” – such read the question I submitted to the Kohl Circle’s Conspiracy of Writers, earlier this year. It was a question also to myself, as I found myself without the breath so badly needed to articulate what was going on, what was going wrong around us. The dark cloud spread over Beirut was still sinking down to the ground slowly, and it had made our tongues heavy by now, in early spring 2021. Indeed, we were “cloaked in silence,” *in Schweigen gehüllt*, and in a way, the refusal to speak was comfortable, too. Wedged in between the polarities of that refusal – actually a quite active and almost defiant expression of exhaustion – and the simultaneous being-haunted with fragments of rise-ups, protests that shook the world, practices of resistance that had transgressed causes, countries, and languages, I entered this Writing Circle wondering *about our tongues*: in their motion, in their immobilizations, their movement. My question became: **How can we learn from our tongues for their/our practices of resistance?**

--- motion memory: that protest in Trablus, just about a year earlier, where I attempted to wrap my tongue around those words, along with hundreds of others, those words that had painted the hopes and desperations making up the idea of change forming a generation: الشعب يريد اسقاط النظام! – could I partake in this choreography? A hundred tongues in consonance, a hundred tongues linked at that moment – linked, too, with all those who have spoken and written those words before and elsewhere, and will do so again and again ---

The tongue is a nexus, an intersection where grammars of reaching out and withdrawing, of receiving, passing through and giving, opening and closure interlink: we speak, test, taste, sing, celebrate, kiss, love, lick, and articulate. More so than any other sensory organ, the tongue encapsulates multiplicity; as synesthetic site of touch, taste, and sound it lies at a dangerous place of the body: an opening, vulnerable and fleshly, a site of breath and ingestion, and at the same time of voice, cries, speech, and armament. Here, inside and outside flow together, as do social and inner worlds. Another reformulation of my guiding question thus might be: **How does the tongue relate to other bodies, how is the tongue relational?** In her reflections on touch, Hortense J. Spillers (2018) musters the difficult duplicity of the intimacy between, the proximity of bodies that are touching:

The question of touch, to be at hand without mediation or interference, might be considered the fundamental element of the absence of self-ownership. It defines at once the most terrifying personal and ontological feature of slavery’s regimes across the long ages; yet touch, for

<sup>1</sup> “In my language, tongue is called/calls/means: Sprache. Tongue has no bone, wherever you turn her is where she will turn.” (translation mine. The tongue carries the feminine grammatical gender in German)

twentieth-century critics, notably poet Audre Lorde, reverts to the realm of the erotic. [I want to] attempt an entry into this paradox as an exploration of a troubled legacy, and perhaps troubled to the extent that one of these valances of touch is not walled off from the other, but haunts it, shatters it, as its own twin possibility.

Violence and violation are imminent in the tactile encounter, yet it is precisely this imminence which functions as a backdrop to “curating, healing, erotic, restorative” (Spillers, 2018) qualities of touch – and vice versa. The tongue is subject to the same grammar, as Trĩnh Thĩ Minh Hà captures in *elsewhere, within here*:

The tongue that falsifies must then be trimmed, cut, edited. Selectively staged. Tactically turned over. Dis-played aloud, always interrupted in its breath. A site of love, a tear on silence. Voice evokes rape. Unapproachable, it arouses sexual desires. Does it lie? No, *identity and non-identity meet* in the question asked; they interact in the same sound space. (2011, p. 11; emphasis mine)

Trĩnh pointing at the simultaneity of identity and non-identity marks the site of the tongue as an additional kind of opening: of self to the other, of self to the other-within. The tongue is a relation, and in being that, it can be subjected to censorship all the way to mutilation. With the tongue as social tie, such an “elinguation signifies also a metaphorical removal of language from the self, a kind of exile of the victim of torture and censorship from his or her preferred community of speech” (Arrendondo, 2007, p. 61).<sup>2</sup>

In the following, I want to trace the tongue’s relations and enmeshments with(in) different grammars and power structures, starting out with the logocentric disregard for body and the tongue especially in the realm of Western philosophy. The bound, tamed, and often gendered tongues evoke violent histories that I can merely allude to in this text, reminded that naming them is impossible and yet necessary, as they also make up the bodily and sensory archive which breaks through this logocentrism. In the second part, I want to return to the Circle’s Conspiracy of Writers, imagining it as an anti-logocentric enactment, and indeed dance of tongues. I want to reflect on how that action relates to practices of resistance, which can both look like participation/organization as well as refusal/opacity in Glissant’s sense of the word.

