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Leakage: being a risk object or an object at risk? Investigating potential synergies between gender studies and discard studies through the concept of risk

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ABSTRACT

This article employs the concept of risk to explore potential synergies and points of contact between gender studies and discard studies. In doing so, the focus is on the risk of leakage, such as pollution, toxic discharges, urine leakage and menstruation. Leakage is of interest to scholars, both within gender studies and discard studies as it concerns the (female) body as well as pollutants seeping into the environment. Applying the concept of risk, it is suggested that discard studies add to gender studies an understanding of the ways in which bodies and environment mutually enfold one another in and through leakages while it is also evident that these enfoldings are far from symbiotic and harmonious. In addition, discard studies' focus on leakage as at once troublesome and mundane brings to the discussion an understanding of the risk of leakage as it is managed on a daily basis. From the perspective of gender studies, we learn that bodily leakages are commonly framed as an individual matter. Hence, gender studies' contribution to discard studies lies in its ability to assign responsibility to humans for environmental leakages and spills, rather than viewing them as passive victims.

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'[B]laming the victim is a strategy that works in one kind of context, and blaming the outside enemy, a strategy that works in another' (Douglas, 1986, p. 59).

Introduction and aim

The combination of gender studies and environmental studies¹ is well known by most scholars within the humanities and social sciences, where it often takes the form of ecofeminism (for comparison, see Agarwal, 1992; Mellor, 1997a, 1997b; Merchant, 1980; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Plumwood, 2002; Tsing, 2005). One combination which is perhaps less apparent brings gender studies and discard studies together.^{2, 3} This article aims to employ the concept of risk to explore potential synergies between these two disciplinary strands, particularly with respect to leakage. Recent works within gender studies have critically explored the assumed link between leakage and the female body (for comparison, see Grosz, E, 1994; Shildrick, 1997), and by sifting the concept of risk through gender studies and discard studies, the intention is to show how they each contribute to the other. Gender studies share with discard studies an understanding of leakage such as pollution, toxic discharges, urine leakage and menstruation as a risk; a threat to established orders. Yet, I note that whereas the former explores the ways in which the risk of bodily leakages are commonly framed

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as an individual matter, the latter views the risk of leakage as a collective threat, a danger to the environment and human health. While preventing leakages is key both to efficient water management (Tuana, 2008; Öhman, 2016) and waste management (Gabrys, 2009; Hird, 2012) as well as the establishing and cementing of gendered orders (Grosz, E, 1994; Shildrick, 1997), scrutiny of the risk of leakage reveals a difference in how risk is conceived precisely because it tends to imply different things in relation to the female body and to the environment.

Previous risk researchers have noted that *attributions of risk* form part of continuous power plays (for comparison, see Douglas, 1986; Lupton, 1993). Hence, risk is framed as an individual matter or as a collective threat to 'serve to maintain cohesiveness of a society [...] (Lupton, 1993, p. 430). This article builds on these insights in relation to leakage as discussed in discard studies and gender studies, respectively, firstly by evaluating previous works in the field of risk studies. Delineating the differences between discard studies and gender studies, I suggest that since leakage is subject to *different modes of risk attribution* it is seen as either an external threat or an individual matter. Humans are thereby configured as either passive victims or individually responsible. Informed by prior literature in discard studies and gender studies, I then briefly discuss what these works refer to as the *porosity* between body and environment. While body and environment are commonly thought of as distinct entities, leakage – as it threatens to breach these entities – provides the language that allows us to acknowledge the porosity and permeability between humans and their worlds. Finally, a concluding discussion is presented.

