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Introduction

We live in an age of service work. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), only 20 percent of the US population performs “goods-producing” labor (manufacturing, extraction, and agriculture), while the other 80 percent do “services-providing” labor, from truck driving to financial management, teaching to janitorial work. What, if anything, do those jobs have in common? After all, the BLS’s “services-providing supersector” includes jobs with the highest salaries, as well as those with the lowest wages; it contains enduringly professionalized occupations (lawyers, doctors), but also historically precarious jobs (home health-care workers, hotel cleaners). Nonetheless, a glance at the twenty most common jobs in the United States—all but one of them in the services-providing sector—does let us begin to generalize about service work. The list includes retail sales workers, fast-food employees, cashiers, cooks, clerks, and restaurant servers, as well as registered nurses, health aides, and elementary school teachers. Most of these jobs involve in-person work that cannot yet be automated. Nor can most of these jobs be outsourced, though they are disproportionately likely to be performed by immigrant, nonwhite, and female-identified workers. They are highly likely to involve some degree of “temporal instability”: constantly changing shifts and schedules, unpredictable working hours, and involuntary part-time work. And they are mostly low-waged jobs: 75 percent of those earning the minimum wage or less are in the service sector, and workers in nonprofessionalized service-sector

occupations are more likely to live below the official poverty line than any group other than farmworkers.

This book offers a new history and theory of contemporary service work. Today's service workers regularly toil for nonhourly methods of wage payment. They are subject to indirect yet insidious forms of domination, from the "self-management" of performance-based wages to the impersonal surveillance of platforms and apps. They are more likely to work in temporary jobs or as gigworkers. Their work is less likely to be protected by maximum-hour and minimum-wage laws. And they are a test case for the ways that even jobs resistant to full automation can still be transformed by technologies of speedup and intensification. In all these ways, service work requires us to rethink our basic understanding of wages, management, labor-saving technology, and regulation. This book does just that, focusing less on service work's "affective" or "performative" dimensions and more on how it is paid, how it is controlled, and how it is mechanized. I do so by identifying what I contend are three paradigmatic types of contemporary service labor: superexploited tipwork, deskilled clerical microwork, and informalized gigwork.

While theories of service work have tended to neglect its labor process, histories of labor have tended to ignore service work entirely. This book argues that service work is not a footnote in the story of modern capitalism, but an indispensable shadow history of labor exploitation. Long considered an anomaly or anachronism and understood less as a class formation than as a feeling, low-waged service work is in fact key to understanding the nature of work and life under capitalism. Instead of treating low-wage service work as marginal or exceptional, *Beneath the Wage* argues that service work is an enduring and structuring form in the history of wage labor. It maintains that service work is best understood as a gendered and racialized method of labor exploitation. It suggests that service work's long-standing exclusion from regulation requires us to imagine different strategies for political mobilization. And it contends that representations of service

work—from pop culture to radical labor imaginaries—help reveal the connections between everyday life and the broader social relations that produce our shared subsistence.

Each chapter of *Beneath the Wage* analyzes the history, culture, and politics of one of these exemplary forms of contemporary service work. Chapter 1, on tipwork, studies the history of tipping since the eighteenth century, looks at the rise of TV shows about low-waged tipwork (from reality TV to the episodic narratives of absurdist comedy), and recounts the use of mutual aid among tipworkers to produce an abolitionist vision of solidarity. Chapter 2, on microwork, excavates the history of piece-rate wages, explores conceptual poetry produced by workers on platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, and describes how subcontracted, outsourced microworkers, while denied the centralized “shop floor” of factory labor, use “work-to-rule” sabotage against the employers who exploit them. In Chapter 3, on gigwork, I reconstruct the contradictory fantasies and anxieties around freedom and control that have long been associated with the spatial mobility of “circulation gigwork,” examine how those fantasies and anxieties have shaped contemporary novels written about and by gigworkers, and offer an account of how and why service-worker unions are dispensing with the productivist language of “fair wages” and beginning to center so-called noneconomic demands concerning housing, policing, borders, and the climate crisis. In the book’s conclusion, I subject my own kind of service work—university teaching—to scrutiny, exploring the sharp turn toward online higher education in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I imagine the kinds of political mobilization that might combat deskilling and automation in the portion of the service sector I know best.

My title, *Beneath the Wage*, evokes the contradictions that attend service work as waged labor. Michael Denning has influentially argued that the “fetishism of the wage” also depends on the production and normalization of “wageless life.”¹ *Beneath the Wage* expands this claim to understand service work as a form of waged life that is nonetheless

denied the minimal protections and legitimation extended to waged industrial work. Service work is an activity, not a product: its “output” can be alienated neither from the body of the service worker herself nor from the body of the person she serves. Like goods-producing manufacturing labor, however, service work has been commodified, socialized, and subjected to the impersonal domination of the wage. But unlike manufacturing work, it has also been largely excluded from the paradigm of “free labor.” Service workers, I suggest, are thus “beneath” the wage in the sense that like other wage workers, they are compelled to earn a living, but they are also “beneath” the wage in the sense that they are excluded from wage labor’s promises of freedom, autonomy, and equality.²

Service work’s seemingly anomalous or anachronistic status has also been used to exclude it from labor standards, reforms, and regulation. In the period of rapid industrial growth and innovation that began in the early twentieth century, US law and regulation provided most manufacturing workers with minimum hourly wages, maximum working time regulations, collective bargaining agreements, and a range of protections attached to the new category “employee.” At the same time, however, the United States was *also* innovating a service sector defined by precarious tip wages, long working days governed by task efficiency, and the uncertainty attached to the equally new category “independent contractor.” This book thus focuses primarily on the US context because it is here that we can see most clearly how and why service work, specifically in its status as labor that does not involve “the production of goods for commerce,” was excluded from regulations designed for a period of rapid industrial growth.³ Put otherwise, I want to offer a counterhistory of wage labor in what Giovanni Arrighi famously termed the “long twentieth-century” of US industrial hegemony: instead of focusing on the manufacturing workers whose labor was highly rationalized, mechanized, and regulated, I attend to the role of newspaper boys whose precarious working conditions gave rise to the legal concept of the “independent contractor”; to Black “domestics”

washing windows as day laborers; to piece-rate female “outworkers” stuffing envelopes in their own homes.