## I. The Tongue that does not Speak, the Tongue that does not Touch

In a now infamous interview with Raoul Mortley, the Zionist philosopher Emmanuel Levinas evoked “Jerusalem and Athens,” metonyms denoting religion and philosophy respectively, as fundamental markers of humanity: “I often say, although it is a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. *All the rest can be translated*: all the rest—all the exotic—is dance” (as cited in Zalloua, 2017, p. 144; emphasis mine). At first sight, it might seem curious that Levinas, as the philosopher of radical, even pre-ontological implication of the Self with the Other, would state an equally radical possibility of any cultural or social expression to be translatable, their difference to be collapsible into the sameness of Bible and the Greeks, which he elsewhere calls “the only serious issues in human life.” He adds right after that: “There is no racism intended” (*ibid.*, p. 136) – as if to say that it is not a

<sup>2</sup> I want to add a CW to this reference, as it contains a graphic – although fictional – POV description of torture.

question of the value, importance, or right to existence of this “dance,” apart from its reducibility to the more originary, more foundational realm of Jerusalem and Athens. In their tone of a seemingly private frankness, Levinas’ remarks strangely enough seem like an apt summary of the Western philosophical canon as it is widely taught and disseminated today, reifying a Eurocentric origin story of thought that is accompanied by a roundelay of other, “exotic” – that is, foreign, external – cultural expressions, floating unbound in space and time.<sup>3</sup> His choice of “dance” in particular as the conceptual opposition to the “serious” Graeco-philosophical and the Judeo-Christian-theological endeavors, is striking, as it encapsulates philosophy’s denial of the body, both as site of knowledges and their enactment, as well as archive thereof. Dance, here, is precisely not *dancing*, that is to say, an immobilized blanket term obscuring any trace of actual movements, of physical encounter, rhythm, synchronization, or wild ecstasy. Conversely, it is speech, language, words which constitute the philosophers’ toolbox. If we relate Emanuel Levinas’ relegation of embodied thinking to the outside of “serious” thought back to the tongue, a similar inside-outside logic becomes apparent: while language is often evoked as foundational marker of humanity, the tongue herself does not belong to this universal realm. The labor/elaboration of words in the mouth has no room in a logocentric topography of meaning. Emblematically, in many European languages, the tongue’s continuous metaphorization (mother tongues, split tongues, sharp tongues...) has relegated her to a particular, feminine, inferior order of orality, diametrically opposed to the masculine, writing, directing, civilizational order of the hand. The tongue is flesh to be kept in control – putting a bridle on it is not merely proverbial but has material histories of torture, punishment, and censorship as its backdrop.

Physical violence against the tongue – specifically, women’s tongues – is comparatively well-known and popularized topic, not least because of the symbolic signification of the mutilated tongue as taking away a woman’s voice, shutting her up as she has overstepped societal boundaries: With a mutilated or immobilized and thereby “tamed” tongue, she can no longer articulate language, and is thereby effectively excluded from the logocentric, masculine space of social existence-as-action/visibility/articulation. At the same time, it was especially the infamous “Scold’s Bridle” – a 17<sup>th</sup> century torture device that has been reported at first in England and Scotland, comprised of a metal headgear equipped with an iron gag intended to press down on the tongue and lacerate it with spikes or raspy surfaces, sometimes while the victim is pulled through the streets by a rope – that was designed for public humiliation. The Scold’s Bridle was specifically intended for women who were unable to contain what Lynda E. Boose (1991) describes as the “woman’s unruly member” – chatty, accusatory, loud, misfitting women. As Lindsey Lanzisero writes, “the excesses of the tongue were often tied to excess in bodily fluid and functions. [...] Speech became another incontinence comparable to the excesses of menstruation, urination, and sexual desire” (2006, p. 8). The shame and injury in this specific form of torturous punishment reduces the transgressive female spoken word to a bodily function, and a defective one at that. The suppression of the tongue’s dance into silence and immobility here becomes symptomatic of the same logocentric order, in which words can be divided into proper speech acts and improper utterances so bodily and uncontainable that they basically do not constitute language at all.