On risk

The last 30 years have increased the focus on how it is to live with risk, as most famously conveyed in Beck's (1992) now classic *Risk society. Towards a new modernity*. Beck's study leads to an understanding of the subjective character of risk. Four years before Beck's study was first released, Douglas and Wildavsky (1982, p. 6) discussed risk in relation to culture, noting that '[t]he perception of risk is a social process' and that 'public perceptions of risks and its acceptable levels are collective constructs [...] (ibid., p. 182). A few years later, Paul Slovic (1987) introduced the term risk perception as a means to assess 'the complex and subtle opinions that people have about risk'. Jasanoff (1999, p. 150) talked about the songlines of risk, noting that risk 'is culturally embedded and has texture and meaning that vary from one social grouping to another'. More recently, studies have emerged on the performative and relational character of risks, how risk is done and undone according to social norms and regulations (Boholm & Corvellec, 2011; Montelius & Girtli Nygren, 2014; Nygren & Olofsson, 2014). Risk is seen here as a practice more than a static phenomenon, pointing to the subjective and culturally interpretative side of risk. The latter is especially made clear in an article by Boholm and Corvellec (2011). Drawing on the work of Stephen Hilgartner (1992), Boholm and Corvellec observe that the definition of risks seems to include at least three conceptual elements: an object deemed to *pose a risk*, (a risk object), an object *at risk*, and the link between them. Outlining the relationship between these three factors 'redirects our attention from the ontology of risk to its epistemology' (Boholm & Corvellec, 2011, p. 176). As such, risk is also open to social definition and construction. Still, it would be incorrect to refer to risk as exclusively a social construction, something that can be made and unmade as we choose to engage in and/or perceive certain kinds of risks while neglecting others. Beck (Beck, 1992) highlights this ambiguity by distinguishing the perception of risk from its realities and consequences. While it is true that we tend to concentrate only on selected aspects of the dangers surrounding us, the risks brought by pollution, global warming and pandemic diseases cannot simply be wished away, and their consequences are not ready subjects for social interpretation.

This article draws specifically on Deborah Lupton's (1993) article *Risk as moral danger: The social and political functions of risk discourse in public health*. Lupton sketches a picture of risk as not only being socially constructed, but as also forming part of moral concerns. Here, her focus is specifically on health risks. Lupton loosely distinguishes the health dangers posed by environmental hazards and the

health dangers generated by lifestyle choices. While the former tends to classify individuals or groups as victims as those *at risk*, the latter emphasize individual self-control and hence those deemed at risk (for developing a disease or illness) are first and foremost seen as the ones *posing* a risk. Put differently, when risk is believed to be voluntarily undertaken and/or internally imposed, the relationship between being at risk and posing a risk is reversed. A moral distinction is thus drawn between 'those at risk' and 'those posing a risk'. Hutson and Liddiard (2000) make a similar conclusion in their study on news reports on homeless people in Great Britain. While these people are indeed *at risk*, they are also said to *create risks* for the public as well as for potential landlords, with the authors referring to them as *risk objects*: '[I]ronically, when the pollution is human, then the victim can be blamed' (Hutson & Liddiard, 2000, p. 169). Mary Douglas too, investigates the discrepancies between different modes of risk attribution, showing that 'blaming the victim is a strategy that works in one kind of context, and blaming the outside enemy, a strategy that works in another' (Douglas, 1986, p. 59).

The different modes of risk attribution – risks that are externally imposed (pollution, nuclear waste and toxic chemical residues) and internally imposed (diseases and illnesses) – are of course socially contingent, and far from clear-cut. Still, they provide an important analytical function by allowing us to discern moral judgements for blame and responsibility versus victimization and vulnerability. The studies by Lupton, Hutson and Liddiard and Douglas add complexity to Hilgartner's understanding of the relationship between a risk object and an object at risk. While portrayed as separate, I note that the risk object and the object at risk sometimes merge, as with certain illnesses and diseases. Informed by the above-mentioned work, this article suggests that leakage is subject to different modes of risk attribution depending on whether it concerns the female body or toxins seeping into the environment. It is particularly in relation to the former that the risk object and the object at risk appear to merge. Juxtaposing the respective approaches taken by discard studies and gender studies to leakage, the text below shows alternative ways of thinking both about the leakages that are said to concern the female body and those that are seen as threats to the environment and human health.

Before looking at discard studies, it should be noted that differences exist in the methodological and theoretical assumptions made about leakage in gender studies and discard studies, where and how it is used, and its subsequent contextualization. These differences make a traditional comparative study impossible. At the same time, consideration of the risk of leakage (as an object of scrutiny in both gender studies and discard studies) highlights an understanding of the different modes of risk attribution that are at stake given that leakage is at once individualized and collectivized. Hence, exploring the risks of leakage is a way to emphasize the synergies between gender studies and discard studies.