But I am also interested in what happened *after* that period of industrial growth, as the service sector was increasingly compelled to power capital accumulation on its own in the wake of deindustrialization. A low-productivity service sector cannot produce adequate economic growth under capitalism, which is why we are now many decades in to a “long downturn,” or accumulation crisis.⁴ *Beneath the Wage* is about what work looks and feels like in the present age of productivity stagnation. It contends that slowing productivity growth manifests in the worker’s labor process as a nearly unbearable temporal speedup, that technological stagnation is lived as intensified domination, and that an inertial economy is experienced as wages so low that the worker’s everyday existence becomes perilous. In this context, the idea of being “beneath the wage” suggests not just that service work is typically lower waged, less secure, and more subordinated than many other types of work, but also that attention to service work reveals the domination, precarity, and exhaustion concealed beneath *all* waged work under capital.

Beneath the Wage also explores how low-waged service work has occasioned vital and distinctive strategies for political solidarity beyond either legislative reform or traditional “fair wage” demands. Service work yokes our everyday lives to the broader communal relations that ensure our common survival. This is truer today than ever before. Precisely insofar as service work has been increasingly socialized under capitalism, and precisely inasmuch as the service sector has been forced to expand as a result of deindustrialization, contemporary service work structures forms of collective survival and subsistence across and within the proletarian class as a whole, creating new forms of non-biological connection between households and the larger social order, between intimates and strangers, between the act of providing service work and the fact of depending on the service work of others.

Bringing together the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of service work, *Beneath the Wage* is inspired by the method of Marx’s

chapter “The Working Day” from *Capital, Volume One*. There, Marx attempted to capture “the voice of the worker, which had previously been stifled in the sound and fury of the production process.”⁵ To do that, he listened for the “voices”—real and imagined—of workers, capitalists, and even machines in a variety of sources: in the “Blue Books” produced by the English and Scottish factory regulators; in the margins of public health documents and news reports; in the defensive statements of factory owners themselves; and in the works of William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and Charlotte and Emily Brontë.⁶ From this array of texts, Marx fashioned a robust theory of life both in and beyond the factory, explaining how everything from the invention of shift systems to the price and quality of bread was connected in a world organized around the industrial wage.

Beneath the Wage strives to create an analogous portrait of our world of service work by drawing on a similarly diverse range of sources. I tell the story of how contemporary service work has been structurally and phenomenologically transformed by methods of wage payment and measures of output, by the pressure of technological speedup and surveillance, and by the insecurity of schedules and contracts and compensation. I do so by way of an archive that is at once fictional and documentary, historical and technical, theoretical and political. I look at how politicians described the problem of regulating restaurant work in the early twentieth century and how contemporary gigworkers have responded to legislation around their “independent contractor” status. I read economists and scientific managers talking about efficiency and incentives and subcontracted workers describing what it’s like to work under the lash of piece-rate wages. I attend to traditional “aesthetic” forms (prestige television dramas, conceptual poetry, literary autofiction), to “pop” forms such as reality TV, comedy, and advertisements, and to workers’ writing about their own labor.

Part of what I hope to get by treating such a wide variety of texts is a fuller understanding of how service work operates at the level of both individuals and systems—and, further, of the ways that service

work uniquely mediates between these two levels. Recognizing the link between individual particularity and classed generality—between the concrete and the abstract, experience and totality, theory from above and praxis from below—is, this book argues, vital both to comprehending service work and to organizing around it. I’ve sought to assemble an unruly set of sources that can help us do that. Describing service work from a variety of perspectives, these sources create a bridge between everyday life and the social totality.

Most Marxist theories of aesthetics have tended to focus on our need for “cognitive maps” capable of illuminating the “hidden abode of production” and of rendering the vast scales of globalized commodity production. But coming to grips with our age of service work requires us to register intimacy and totality at once. How do we map the forms of capitalist exploitation that happen when we are handed a bag of groceries or a cup of coffee, when we have our blood pressure taken or our homework graded, when we ask for our office trashcan to be removed or our data set to be coded? What does it mean that many service workers also pay others to serve them, as when the bartender takes an Uber home from work or the Uber driver stops off for a drink? To understand these relations, we need texts capable of describing not only awesome distances, but also temporary solidarities; not only the vast scales of the centralized factory, but also the minor knowledges of how things move hand to hand; not only the veiled secret of the “hidden abode,” but the ever-present fact of the everyday forms of labor that are directly before us.

EXISTING THEORIES OF SERVICE WORK

No book has more influenced our contemporary understanding of service work than Arlie Hochschild’s 1983 *The Managed Heart: On the Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Hochschild’s study of female Delta flight attendants identifies a new form of in-person service she terms “emotional labor.” *The Managed Heart* opens with a passage from Marx’s *Capital* on child labor in a nineteenth-century wallpaper

factory. Marx, Hochschild writes, was concerned not just with what the factory worker was paid and how many hours he had to work, but also with “the human cost of becoming an ‘instrument of labor.’” Both the factory worker who produces tangible goods and the service worker whose product is a “state of mind,” she argues, are alienated from some fundamental aspect of the self: the factory worker from his own body, the emotional laborer from her very “soul.” Although she starts out by emphasizing this continuity in the alienation of labor, however, Hochschild is ultimately more interested in the *differences* between manufacturing labor and service work. For the flight attendant, she argues in a key paragraph, “*the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself*, in a way that loving or hating the wallpaper is not a part of producing [it]. Seeming to ‘love the job’ becomes part of the job; and actually trying to love it, and to enjoy the customers, helps the worker in this effort.” Whereas the wallpaper manufacturer was not required to like his job—was not, indeed, required to have or express any particular feelings at all—the service worker must not just “*seem* to ‘love the job’” but “actually try to love it.” Flight attendants must “develop feelings for the parts [they] play” and “participate in the illusion” to be believable. For Hochschild, service workers thus engage in a kind of “double pretending” through which they come to experience the “state of mind” they perform and produce as if it is their own, real emotion. This “social engineering,” she contends, requires a mutually reinforcing circuit between the authentic private self and the performed or “engineered” public self. Focused on the “timeless” question of “what an emotion is and how we can manage it,” *The Managed Heart* is not a theory of labor exploitation, but rather an account of “the costs and benefits of managing emotion.”⁷