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<sup>3</sup> Levinas’ own philosophy of the face of the other, then, similarly falls short by denying the Palestinian other her faciality, as Zahi Zalloua has shown in the first chapter of *Continental Philosophy and the Palestinian Question*.

The Scold's Bridle's public nature led to a couple of sometimes rather sensationalist eyewitness accounts and illustrations that turned the bridle into a relatively well-known sight and item (despite the technical illegality of the instrument, which also implies its inexistence in official documents of the time). At the same time, its history is inseparable from the device's export to the Americas – Toni Morrison hints at the usage of the torture device in *Beloved*. The “taming” of the enslaved's tongue was an excessively often used method of punishment irrespective of gender,<sup>4</sup> one of what Spillers calls “the high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding” (1987, p. 67). Conversely, it is in this context of enslavement as function of shutting up and shutting out the humanity of the enslaved, with the tongue as *flesh*, that the paradoxical position of the tongue becomes more apparent. As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020, p. 189) writes:

In the context of the West, mouths and tongues perform a kind of double- speak in the field of signification. On the one hand, they provide speech, understood to deliver indisputable evidence of Man's justifiable authority— language, an achievement thought to offer testimony to a “natural” hierarchy among species and races (or races as species), whereby “proper” speech purports to guarantee mastery and justifiable authority over “nature.” On the other hand, mouths are also irresolute figures of porosity, vulnerability, pleasure, and contamination that evoke racialized, gendered specters with respect to sexuality— “the feminine position,” the locus of the erotic and devouring womb— as Sigmund Freud infamously put it, “the dark continent of female sexuality.

Staying with Freud for a minute, I want to evoke a different repression of the feminine tongue *despite* language, *despite* articulation. In the early “science” regarding “hysteria,” (just like many later gynecologist research projects) being subjected to scientific experiments was a plight for marginalized women; one such example being many sex workers in the city of Paris, who were showcased and “diagnosed” in rooms of doctors, such as the famous *Hôpital de la Salpêtrière*, where Freud studied from 1885 as a student of the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, who also founded and presided over the first neurology department in Europe. As Judith Herman recounts in *Trauma and Recovery*, the subjects for the neurology department's experiments, the “beggars, prostitutes and the insane” (1997, p. 10) of Paris, where the live demonstration tool in many of his lectures, such as we can read in this

verbatim account of one of his Tuesday Lectures [w]here a young woman in hypnotic trance was being used to demonstrate a convulsive hysterical attack:

CHARCOT: Let us press again on the hysterogenic point. (A male intern touches the patient in the ovarian region.) Here we go again. Occasionally subjects even bite their tongues, but this would be rare. Look at the arched back, which is so well described in textbooks.

PATIENT: Mother, I am frightened.

CHARCOT: Note the emotional outburst. If we let things go unabated we will soon return to the epileptoid behavior... (The patient cries again: “Oh! Mother.”)

CHARCOT: Again, note these screams. You could say it is a lot of noise over nothing. (p. 11)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as Hayes and Handler (2009) show, the figure of the enslaved martyr woman can be traced back to images of a male slave wearing the metal facemask that Escrava Anastácia is associated with.

<sup>5</sup> I want to thank Ruben Hordijk for bringing my attention to this reference, which encapsulates so well what may count as speech or as “mere sound” or “cry” in a given situation.