Leakage, waste and waste management

Recent works within discard studies demonstrate the intimate link between leakage and waste (for comparison, see Gabrys, 2009; Hird, 2012, 2013; Millar, 2018; Moore, 2012; Van Wyck, 2005). While waste does not necessarily leak *per se*, the very *risk* of leakage is omnipresent since leakage always occurs *at some point*, and is always located *somewhere*. Saying this, whereas risk seems to comprise the potential, that is, that which *is not yet*, leakage can be said to represent the actualization of this risk, precisely through its status as mobile. Leakage, one could say, is waste in movement. Understanding leakage as waste in movement and also as something that moves unpredictably becomes clear in the following quote:

Spills are a way to describe the movement and exchange of wastes that do not conform to a clear trajectory or network, but, rather, express more formless and even disruptive geographies. (Gabrys, 2009, p. 666)

Similar to leakages, spills comprise the formless, the disruptive, that which does not conform to a clear trajectory or a distinct network, meaning that leakage is also *actively transforming* materiality. As such, whatever leaks also seems to transform into waste:

Waste can escape and exceed, not just our categories for it, but also the physical limits and boundaries imposed on it, [and as such, it] is given capacity to act on society in interesting and surprising ways. (Moore, 2012, p. 13)

Yet, it would be incorrect to refer to waste as an inherent feature of certain materials and substances. Gabrys (2009, p. 668) convincingly argues that what we see as spill and pollution changes in time and space:

Pollution is not a fixed category, and what we regard as contamination shifts across space and time.

Pollution from asbestos is an example of the transformative states of materiality (Gregson, Watkins, & Calestani, 2010; Litvintseva, 2019). While asbestos has some remarkable characteristics – it is flexible, heat-resistant and non-conductive – it is also highly toxic. This is particularly the case during demolition and waste management of asbestos. The fibres that become released into the air, airborne asbestos, are ‘able to enter bodies and interfere with them on a cellular level [...]’ (Litvintseva, 2019, p. 158), with serious effects for the lungs in particular.

The case of asbestos is interesting not simply by allowing us to understand the porosity between body and environment; for the purposes of this study, it also stresses the link between leakage and waste management practices. Leakage often occurs *in and through* practices of waste management – in this case in terms of pollution. Hird (2012, p. 458) compellingly describes this link when stating that ‘[t]he science and engineering of landfills is concerned with making sure waste does not leak’, suggesting a strong connection between landfill management *and* efforts to prevent leakage. Hird (2012, p. 465) adds that ‘[t]he problem with landfills is that their containment [of waste] is always temporal; eventually they spill and leak’. This indicates that not only is the risk of leakage omnipresent, but that attempts to fully prevent leakage are close to futile. A similar formulation is found in a more recent study by Hird (2013, p. 114) where she notes that ‘Waste never leaves; it is never fully contained or controlled’. This corresponds with Peter van Wyck’s study of repositories of nuclear waste in Carlsbad in New Mexico, and how leakage comprises an inevitable part of every attempt to accumulate or deposit. Parallels exist with the study by Gabrys who explains that ‘[t]he stowing away of wastes never proves to be a permanent solution’ (Gabrys, 2009, p. 671). Similarly, Millar (2018, p. 31 f) notes that leaking is intimately linked to the generativity of waste: ‘[g]arbage leaks, creating streams of black, noxious leachate that drain through its layers and, if not contained, seep into surrounding groundwater’. As a means to prevent leakage – at least according to the EU’s Waste Framework Directive (2009/99/EC) – waste should ‘be managed without endangering human health and harming the environment [...]’. A common solution to this, especially when it comes to hazardous waste, is *waste immobilization techniques* (Meegoda, Ezeldin, Fang, & Inyang, 2003) that prevent leaching and the free movement of contaminants in waste. This can be achieved through either temporary containment, permanent vitrification or solidification.

The works described above show that leakage is subject to different forms of measurability, scalability and manageability, depending on the particular waste involved and the waste management techniques (for instance, landfill waste gives rise to different spills than incineration). Relying on such techniques, humans also seek to decipher, initiate (and legitimize) different forms of measures as part of leak management. It is worth noting that the risk of leakage largely seems to be imposed *on* humans rather than *by* humans. While we learn that (what is considered to be) proper waste management is equated with leakage prevention, less is said about humans as the instigators of such leakages. With Boholm and Corvellec (2011), the risks of leakage seem largely externalized as people appear to be objects at risk rather than risk objects.