Despite Hochschild’s surprisingly minimal engagement with questions of labor process and class in *The Managed Heart*, a generation of sociologists has used the book to describe service work as labor that conscripts “the spirit and the soul of the worker.”⁸ With the “transition from an industrial to a service economy,” one theorist notes,

the “subjectivity of the worker becomes central to the production process”; interactive service work, another contends, is less about the body than it is about workers’ “looks, words, feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and demeanor.”⁹ For these scholars, as for Hochschild, control over the “hearts and spirits” of workers requires service employers to gain the “consent” of workers and to ensure they “internalize” the discipline of service work.¹⁰ Because service workers’ performed feelings often become “real feelings” when ritually repeated, it is claimed, service workers lose their “authenticity and singularity,” as their “sense of self” becomes entangled in the success of their employer.¹¹ Often, as in Hochschild’s account, arguments about the entangled self are used to distinguish the clear-eyed production worker from the more self-deluded service worker. Whereas “the assembly line worker could openly hate his job,” the service worker’s forced performances produce feelings of “inauthenticity” and “estrangement” to the point where workers may no longer be able to “distinguish their ‘real’ selves from their ‘on-stage’ selves.”¹²

Although Hochschild was focused more on estrangement than exploitation, her ideas about the false consciousness and affective confusion of service workers also show up in autonomist and post-Marxist theories of contemporary service work.¹³ In his book *Dead Man Working*, for example, Carl Cederstrom cites Hochschild to argue that “the injunction to be authentic” means service workers “can no longer draw the line between what is fake and genuine.” Mark Fisher similarly claims that under the regime of service work, “it is no longer possible to just turn up at work and be miserable” and that service workers must instead perform “a happy smile [and] ritualized submission.”¹⁴ Maurizio Lazzarato contends that the requirement to perform affect “also directly acts on the subjectivity of employees,” who come to believe “the promises made to them.”¹⁵ Contemporary service work, argues Frédéric Lordon, demands that emotions be not just “outwardly enacted, but ‘authentically’ felt” and thus defines a “post-Fordist regime” in which work is governed by “new affective sensibilities.”¹⁶

As Lordon's reference to a "post-Fordist regime" implies, many of these post-Marxist critics also argue that the "affective" qualities of service work make it an entirely new form of accumulation via affective exploitation—a new "postmodern social factory" in which feelings themselves become "a source of value," in Cederstrom's language. Eva Illouz similarly identifies service work as a new phase of "emotional capitalism."¹⁷ For Lazzarato, the rise of "immaterial labor" whose "raw material . . . is subjectivity" renders prior Marxist theories of value and exploitation obsolete. Michael Hardt, likewise, argues that "affective labor" is now "the highest value-producing form of labor," and Antonio Negri describes "an economy of desire" in which "affective flows" become "productive nexuses."¹⁸ In their immensely influential coauthored book, *Empire*, Hardt and Negri together contend that work involving "the creation and manipulation of affect," as well as other forms of care, communication, and creativity, are "driv[ing] the postmodernization of the global economy."¹⁹

These accounts of the postindustrial service economy as an entirely new form of value accumulation draw on a longer Marxist-feminist tradition committed to rethinking the division between value-productive and reproductive labor. The first wave of influential Marxist-feminist accounts of reproductive labor focused primarily on unwaged housework (although, as I will discuss in the next section, Black Marxist-feminists such as Angela Davis were at the same moment producing vital theories of waged domestic work). Housework, Silvia Federici's 1974 manifesto *Wages Against Housework* fiercely contends, is the site of "the most subtle and mystified violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated." Like Hochschild's *The Managed Heart*, *Wages Against Housework* attends to the "affective" dimension of domestic care work, but in a more explicitly political key, arguing that housework is made to *appear* as a "labor of love" so that women can be denied a legitimating wage.²⁰ Leopoldina Fortunati's *The Arcane of Reproduction*, published in Italian in 1981 and translated into English in 1995, offers a more structural account of unwaged housework, arguing that the female

labor market of housework and sex work is posited as “non-value,” but is actually necessary to the production of surplus value because it produces the use value of labor power itself.²¹ Fortunati refutes political or normative distinctions between productive labor and reproductive labor and illuminates the role of gender in constituting and naturalizing those distinctions. Yet while Fortunati treats reproductive labor as a vital *part* of the productive process, she does not suggest that it is *independently* productive.²² The male worker’s body is the “dead labor” the housewife manufactures in the “arcane of reproduction,” making her the concealed source of some of the value he in turn produces in the “abode of production.”²³ Noting the zero-sum contribution of reproductive labor to production, then, we can distinguish between Fortunati’s account and the claims of thinkers such as Lazzarato, Illouz, and Hardt and Negri, who argue that affective work has become “self-valorizing,” capable of producing an entirely new kind of capitalistic value outside the sphere of productive labor.

This distinction between productive and reproductive labor might seem somewhat scholastic, were it not for its connection to the question of value production in a period of deindustrialization. Put simply, what happens when almost everyone is working in the arcane of reproduction, but almost no one is laboring in the abode of production? Important recent books by Nancy Fraser, Jason Smith, and Gabriel Winant have noted that far from catalyzing a new era of dynamic and self-sustaining affective value production, the rise of service work suggests an ever-intensifying crisis in capital accumulation. For Fraser, that crisis is a “crisis of care”: the simultaneous decline of the Fordist “family wage” and decimation of governmental social welfare provisioning in the 1970s required formerly unwaged “housewives” to enter waged work (often low-waged service work) and thus also to rely on the even lower-waged (and often racialized and feminized) care work of others, producing an intractable contradiction between capitalism’s reliance on reproductive labor and its increasing inability to support or sustain it.²⁴ For Smith and Winant, in turn, the rising service

sector is at once cause and effect of a global “long downturn”—the stagnation not only of technological innovation (productivity gains), but also of accumulation as such (rates of growth). When manufacturing employment started its precipitous decline beginning the early 1970s, they note, the service sector initially absorbed a lot of that cast-off labor. Yet because in-person service work “require[s] an intuitive, embodied, and socially mediated form of knowledge or skill,” Smith argues in *Smart Machines and Service Work: Automation in an Age of Stagnation*, there are “technological, moral, and even legal limits” to its mechanization and automation. As more and more labor is allocated to this relatively low-waged, low-productivity sector, he contends, economic growth has slowed or even completely stalled out.²⁵ Winant’s *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America* similarly connects the rise of care work to the collapse of industrial manufacturing. In a deindustrialized economy, Winant argues, “high-employment, low-profit industries—such as health care, education, and social services—experience . . . limited opportunities for productivity gains, a problem inherent to the provision of human services.”²⁶ Relatedly, Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton’s influential 2013 essay “The Logic of Gender” connects the Marxist-feminist tradition to more recent scholarship on service work by clarifying the relationship between the unwaged “housewife” of the past and the low-waged child-care provider of the present.²⁷ Contemporary service work’s low wages, Gonzalez and Neton argue, can be explained not only by its economically and technologically “unproductive” nature, but also by its historic devaluing, a history intimately connected to its naturalization as “women’s work.”²⁸