The young woman's articulation, here, merely counts as "outburst," as "noise" and functions as such when used as diagnostic indicator – the tongue, here, does not even need to be tied in order to be censored, and the voice amounts an animalic noise which requires external interpretation, diagnostic – indeed translation – in order to make sense to the doctors and their students. Simultaneously, a well-known inversion takes place here; for the marginalized sex workers' cries also make possible the diagnostic ear of the listener for another kind of patient. By listening (sometimes more sometimes less patronizingly, to be sure) to women of Europe's upper and bourgeois class, Freud was actually confronted with a structural plight of women; namely widespread sexual abuse and incest pervasive in the families of most of his patients.<sup>6</sup> Freud successively was unable to properly recognize the real occurrence of such a degree of deeply engrained patterns of sexual violence, granting also his wealthy female patients only a limited degree of recognition. Looking intersectionally at these histories of violence allows us to see how logocentric denotations of thought undergirding Western conceptualizations of the self, the political, the public, etc. always require the juxtaposition of "what counts as thought" and what is "just dance" – the sex worker's animalic cry versus the doctor's analytic speech, and successively also the bourgeois woman's reflections on the couch, which in their own way encounter the limit of recognition – all these grammars are at work on a plane of the phone/logos distinction, that is, Aristotle's attempt in distinguishing human language from mere utterances:

The building block is the Letter, "an indivisible sound (...) one of which an intelligible sound can be formed. Animals utter indivisible sounds but none that I should call a letter" (Poetics, 1456b22)." [In his discussion of the passage, Derrida however] notes that there is nothing that distinguishes the indivisible sound of an animal and of man besides the retrospective teleology of man's capacity for speech and thought. (as cited in Hordijk, 2017)<sup>7</sup>

The relegation of the tongue to an exoticized, feminized, animalized realm of noise takes place in exactly the same retrospective manner – one is declared intranslatable.

Steeped in this kind of logocentrism, much of contemporary political theory, especially liberal currents which are only starting to grapple with their Euromodern, antiblack, racist, misogynistic and classist foundations and premises, spends a great deal in theorizing the possibilities and limitations of different vitalities of social and political life: speech act, political participation, questions of visibility and in many respects even the critical inquiries into the *struggle for recognition* – these are all features of a vitalist and reformative outlook onto political life; a zone of activity, exposure, logocentric virility, which slowly but steadily has expanded its circle of inclusion. This trickle-down mechanism of purportedly ever-expanding freedom is diametrically opposed to de/anti-colonial and feminist registers of doing and thinking politics, which depart from the exclusion from this zone – an exclusion with the primary function of enabling and conditioning the freedom of the included. It is from this position that a refusal of inclusion into or

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<sup>6</sup> As Judith Herman points out, Freud's initial hypothesis after encountering so many stories of sexual violence, namely that his patients had actually suffered real sexual trauma, was so scandalous and scientifically unacceptable to his colleagues that he himself changed course and relegated the origin of his patients' suffering to imagined traumata.

<sup>7</sup> A summary of the thesis can be found here: Ruben Hordijk, "When Animals Speak: Kant, Enlightenment Philosophy and the Silence of Animals." *Trace: Journal for Human-Animal Studies*, Vol. 5 (2019).

recognition by these logocentric hierarchies emerges, as they always require an exploitable underside. In having raised these instances of intersectional gendered violence in their irreducible differences, the tongue reminds us to recast the feminist project of “coming to voice” not as “Woman’s united” one, but precisely by interpreting the coming to voice in this sensory way of a *dance of tongues*, by claiming it as a choreography, a sensory archive, and a practice of resistance.

## II. From Bodily Archive to Transgressive Translations

The tongue is an archive. The tongue is memory, movement memory, masterful coordination. An infinite strength, it seems, to effect movements as meticulous as a brush stroke, so accurately timed, so precise yet so playful. Yes, the tongue is dancing, shapeshifting continuously between softness and tension, pressure and release. When we learn vocalized language, it is the tongue, in her interplay with lips, teeth, pharynx, and airflow, that slowly acquires an entire archive of acrobatics (some languages actually take longer to pronounce properly by native speaker children). It is her incessantly specific motion memory that affords even the slightest dialectal nuances, forming choreographies that tell more stories than the mere words uttered. The tongue overflows language, becomes a profoundly relational bodily archive of inheritance and passing through:

The world’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. (Thị Minh Hà, 1989, p. 121)

In the beginning I raised questions about our relations to the tongue, and about what makes the tongue a Relation. Taking the “dance of the tongues” “seriously” (in the same way Levinas did *not*), then, also raises the question of translation as relation. In recent years, with decolonial and minoritarian discourses gaining a foothold in academia (which itself continues to raise the question of cooptation – or at least mistranslation – of their theories and praxes), I have encountered time and again, in conference or paper titles, as well as manuscripts, the formula(tion): “What can *we learn from* [insert Indigenous group name/ or misnomer/ or sometimes, simply, ‘Indigenous people/ epistemologies/...’] about [x]?” In these kind of endeavors, the purportedly humbling, receptive and grateful position of the listener is merely a masquerade: “Learning from” is but the old anthropological formula of “speaking about,” if it just means that the academic author orates it all the same to his or her audience of academic authors – without questioning how academia incessantly reproduces the logocentric exclusion of marginalized “research subjects.” In considering the bodily archive, the lingual archive, learning to “speak nearby,” as Trinh would call it, becomes the challenge of relationality to purported academic neutrality. Often enough, this learning can also be an enactment of the things we already do every day: being ready to chime in, to taste each other’s words and song, to respond and stay responsive. Yoko Tawada writes of the impending contamination of such lingual intimacies in this narration of a dream sequence:

I was a tongue. I left the house like that, naked, pink, and unbearably moist. It was easy to charm the people in the street, yet no one wanted to touch me. Behind the shop windows were plastic

women without genitals. The prices on the tags were crossed out with red ink. Cautious citizens only touch tongues wrapped in plastic. (2002, p. 9-10)

Here, it is the caution, sterility, genderless plasticity preventing contamination, preventing the dangerous encounter with the tongue. The tongue contains, the tongue contaminates: the wetness of a tongue kiss, its sticky licking – tongue meeting tongue, tongue meeting skin, something is passed through. As site of queer love, the tongue roams an erotic space of sensations (not merely “explores”!) and motions.

*--- a motion memory: the tingling-icky high school game of passing an ice cube from mouth to mouth, tongue to tongue, until it melted – the painful feeling of contaminating someone else; it’s my own unacknowledged enjoyment that spoils the fun, contaminates the kiss, creates obscenity – and obscenity, as I now know, between me and myself, not capable to affirm the queerness of pleasure, and with that, myself ---*

I want to evoke this danger/openness again to reconsider my motion memory from Trablos in early 2020. The collective choreography of chiming in to re-enact a phrase and its history is a [allgegenwärtig] practice of resistance, which, for its participants, also plays into their respective desire “to shout in unison,” to have that control of the tongue together with the others, a collective control we can equally associate with the mutual trust and reliance between a group of dancers. Yet, the question of *who* is to assume this unison remains open to me: my positionality in that moment was so radically different from most other people in the square that night, because of the kind of passport in my pocket. Marked by a personal desire of solidarity and participation – while the tongue represents both the techniques of joined resistance as well as my partial outsidersness – the attempt to link arms, link tongues, then, is but a beginning, the initial touch, which will be repeated, renamed, translated and reinterpreted, and is never without danger, without violence.

As the Circle’s Conspiracy of Writers, we attempt to link arms, and to link tongues. Tongues that are growing in different soils, tongues that had been uprooted, and tongues that had been planted elsewhere – we all had learned what it means to tend the tongue, to grow it into new shapes, to make it dance again. We chuckled more than once about the fact that our exchange took place in English, hardly anyone’s first language in our digital room, but rather a language that had tied knots into tongues, one that forced its choreography upon us. What is called an accent is the refusal of those knots; in my German, which perhaps is too forceful, we therefore call it *Zungenschlag* – a beat of the tongue, breaking free from an all-too rigid expectation of how to dance *correctly*. A polyglot English, an English of *many tongues*. Having a working language together, which is a hegemonic and supremacist one, is both a sign of the dangers of effacing of the tongue’s archival multiplicitous memory as well as its condition of possibility to re-world, re-make connections to each other. Similarly reflecting on the hegemonic requirement to speak Standard American English, Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown’s “phenomenology of the racialized tongue” emphasizes that there is “something *bodily laborious* about being “articulate” and “intelligible” in verbal exchanges with others” (2016, p. 104). At the Circle, we are trying to switch this around, made English