Leakage, gender and the (female) body

Having discussed leakage in relation to waste and waste management practices, this section considers leakage with respect to the (female) body. Leakage has been the object of keen attention in previous gender studies (for comparison, see Grosz, E, 1994; Paster, 1993; Sandberg, 2011;

Shildrick, 1997). These works critically explore the assumed link between leakage and the female body as well as its effects. Grosz, E (1994, p. 204), for example, notes that 'there remains a broadly common coding of the female body as a body which leaks [. . .]'. In a similar vein, Linn Sandberg (2011, p. 137) mentions the 'leakiness, mushiness and lack of boundaries [as] strong prevalent symbolic representations of female bodies'. Comparable findings are presented by Gail Kern Paster (1993) in her study on representations of the body in Renaissance English theatre, where Paster concludes that the normative condition of women in early modern Europe was to leak. Together, the studies by Gabrys, Sandberg and Paster are persuasive in showing that the assumed leakiness of the female body is far from a recent phenomenon, nor cannot it be excused as a mere relic of the past.

Still, leakage is not just another property of the, defined in advance, female body. Bodies also *become gendered because they leak*. Leakage then both challenges and cements women's social subordination to men as 'the female body [. . .] and its putative leakiness [. . .] breaches the boundaries of the proper' (Shildrick, 1997, p. 16 f). Here, leakage is both gendered and gendering. Parallels can be drawn between the potential of leakage to determine the gendered belonging of bodies (as acknowledged by Shildrick) and the above-mentioned works of Gregson et al. (2010) and Litvintseva (2019) that discuss the transformative potential of leakage. Since these works illustrate the inherent agency of leakage, they seriously view leakage as a real game changer.

Leakage as both gendered and politicized is further discussed by Grosz, E (1994) who notes that some body fluids are wanted and welcomed, but others are not. 'Blood, vomit, saliva, phlegm, pus, sweat, tears, menstrual blood, seminal fluids, seep, flow, pass with different degrees of control [. . .]'. (Grosz, E, 1994, p. 195). Sperm has historically been seen as an active, creative force that changes both the receiving woman and the potential foetus (Merchant, 1980). During procreation, the woman is thus thought to contribute only with passive material rather than being part of the process of procreation. As opposed to both menstruation and excrements, the status of sperm is also regarded as non-polluting. While saying this, despite men's bodies often being taken for granted as given, non-leaky, entities, this is not always the case. Leaky male bodies, as outlined for example by Lisa Wynne Smith (2011, p. 26) equally constitute a threat to gender norms because they indicate 'an inability to govern one's health and manhood'. Smith examines male bleeding in England and France during the 18th century, where the above quote not only demonstrates the importance of men's bodily control but shows that the ability to govern leakage is constitutive of what it means to be a man. Men's assumed ability to regulate embodied fluids also stands in stark contrast with women's assumed *inability* to do the same.

Thus far, as it relates to the female body leakage seems largely individualized. Here, the individual woman is primarily seen as the risk object, responsible for potential leakages. However, one can find alternative understandings of bodily leakages being presented by, for example, Laura Fingerson (2006). Studying how young girls relate to, and manage menstruation in their everyday interactions, Fingerson argues that menstruation is an important part of the maintenance of social relations. As such, her findings contravene understandings of menstruation as an individual woman's matter. Fingerson states that menstruation must be understood not solely as shameful but also as a source of power that girls actively use to position themselves in social relations with boys. Yet, while menstruation may be seen as a source of power, shame comprises a large part of how women and girls relate to it. Fingerson (2006, p. 15) writes, for instance, that '[m]uch of the work that girls perform to manage menstruation is done to hide evidence that they are menstruating from others', with Fingerson adding that this is 'to ensure that *they* do not leak through their clothing' (Fingerson, 2006, p. 15, my emphasis). It is unclear whether the use of the word 'they' is Fingerson's own or her informants, but regardless it implies that girls themselves leak. Since menstruation is described in terms of leakage, the most important task for girls (as individually responsible) seems to be eliminating the risk of leakage *in order to hide* the fact that they are menstruating. The embarrassment of leaking that is implied in the girls' efforts to hide and conceal menstruation also personifies leakage in terms of *I*, and the embarrassment of leaking thereby also becomes embarrassment with oneself. Here, I want to propose a slight distinction between the noun menstruation and the verb

menstruating, a distinction that Fingerson might have overlooked. While her informants use menstruation to position themselves in social relations with boys, the *menstruating body* represents the risk of leakage. Put differently, the talk about menstruation seems somewhat different from the (consequences of the) menstruating body.