Attending to histories of industrialization and deindustrialization, to contemporary crises of productivity and profitability, and to how service work came to be devalued and dominated, this body of scholarship is vitally important to *Beneath the Wage*. Only by theorizing contemporary service work as labor—and in the context of or by comparison with other kinds of labor—can we understand its low and precarious wages,

its feminization and racialization, its exclusion from contracts and regulation, and the ways service workers themselves have been forced to labor perpetually harder, faster, and longer.

THE PREHISTORY OF SERVICE WORK

As I have already suggested, service work is not a footnote in the story of modern capitalism, but an indispensable shadow history of labor exploitation. Today's service work has roots in the history of domestic servitude: the maids, nannies, and household servants who were (and are) controlled through direct domination, yet also exploited through wages and labor markets.²⁹ As Evelyn Nakano-Glenn argues in her influential essay "From Servitude to Service Work," the history of how and under what conditions "racial-ethnic women were employed as servants to perform reproductive labor in white households" bears intimately on a contemporary era in which "racial-ethnic women are disproportionately employed as service workers," performing labor-intensive, low-wage work while being subjected to a repertoire of racialized and gendered techniques for exploitation.³⁰ This section briefly sketches the history of domestic servitude in order to show how contemporary service work continues to be shaped by the methods of wage payment, discipline, management, and regulation that were first innovated for preindustrial domestic servitude in Britain and enduringly racialized in the United States.

Centuries before theories of contemporary service work as "immaterial labor," classical political economists such as Adam Smith were already writing about domestic servitude as work that "does not fix or realize itself in any permanent subject; or vendible commodity" and instead "perish[es] in the very instance of [its] performance," without "leav[ing] any trace or value behind."³¹ Classical political economy's substantialist theory of value—the idea that value inheres in the physical object as the crystallization of embodied labor—inevitably resulted in normative distinctions between goods-producing work and the

more ephemeral output of domestic servitude.³² As Carolyn Steedman argues, because servants “did not ‘really’ work or make . . . *vendible objects*,” classical political economists such as Smith and John Locke could not conceptualize them as working class.³³ Far less beholden to a substantialist definition of productivity than his predecessors, Marx argued to the contrary that those whose work is “consumed as services and not in products separable from the worker” could also be “directly exploited in a capitalist manner.” Yet despite acknowledging that as of the time of *Capital*’s writing, the “servant class” was larger than the number of workers employed in textile factories, mines, and the metal industries *combined*, Marx nonetheless tended to treat domestic servants as a feudal holdover largely irrelevant to a theory of the capitalist mode of production. Servants were part of a “transitional stage,” he argued, and were “of microscopic significance when compared with the mass of capitalist production.”³⁴

Domestic servitude also seemed at odds with capitalist work discipline, management, compensation, and productivity, concepts that were defined almost exclusively in relation to industrial manufacturing. As the historian E. P. Thompson famously argues, eighteenth-century industrialization transformed time itself by requiring working days of a fixed length and the rationalized regularity of “clock time.”³⁵ While Thompson focuses on the standardization of labor time, Eric Hobsbawm’s classic essay “Custom, Wages, and Workload in Nineteenth Century Industry” describes the standardization of wages measured by time.³⁶ Both Hobsbawm and Thompson yoke the temporal discipline of rationalized, mechanized industrial labor to the increased use of formal wage contracts. Yet neither time wages nor this kind of rationalized, predictable time discipline apply to domestic service. As historian Leonard Schwarz suggests, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the time-based wage was gendered, age specific, and “did not apply to those who lived in their employers’ houses: farm servants, apprentices, domestic servants. The latter received board wages” and “had no legal time of their own.”³⁷ Guides to servants’ behavior from

this period generally say nothing about hours of work, since domestic servants were paid by the year and had no legal control over their hours or their pace of work.³⁸ To the extent that time functioned as a mode of labor discipline for domestic servants, it did not enforce what Thompson calls “bourgeois exactitude,” but instead made working time infinitely elastic.³⁹ Because the servant is hired “without any particular time limited” for their labor, the eighteenth-century jurist William Blackstone argues, they “shall serve . . . as well when there is work to be done as when there is not.”⁴⁰ Those considered “menial servants”—from the Latin *intra moenia*, or “within the walls” of the household—did not experience Thompson’s “distinction between their employer’s time and their ‘own’ time.”⁴¹

Blackstone’s writings on the rights and responsibilities of domestic servants and their masters would soon become the basis for new laws and regulations governing manufacturing labor. Yet domestic servants also quickly became one of modern labor law’s most vexing problems.⁴² Eighteenth-century British common law had given masters an immense amount of control over their servants, and industrial-era employment law translated that “open-ended duty of obedience” into the employer’s right to control all aspects of the employee’s labor process, whether directly or via managers and overseers. At the same time, actual domestic servants were excluded from the very laws and regulations originally modeled on their working conditions. For instance, the 1875 Employers and Workman Act—a reform that enabled the modern trade-union movement in Britain—borrowed heavily from the 1867 Master-Servant Act, yet the 1875 law explicitly excluded domestic servants from its scope. By the end of the nineteenth century, domestic servants were largely omitted from legal categories such as “laborer,” “apprentice,” and “workman.” As those formerly distinct types of laborers were drawn together into a single term—“employee”—and codified as a legally protected group in the twentieth century, domestic servants would be set ever further apart, providing the constitutive outside to the protected legal categories that enabled the rise of industrial wage labor in Britain.⁴³