the subject to our ways of speaking and reading, much like in the exergue by Turkish-born Emine Sevgi Özdamar that is opening this essay. Translating as a creation of new realms of expression becomes the crucial task amidst the reality of being asked all too often to do the translation work *for* others. As one of our conspirators (and wonderfully, I don't know who! The reference remains afloat...) writes (2021):

When we find ourselves in spaces where we are always seen in relation to the hegemonic ear that does not listen, when we find ourselves in a situation where we are being addressed in ways we don't agree to/being positioned as the other/having to bear the burden of doing "translation" work (translating worlds, meanings, concepts, always in relation to a "centre" in question), we should embody a multiplicity of refusals: epistemic, political, embodied refusal. We must embrace discomfort and let this affect circulate.

Translating or *not* translating, both practices can empower, can help resist – let us remember the practices of leaving things untranslated – leaving labor for the reader to do – in the works of María Lugones or Gloria Anzaldúa...

*--- a motionless memory: A group of children in a circle, running around me, lolloping in an enclosing circle, sharp tongues lashing out, sticking out their tongues, exposing their tongues. As a child, I imagined the tongue to most protected part of the body, safely encaged in a casket of teeth, a structure of bone, embedded and cushioned – here I could withdraw ---*

The tongue can cut sharply – by denying the Relation that enables the tongue to speak. It can attack, too, breach boundaries, by chiming in, by being chatty. Contamination by the tongue is a risk, too. Next to trying to reach out, maintaining our own boundaries becomes equally crucial, which is why withdrawal and refusal remain courses of action as vital as taking the word.

We are holding multilogues of simultaneously speaking through the microphone while the chat is exploding with ideas and inspirations. In this way, the Circle became a meeting point for translating from entirely different spaces, time zones, and indeed tongues. The technology we use, the digital space we inhabit – primarily googledocs and yopads, where we write, comment, *translate* live, reading each other, reading out loud our communication which becomes a live "enacting" – again, just like the English language, works according to its own hegemonic grammars. We need to remind ourselves that the technological devices we use impose certain delimitations – of data protection, anonymity, etc. Yet it is precisely those spaces, in which formats have to be broken and transgressed, where communication is queered: a multilevel, simultaneous, chaotic collaboration, where ideas are being born, translated, stay afloat, sometimes unfinished or forgotten, sometimes reiterated and re-edited over and over. A virtual writing circle poses the question whether resistance can be translated to the digital realm, and what, in turn, this translation does to our bodies, voices, tongues, that are simultaneously implicated in different physical sites of resistance. Our ongoing, chaotic multilogue, then, might indeed stay at a level of afloatness/طفو, yet that might precisely be what is necessary for a transnational, translating, and transgressive force of collaboration.

In this, our time of fragmented protest, our perception of “planetary urgency” was already anticipated before the pandemic in the transnational upheaval of late 2019. By exploring both manifoldness of the tongue, as well as its restriction and debilitation, we need to unfold a decolonial feminist perspective of orality that addresses not the control but the uncontrollability of the tongue, the affirmation that “the tongue, speech, and language are not our own” (Sharp, 2011, p. 44). Recognizing this uncontrollability means recognizing multiplicitous uncontrollable memories and futural worlding effects, both sources of power to resist, sources that lie within and without:

Only then can speech, face to face and body to body, generate the affective conditions of a *qualified and precarious collective self-possession*. What this implies is thinking outside a politics of rights and representation and moving toward an experimental art of composition and synergy. (*ibid.*)

Fuelled by a desire of a joined dancing of the tongues, a desire without fulfillment but in its movement and dance and translation, new worlds are in the making. Let us chat, chime, cuss, cheer, cry together, our tongues entwined but irreducible.

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