Body and environment – porosity through leakage

While body and environment are commonly conceived as distinct entities, leakage – as it threatens to breach these entities – also provides the language that allows the porosity between body and environment to be acknowledged. Drawing on the above-mentioned studies, this article has looked at actual leakages and their symbolic potential to destabilize seemingly static categories such as body and environment. The dual character of leakage is especially evident in the works of Gregson et al. (2010) and Litvintseva (2019), as well as Gabrys (2009, p. 667) who connects carbon sinks, that is, oceans, lakes as well as soil and vegetation that absorb and store carbon and greenhouse gases, with human bodies: ‘So too, are our bodies sinks, collectors and amplifiers of pollutants [...]’. It is noteworthy that the mutual becoming of reservoir and body is precisely *due to* leakage or, while drawing on the work of Gabrys (2009, p. 677), spills: ‘When wastes potentiate [...], [t]hey spill over, from environments to bodies, feed back, amplify, and collect in organisms’. Along similar lines, Harvey (1998, p. 99) notes that

[t]o conceptualize the body (the individual and the self) as porous in relation to the environment frames “self-other” relations (including the relation to “nature”) in a particular way.

The porosity of bodies has also attracted growing attention from postmaterialist feminist studies (for comparison, see Tuana, 2008; Haraway, 2016; Hekman, 2008; Öhman, 2016; Tsing, 2015). A joint reading of the latter suggests that they all seek to show the intimacy, and inevitable reciprocity, between body and environment. For example, in her study on the hurricane Katrina and the consequences of the toxic waste that seeped into the ground water and human bodies, Nancy Tuana (2008) challenges the ontological division between human and non-human bodies. ‘The boundaries between our flesh and the flesh of the world we are of and in is porous’ (Tuana 2008, p. 198). Here, leakage – in this case of toxic waste – is what links human and non-human bodies. Similarly, May-Britt Öhman (2016) speaks about water bodies, human bodies and dam bodies. The latter, Öhman (2016) shows, is the means through which the two former are commonly seen as separate.

Saying this, Öhman (2016, p. 17) reminds us that dam bodies are vulnerable bodies: [w]hen the waters once quietly contained in the dam bodies invade us, when the relationship of human bodies and these bodies of waters come into conflict, the porous relationship becomes disturbing and distressing.

When understanding bodies and their surrounding environment as being engaged in symbiotic relations, they are also mutually engaged in the creation of potentially disruptive ecologies and troublesome entanglements, as Anna Tsing (2015) and Donna Haraway (2016) elegantly suggest. These disruptive ecologies are enabled exactly through leakage. The works of Tsing and Haraway are important by reminding us of the routineness with which disruptions, failures and breakdowns occur. These are not exceptional cases, but mundane means of making a living. Taken together, these works add to previous gender studies literature by seeking to situate and contextualize (what is seen as) the leaking body. As such, they demonstrate that leakiness and seepage concern all bodies, not just female ones.

Concluding discussion

Returning to the introductory citation from Douglas, this article has sought to tease out certain underlying motives for blame and responsibility versus victimization and vulnerability in relation to

the risk of leakage. It is suggested that leakage, as it relates to the (female) body (and similarly to diseases and illnesses), is a risk that is largely internally imposed, individualized and also personified in that it seems to concern (shame of) the self. Yet, in relation to the environment, the risk of leakage seems to be externally imposed. As concerns waste management practices, for instance, the risk of leakage chiefly constitutes a threat to the environment and to human health. And while the focus is on preventing, regulating and controlling the risk of leakage (employing immobilization techniques, emission allowances, impermeable liners and lead-lined containers), the focus is also on what (or whom) is *exposed* to this leakage, a discussion that seems somewhat absent with regard to the leakages that connote the (female) body. Recalling the discussion by Lupton (1993), risks believed to be *internally imposed* make those who are deemed at risk the sinners and, with respect to this article, the ones responsible for restoring order. The body, and particularly the female body, does not seem to be exposed to leakage; instead, it *generates/constitutes* leakage, as becomes obvious in this article's joint reading of recent works in discard studies and gender studies. This means that the modes of risk attribution tend to differ according to whether leakage is approached from the perspective of discard studies or gender studies.