The history of domestic servitude and labor law is strikingly similar in the US context. Much as British jurists had struggled over how or whether to define domestic servants as workers, the issue of how and whether to regulate domestic servitude so beleaguered America's late nineteenth-century middle class that it was termed "the Great American question."⁴⁴ The answer to that question would be the same in the United States as in Britain. Much as the "ephemeral" nature of domestic servitude had excluded it from the British tradition of classical political economy, twentieth-century domestic servitude in the United States was excluded from regulation because it did not produce a material commodity alienable from its maker. A 1930 New York State court opinion ruling against a domestic servant seeking recognition as an employee, for instance, held that "there is no tangible, commercial product of domestic service, it ministers only to the necessity, comfort, and convenience of the employer."⁴⁵ Also as in Britain, waged domestic servitude in the early twentieth-century United States could not be understood as labor because neither its time discipline nor its compensation had been rationalized in the ways goods-producing labor had. A 1917 Bureau of Labor Statistics report notes that because the domestic worker's "whole time . . . belongs to her employer," her labor could not be regulated in the manner of work done in "the factory, the store, and the office."⁴⁶ Nonwhite domestic servants in the United States were particularly vulnerable to the intensity and insecurity endemic to work that was not legally or politically recognized *as* work. They typically received part or even all of their compensation as "in-kind" payments, rather than standardized cash wages, and they experienced what historian Cecelia Rio describes as a life of "around-the-clock duty" characterized not by rationalized time, but by diffuse and unpredictable obligation.⁴⁷

As this last detail suggests, the US context had its own specificity, too. Servitude was a particularly vexing problem in the United States because it suggested the nation hadn't actually broken from European "feudal" relations. Most importantly, the fear (or fantasy) of domestic servitude's anachronism was profoundly racialized in the

United States. The association of “menial” domestic labor with chattel slavery had outlasted slavery’s formal abolition. After emancipation, waged domestic work was still predominantly performed by Black and other nonwhite women in the North as well as the South. Domestic servitude, Jacqueline Jones argues, “recapitulated the mistress-slave relationship in the midst of industrializing America. As paid labor became increasingly associated with the time-oriented production of goods, the black nurse, maid, and cook remained something of a labor-force anachronism.”⁴⁸ Sarah Haley powerfully describes the link between domestic service and “carceral servitude” in this period. “The ‘proprietary notions of the self’ grounding white liberal notions of freedom”—notions that emerged in no small part from the fetishistic affirmation of work that produced tangible commodities—ensured that “caprice governed the economic decisions of white domestic managers,” she writes.⁴⁹ In her history of postbellum Black women’s labor, Tera Hunter similarly contends that “white Southerners had a stake in the persistence of individualized, manual, low-wage household labor.”⁵⁰ Angela Davis, in her powerful critique of the *Wages for Housework* manifesto cited in the previous section, notes that “in the United States, women of color—and especially Black women—have been receiving wages for housework for untold decades.” Black women, Davis contends, “have had to do their own housekeeping and other women’s home chores as well.... As paid housekeepers, they have been called upon to be surrogate wives and mothers in millions of white homes.”⁵¹

Domestic service was thus excluded from the emerging contractual understanding of free labor in the postbellum United States because it was naturalized as labor “innate” to women of color, because it was subject to intimate, “individualized” domination instead of impersonal modern management, and because it was unprotected by either tradition or law.⁵² Similar reasoning was used to exploit migrant women. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Grace Chang notes in *Disposable Domesticity*, migrant women were essentially “imported into the

United States from the Third World” to labor as domestic servants. Migrant women were perceived to be “naturally” suited both to the hard work of care, cleaning, and cooking and to the unrecognized status of that work. Programs such as the “Americanization” schemes of 1910s and 1920s, which conscripted Mexican immigrant women into domestic work in the US Southwest, were grounded in the fiction that the work of migrant domestics was not actually work at all, but rather “training” or “rehabilitation,” and that domestic servants’ white bosses were not employers subject to labor regulations, but rather “hosts” or even “friends.”⁵³

This brief history of domestic servitude shows us how certain kinds of work are made to seem less like work. Despite the realities of domination and precarity, domestic servitude in the United States and Britain was centrally understood, in Steedman’s words, as “an emotional and affective relationship rather than a class relationship.”⁵⁴ This early substitution of affect for class offers a surprising point of origin for the claims of contemporary theorists that “emotional laborers” willingly “internalize” the affects they are compelled to perform. Well before the rise of capitalism, the servant’s relationship to the master already functioned as a ready metaphor for voluntary submission to the natural and divine authority of the father, the king, and God. Servants weren’t just called upon to obey, but rather to “internalize obedience and be faithful in their hearts,” as Sarah Maza explains in her history of domestic service in the seventeenth century.⁵⁵ Sometimes, this kind of willing submission could appear as a virtue (as in descriptions of service to Christ). Just as often, this sort of “voluntary servitude”—the degrading quality of consenting to your own domination—is what has made servants appear to be the abject other of the capitalist wage laborer: content in their submissiveness, complicit in their unfreedom, stubbornly premodern.

Of course, one does not need to look hard to find ample evidence that domestic servants were neither complicit in their exploitation nor content with it. It is a grievous error to think that political

consciousness and therefore political organizing are possible only in the context of the formal wage contract. Although often denied legal protection, formal regulation, political representation, and collective bargaining rights, domestic servants have frequently been a radical faction in labor movements and beyond. In her book *Between Women: Domesticity and their Employers*, the feminist sociologist Judith Rollins argues that the domestic servants who have long been depicted as subordinate, invisible “non-persons” are actually anything but. Over years of conversations with nonwhite domestic servants, Rollins found a high level of class consciousness and a canny “awareness of the Other” that she compares to Frantz Fanon’s account of the colonized subject who is fully prepared to fight for his own liberation.⁵⁶ Historian Ashley D. Farmer likewise describes a revolutionary vanguard of “militant Negro domestics” who forged a vital network of radical Third-Worldist solidarity. In in the 1940s and 1950s—a period in which 80 percent of Black women were employed as domestic workers—Black feminist Marxists such as Louise Thompson Patterson, Claudia Jones, and Alice Childress organized through the Communist Party, the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the National Negro Labor Council, and the independent Domestic Workers Union (DWU). These women were theorists as well as organizers, developing their own conceptual paradigms to describe the exploitation specific to nonwhite, female domestic servants. Such paradigms included the concepts of “triple exploitation” (Patterson’s term, which would become the basis for later influential theories of “intersectional” oppression) and “super-exploitation” (Jones’s term, which as others have done, I hope to build on throughout this book).⁵⁷ Although domestic servants were frequently sidelined by the mainstream labor movement (a 1970 AFL-CIO report claimed it was “impossible” for the organization to include domestic workers, who “have several different employers in the course of a week”), they continued to organize both within and beyond traditional unions.⁵⁸ As Magally Miranda has argued, domestic workers are today showing all workers what it looks like to build collectivity

outside the standard context of the shared workplace or the union shop and across the dividing lines of regulated, unregulated, waged, and unwaged labor.⁵⁹

This is a book about service work in the twenty-first century: the work of restaurant servers and baristas, outsourced clerical workers and app-bound gigworkers. This kind of work may seem far afield from the work that's been done by domestic servants for centuries. But if we want to understand why service work is often treated as if it's not work at all, why this kind of low-wage work is gendered and racialized in specific ways, why service workers are often seen as submissive, instead of as exploited, and why theories of service work focus on service workers' feelings instead of on their formation as a class, the answers to these questions lie in the longer history of domestic servitude. Likewise, if we want to understand the working conditions of contemporary service work—its vulnerability to domination and subordination, its low and uncertain wages, its marginalization in law and politics—we must see that these conditions, too, originated in the working lives of domestic servants. Finally and perhaps most importantly, if we want to understand how jobs that have been constitutively excluded from political and legal protections might nevertheless foster their own forms of radical consciousness, political organizing, and communal solidarity, we would do well to pay attention to the collectivist practices of the servant workers who once occupied that same precarious, informally waged, and legally unrecognized position.

SERVICE WORK AND LABOR PROCESS THEORY

If we focus too much on what service workers do (smile, create, care, emote), we risk overlooking the conditions in which they do it. This book is an attempt to understand those conditions. It is interested in how service workers are paid (wages), how their work is controlled (management), and how that work is mediated by technology (mechanization). I borrow these three concepts—wages, management, and

mechanization—from the tradition of labor process theory. Most famously developed by Harry Braverman in his monumental book *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, “labor process” describes the way workers themselves experience waged work and especially how they are stripped of skill, pride, and control over their own labor.⁶⁰ I have found labor process theory an invaluable resource for understanding the general tendency of work under capitalism to be devalued and degraded.⁶¹ Yet much as theories of service work have rarely focused on its labor process, theories of labor process have rarely focused on service work.⁶² *Beneath the Wage* hopes to change that. Doing so, I’ll argue, doesn’t just afford us new insights into the functioning of the service sector. It also helpfully decenters manufacturing labor from our understanding of capitalist wage labor as such, revealing important connections between low-wage service work and other types of labor that are not goods-producing. Like farmwork, service work often uses nonhourly methods of wage payment that fail to provide a stable or even adequate living for workers. Like truck drivers and other goods-circulating workers, service workers tend not to be surveilled by a stopwatch-holding scientific manager, but instead are forced to work harder and faster via decentralized, indirect management. And although service work remains less mechanized than manufacturing labor, technology is today being used to degrade and outsource not only low-waged service work but also professionalized care work such as teaching and health care.

Service work is also distinct from goods-producing labor insofar as it has been excluded from labor movements and labor reforms. To understand this aspect of service work’s history, I add a fourth concept to the list above: regulation. Because regulatory reforms such as the 1937 Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) were made possible by changes in the management and technology of industrial manufacturing, laws dealing with minimum wages and maximum hours are often simply treated as a given in labor process theory. Service work, by contrast, has typically been excluded from such regulation. Service work’s

constitutively unregulated status is, I'll argue, the last defining aspect of its labor process.

The three chapters of this book shed light on these structuring conditions of service work. Chapter 1 focuses on wages and management (the history of superexploitative tip wages and their relationship to direct domination in service work). Chapter 2 considers wages and machinery (piece-rate wages and the deskilling and outsourcing of clerical task work). Chapter 3 takes up management and machinery ("independent" gigwork's reliance on the time-disciplining technology of algorithms and apps). In all three chapters, I emphasize how exploitation and domination have been intensified by service work's exclusion from labor regulation. Out of these close studies of service work's labor process, I ultimately aim to develop a broader theory of the dominant tendencies of capitalism in the twenty-first century. In service work's irregular wages, we see a widening trend toward *superexploitation*. In its methods of indirect management, we see the unmistakable process of *intensification*. In its complex relation to machine-driven automation, we see a pronounced shift toward *deskilling*. And in its eluding of regulation, we see the triumph of *informalization*. These conceptual pairings—and their role in illuminating the past and present of low-waged service work—are worth explaining in a bit more detail.

SUPEREXPLOITATION (WAGES)

It is essential to understand not just *how much* service workers are paid, but also simply *how*. This attention to the method of wage payment is among this book's most important contributions to labor history and theories of the labor process. Whereas most scholarship on wages focuses simply on the amount of the wage, theories and histories of the method of wage payment look at whether wages are regulated or formalized, how frequently wages are paid and in what form (monetary or nonmonetary), and in what way the amount is calculated (by time, output, performance, or something else). The method of wage payment is often particular to a given historical epoch and is determined by

social, political, and cultural forces—including, I argue, racialization and feminization—as well as by the level of technological development in the economy or sector.