Drawing on the above discussion, while still far from straightforward, one can say that synergies are emerging between gender studies and discard studies. Discard studies add to gender studies the contention that not all risks are internalized. When it comes to the risk of pollution, for instance, people as a community are commonly the objects at risk and the leakage itself is the risk object. In a similar vein, gender studies' contribution to discard studies lies in its ability to assign responsibility to humans for environmental leakages and spills, rather than viewing them as victims. Perhaps, this is the kind of thinking we need: to internalize leakage in(to) the environment, to see ourselves as the risk objects, not only the objects at risk. Using the concept of risk, discard studies also add to gender studies an understanding of the ways in which bodies and environment mutually enfold one another, precisely in and through leakage, while also showing that these enfoldings are far from symbiotic and harmonious. Gabrys' study of carbon sinks, for example, demonstrates the intimate link between human bodies and reservoirs, in and through what she refers to as spills. This means that leakage is not confined to reservoirs, but inherently transgressive in that it also extends to transform human bodies.

This article has also shown that leakage is at once troublesome *and* mundane. Here, the suggestion is that leakage is not only possible and potential but, more adequately, inevitable and thus an essential part of the system that seeks to contain and enclose it. At the same time, it has also shown that these enfoldings are not symbiotic and harmonious; instead, leakage – deciphered through the lens of discard studies – reveals their inherent unruliness. Parallels may be drawn with the eco feminist Carolyn Merchant's book *The death of nature* (Merchant, 1980) where, among other things, Merchant discusses the swamps in England which, during the 17th century were trenched, despite protests from the people who lived next to, and also made their living from, these swamps. Merchant employs this example to stress the intricate link between conflicts of class and changes in the ecosystem. However, for the purposes of this article, it is worth noting that the recurring winter floods – in themselves highly uncontrollable – actually served the inhabitants living next to the swamps by making the summer fields more fertile. Here, the productive force of the floods is emphasized as the people of the 17th century utilized, and learned to live with, these recurring events rather than understanding them as exceptions. Merchant's findings are consistent with Gabrys' study on carbon sinks.

Finally, this article has demonstrated the intimate link between leakage and waste, which also points to the inherent agency of materiality. It was initially proposed that leakage might be regarded as waste in movement and, expanding on this proposition, leakage and waste are part of recursive processes of occurrences where waste both defines, and is defined by, leakage. At the same time as that which leaks is transformed into waste, the latter also determines the former. Hence, while leakage as well as waste to some extent can be seen as objects of social inscriptions – what we regard as waste and leakage also change over time and depending on place – the recursive processes of

becoming-leakage and becoming-waste reveal the generative tension *between* these two phenomena. While they are inextricably interlinked, there is a slight mismatch, which allows for social inscriptions but, perhaps more importantly, material agency, simply due to leakage as the inherent property, despite the *not-yet, not-here realization* of waste. Again, while waste does not necessarily leak *per se*, the very *threat* of leakage is omnipresent as leakage always occurs *at some point*, and is always located *somewhere*.

Notes

1. It should be mentioned that both gender studies and environmental studies are highly interdisciplinary fields which is why neither can be regarded as a homogeneous set of theories and practices. In saying this, the current attempt to combine gender studies and discard studies is a *situated* endeavour in that these two disciplinary strands (be)come together *in and through* this particular reading.
2. While discard studies is (also) a highly interdisciplinary field, its focus is commonly on waste and waste practices. Adopting a critical understanding of the taken-for-grantedness of discards, discard studies investigate the systems, structures and cultures that allow for practices of wasting and waste management to appear natural and logical (Liboiron, 2018).
3. One exception is Fredericks's (2018) study on the household waste infrastructure in Dakar where the author also investigates the gendered dimension of trash labour through the lens of embodiment.

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Notes on contributor

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