We tend to associate industrialization with formal contracts and standardized wages, but in fact even late nineteenth-century labor arrangements tended to rely as much on unwritten, casual agreements as on formal contracts.⁶³ Wage agreements, in particular, were variable and disparate. Prior to generalized industrialization, manufacturing wages were often paid “in kind” (in food, beer, or lodging). In the extractive economy, payment in coal, by-products, and credit remained common well after the rise of the factory system.⁶⁴ Even when wages were paid in cash, the quantity due could be measured in a range of ways. By the early nineteenth century, wages were most often measured either by time (hourly, daily, or weekly wages) or by individual output (task-based or piece-rate wages). Yet other ways of calculating compensation persisted until the early twentieth century, including premium-bonus systems, task-bonus systems, weighing and measuring, profit sharing, payment by earnings, and sliding scales.⁶⁵ It wasn’t until assembly-line technology allowed workers’ output to be totally determined by machine speed that the specific type of hourly wage Melinda Cooper aptly describes as the “Fordist family wage” could be codified in the United States by the FLSA and become the dominant method of measuring wages in the manufacturing sector.⁶⁶

Despite this complex history, contemporary political economists, cultural critics, and even historians have tended to treat the regulated, cash-based, hourly wage as a conceptual, political, and historical norm.⁶⁷ *Beneath the Wage* argues to the contrary that “wage” does not name a singular coherent category, but something multiple, variegated, and historically specific. Even after the passage of the FLSA, nonwhite female domestic servants were paid neither by the hour nor by the task, but instead in an unpredictable mix of irregular cash wages and in-kind payment (room and board, leftovers, and hand-me-downs). Likewise, manufacturing work performed by “low-productivity” workers

with disabilities, work where workers are spread out across large spaces (as in farmwork), and work where workers are “self-managed” (as in goods-circulating work such as like truck driving) all continue to be paid via piece rates. Piece-rate and task-rate wages are particularly important to new forms of platform-based digital “microwork,” so named for the amount of the wage as well as the size of the tasks. And for in-person service workers from railway porters to waitresses, the precapitalist practice of giving small gratuities to household staff persisted long after the rise of advanced industrialization. Legally codified at mid-century as a legitimate form of wage payment, tips paid directly by the customer remain a crucial aspect of the in-person service sector.

Following the work of Marxist development economists, I use the term “superexploitation” to characterize service work’s unique methods of wage payment. Superexploitation involves two distinct but often overlapping processes.⁶⁸ First, superexploitation happens when workers’ compensation does not cover their cost of living: when, in Marx’s terms, wages do not fully or predictably provide the “means of subsistence...sufficient to maintain [the worker] in [their] normal state as a working individual.”⁶⁹ Second, superexploitation happens when workers are simply compelled to work harder during a shift, producing what Marx describes as an increase in the “tension” or “density” of working time, or what development economists describe (in language we might query) as the “greater exploitation of the worker’s physical strength.”⁷⁰

There are myriad debates over the specific terms used to describe these methods of surplus value extraction and over what a term such as “superexploitation” can tell us about waged industrial work. I am less interested in these conceptual nuances and more curious about what the idea of superexploitation allows us to see about the relation between wages, work intensity, and the entanglement of race, gender, and class. Superexploitation bears down with special force on workers who are not paid a guaranteed hourly wage and whose wages are not legally regulated. It is further enabled by the racialization and

feminization of labor, which likewise become justifications for a hierarchy of wage forms.

My use of the term draws particularly on the radical analytical and political insights of Claudia Jones. Born in Trinidad and Tobago, Jones migrated to the United States as a child and in 1945 became the first Black woman to become a member of the Communist Party of the USA.⁷¹ As both a labor organizer and a journalist, Jones explored “the militancy of the Negro woman” in light of the Black Belt Thesis, which held that formerly enslaved Black workers in the South were an internal colony. Jones emphasized the interlocking systems of capitalism, chattel slavery, and patriarchy most vividly represented by the Black female domestic servant. As she puts it in her 1949 essay “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” the “super-exploitation of the Negro woman worker is revealed not only in that she receives, as a woman, less than equal pay for equal work with men, but also in that the majority of Negro women get less than half the pay of white women.” Black women had been pushed out of industrial manufacturing work after the end of World War II, she notes, and were most likely to be “hit hardest” by increased cost of living, leading to their “exclusion from virtually all fields of work except the most menial and underpaid.”⁷²

Beneath the Wage uses the concept of superexploitation to describe the specificity of the wage relation in the service sector: a sector where workers are compelled to work for less than they can subsist on and where nonstandard methods of wage payment enable racialized and feminized forms of exploitation. As a way of naming variations within the wage form, superexploitation draws our attention to the violence and precarity that are a part of every wage relation, even when those features are concealed beneath the regularity of hourly wages and the “fairness” underlying wage regulation.

INTENSIFICATION (MANAGEMENT)

Histories of the wage in manufacturing labor typically connect its particular forms of “work discipline” to the standardization of time

(working days with a fixed length and measured by clocks), to the modernization of wage agreements (“a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay”), and to the rationalization of management.⁷³ Taylorist scientific management, Braverman argues, required “the gathering together of the workers in a workshop and the dictation of the length of the working day; the supervision of workers to ensure diligent, intense, or uninterrupted application,” and “the setting of production minimums.” Only after work had been centralized, standardized, and rationalized could stopwatch-holding managers dictate “the precise manner in which work is to be performed.”⁷⁴

The time discipline and scientific management famously described by Braverman, Thompson, and Hobsbawm is not easily applied to service work, which often involves unpredictable work hours and irregular efficiency, more “self-management,” and a less rationalizable—even immeasurable—“output.”⁷⁵ Yet it would be a mistake to think that labor discipline doesn’t matter in the service sector. Indeed, labor discipline is if anything more important in service work than in goods-producing work. Whereas manufacturing achieves productivity gains by replacing humans with machines, the service sector must “coerce more labor out of a given hour by means of refinements in supervision, oversight, and workplace discipline,” Jason Smith notes.⁷⁶ *Beneath the Wage* explores how this coercion works: how, in an attempt to eke out more productivity, nontechnological techniques of labor *intensification* are used to make service workers’ days longer and their pace of work faster. Tips ensure that in-person service workers are highly attuned to the temporal demands of those they serve; indeed, one suggested origin for the word “tip” is that it was an acronym for “to insure promptitude.”⁷⁷ Task wages, likewise, are used to control subcontracted or outsourced workers who labor in their own homes, far from the view of managers or supervisors. Modern platform gigwork, in turn, has innovated a postindustrial time discipline often described as the “obligation to be available,” ensuring that workers remain subordinated to a working day whose only limit is the limit of the human body.⁷⁸ Across all

kinds of service work, moreover, we find heavy use of part-time work and other “just-in-time labor” arrangements that, Joel Suarez explains, allow employers to “suppress labor costs in service industries where productivity largely came through more employment rather than [technological] investment.”⁷⁹

My description of these techniques as “intensification” is intended to evoke a form of labor control that combines the direct domination with which service work is often associated and the more indirect, “scientific” forms of managerial and technological control typically associated with manufacturing labor. By arguing that service work synthesizes “preindustrial” forms of coercion and more “modern” methods of machine-mediated scientific management, I am also intervening in an ongoing critical debate about the so-called “neofeudal” qualities of twenty-first-century service work and gigwork. In a widely discussed 2020 essay, Jodi Dean uses the term “neofeudalism” to describe a present mode of accumulation characterized by “non-capitalist dimensions of production—expropriation, domination, and force.” One of the central features of the contemporary economy, she suggests, is the economic dominance of a “vast sector of servants.”⁸⁰ Dean thus describes the service economy by analogy to what she describes as preindustrial and ostensibly noncapitalist domestic servitude. As my own emphasis on the history of domestic servitude suggests, there is much in this analogy that is useful and indeed vital. Yet Dean offers no historical account of the relationship between preindustrial domestic service and contemporary service work. As a result, she implies a *return* to an older form of exploitation, rather than a *continuity*. This risks treating service work as an exceptional, anachronistic, or “non-capitalist” type of labor. In fact, as I’ve tried to show, it is a significant and persistent part of the history of capitalism. What I describe throughout this book as a long “age of service work” is an attempt to center this historical continuity as well as the coconstitution of manufacturing labor and service work, which exert pressure on one another not simply as “uneven” forms—one declaring itself “modern,” one seemingly anachronistic

but also in combination. That continuity and coconstitution are particularly present when we consider strategies of intensification, which have often originated in the service sector *before* passing into the sphere of manufacturing. The forms of control and rationalization used to manage service workers today are neither residual and “pre-capitalist” nor evidence of a return to a “feudal” mode of accumulation. Instead, they are evidence of capitalism’s defining and continuous need to ensure that work rarely slows and never stops.

DESKILLING (TECHNOLOGY)

“Automation” is the word on everyone’s lips. Yet it is a truism that automation doesn’t really work in the service sector. The idea that service work is technologically stagnant (meaning it is immune to the kind of technological advancements that might eventually allow a task to be fully automated) has been central to many recent theories of the sector. Aaron Benanav describes service work as impervious “to the incremental process innovations that generate rapid rates of productivity growth,” while Astra Taylor claims that service-sector technology is little more than “fauxtimation.”⁸¹ Many of these accounts have drawn on mid-century macroeconomist William Baumol’s theory of “cost disease” to describe the problem of increasing productivity through technology in the service sector. In a famous 1967 essay, Baumol argues that manufacturing is “technologically progressive”: technological innovations and economies of scale from the assembly line to new computing technology allow “output per man hour” to increase both consistently and rapidly in the goods-producing sector. The service sector, by contrast, is composed mostly of “nonprogressive” activities, “which by their very nature, permit only sporadic increases in productivity.” Because it is difficult, if not impossible, to increase service work’s output significantly, the service sector tends to lag behind “productivity in the remainder of the economy.”⁸²

Baumol’s work was prescient. While service-sector productivity increased during the mid-century industrial boom because of new

communications and information technology, in the 1970s it fell even more precipitously than manufacturing productivity did, and it essentially never rebounded. Service work’s “technologically stagnant” character is partly due to the specific tasks it involves. As Baumol notes, for instance, one can neither speed up nor scale up jobs such as teaching or orchestra conducting, because the resulting decline in the quality of the product “would be viewed with concern by critics and audience alike.”⁸³ More often, it is simply not technologically possible to supplement or replace human service workers with machines. Although we have been imagining robot maids since at least *The Jetsons*, engineers have yet to develop robots capable of doing many of the basic tasks commonly performed by domestic servants (or by mothers). As of this writing, no one has yet been able to make a machine that can competently sort and fold a basket of laundry. (Tesla did announce in January 2024 that it had finally created a robot capable of folding a shirt, but it turned out that the robot was remotely controlled by a human operator, making it more akin to Taylor’s “fauxtimation” than to a new Fordist assembly line.)

It is generally true that you can’t automate a lot of service work. But that does not mean there is no link between service work and labor-saving technologies. On the contrary, there’s a crucial connection between them. I argue that this connection is best captured by the concept of *deskilling*. Deskilling refers to the process whereby a job is broken up into smaller parts or otherwise simplified so that it can either be performed by less-skilled (or just lower-waged) workers or be fully automated. Deskilling reduces workers’ autonomy and control over their own labor, allowing managers and indeed machines themselves to determine not just *what* is done but also *how*.

It is important to begin any discussion of deskilling by noting that it is not a quality of the worker or even of the work itself: a job can be “deskilled” and yet continue to require an immense amount of skill to perform. Rather, deskilling is a process that affects a type of worker or even an entire profession over time. To give the example I explore

in this book's Coda, the deskilling of university teaching labor might begin when a teacher has to replace a skill she already has (teaching in the classroom) with a new skill (recording online lectures); teaching *as a whole* is then “deskilled” when her employer decides she can be replaced with her own recorded online lectures plus an underpaid student “learning assistant.” Similarly, because the digital microwork described in Chapter 2 tends to be performed by people living outside the Anglosphere, it requires workers to have English-language skills that are far beyond the foreign-language knowledge of most US professionals. Yet this work has been “deskilled” in the sense that it has been broken up into the smallest possible units so that a single project can be spread out across hundreds or even thousands of workers, each doing as little as a single keystroke. Deskilling is also important to the labor process of platform gigwork, where managerial labor and control over workers is now handled by the platform itself. Whereas taxi drivers or truckers once relied on their own experience and “road knowledge,” today, apps tell them what to do, where to go, and how to get there while also monitoring their speed, location, and efficiency.⁸⁴

Moreover, while service work has not historically been the site of major technological innovations—and while technology is unlikely to ever have the kind of immediate, exponential impact on service-work productivity that technologies such as the assembly line had on manufacturing—recent developments in data processing and machine learning are nonetheless transforming labor in many parts of the sector. The GPS capabilities of circulation gigwork platforms, for instance, have resolved long-standing problems in logistics by ensuring that tens of thousands of delivery workers are taking the fastest routes to multiple destinations and thus guaranteeing maximum spatial and temporal efficiency. The deskilling of clerical work that happens on microwork platforms simply wasn't possible prior to innovations in computing and communications technology. Nor was the asynchronous online college lecture possible prior to widespread high-speed internet and high-quality cameras becoming standard features of personal computers.

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