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## "Leave Us Good News": Collective Narrations of Migration in Mama's Nightingale

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In Edwidge Danticat's 2001 edited collection *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States*, two writers recall the responsibilities of migrant childhood in sartorial terms. Marie-Hélène Laforest describes: "I remember writing notes to my teachers and my brothers' teachers for my mother to sign. I became her substitute, speaking to the teachers, buying my younger siblings' school uniforms" (28). Joanne Hyppolite recounts in the same volume: "You get so you can jump between worlds with the same ease that you slide on your nightgown every evening" (11). Children have long served as bilingual interpreters, spokespersons, and scribes for migrant families and communities. Laforest and Hyppolite's shared turn to garments—from stiff "uniforms" to easeful "nightgown"—expresses the everyday nature of young people's border-crossing linguistic acts.

Danticat's own writings portray children as essential messengers of migration. In her 2015 picture book, *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation*, Saya, a young Haitian-American girl, uses storytelling to secure her mother's release from a detention center, where she has been held since an ICE raid at her workplace. Saya is not only an internal storyteller but also the first-person narrator of *Mama's Nightingale*, working to draw in and redirect the opinions and attentions of readers. The use of Haitian Creole words and phrases within Saya's narrative voice provides a reminder that her storytelling is also an act of bilingual mediation. In line with Saya's linguistic labor, illustrations by Leslie Staub show the protagonist literally clothed in her role as family spokesperson. When Saya sits down to compose the letter that will eventually lead to her mother's release, a dress patterned with keys signifies the power of Saya's words to unlock Mama's detention cell.

Four years after the publication of *Mama's Nightingale*, Danticat's "story of immigration and separation" remains all too relevant. The U. S. policing practices of family separation and

abusive child detention have intensified young people's visibility at the center of immigration discourse.<sup>1</sup> Both the enforcers and the resisters of current border policy appear to agree on the symbolic potency of childhood and vital role of living children in migrant people's fates. The current moment demands attention to both the possibilities and the risks of children's exceptional position in U. S. migration.

Children's literature enables this scrutiny, as authors and critics of texts for young readers increasingly address migrant and refugee lives (Nel, Introduction). Philip Nel argues that picture books, in particular, have the capacity to reckon with global displacements, providing "the ideal medium for voicing that unsettling feeling when something unbelievable suddenly becomes true" ("Refugee Stories"). I see an additional reason for the genre's relevance. By portraying migration from young people's perspective, children's books allow us to examine the implications of making children the protagonists and spokespersons of migration.

Scholars have noted the positive possibilities of children's special role. In a recent study of children's literary representations of young global migrants, for example, Leyla Savsar cites a growing interdisciplinary call to attend to children's own perspectives on migrant and diasporic lives. Contesting perceptions of children as passive, apolitical victims, Savsar argues for the "counter-hegemonic" effects of "literary constructions of the child migrant as the ideal subject with agency at the heart of the migrant's narrative" (396). While young people affected by migration certainly deserve to be heard, I wonder about the consequences of figuring children as "the ideal subject[s]" of migration. Asserting the exceptionality of the child not only burdens young people with heavy responsibility but also risks perpetuating perceptions of children as detached from family and community. White U. S. power may celebrate children as unthreatening, sentimental representatives of migration while eliding their social and political

worlds. Given the state's persistent faith in family division as a border control tactic, the focus on youth must not provide another excuse to atomize and decontextualize migrant lives.

*Mama's Nightingale* models the process of leveraging young people's special position while resisting its potentially isolating effects. Danticat counters state practices of division by positioning Saya's singular perspective within an intricate network of collaborative, formally varied, intergenerational communication practices that mediate diasporic distance and legal barriers to togetherness. While celebrating the young protagonist's speech, Danticat insists that the nightingale, or *Wosiyòl*—Mama's nickname for Saya, taken from a Haitian folk tale and song—does not sing alone. Danticat invokes the figure of the exceptional child only to complicate it, both honoring the specificity of a young person's narrative and seating it within a multivocal storytelling world. Even as Saya uses exceptionality to her family's advantage—performing her childhood in writing, on camera, and in the courtroom—she develops her public voice through intimate connections to the everyday narrative worlds of family and community. By rewriting the terms of child exceptionality, *Mama's Nightingale* unsettles the politics of U. S. migration and the premises of migrant family division.

I join forum fellows Collins, Ellis, and Weinman in arguing that Danticat's works for young readers subvert dominant expectations for the emotional and expressive lives of children, specifically girls of the Haitian *dyaspora*. Collins uncovers Danticat's disruption of white adult demands for portrayals of girls' emotional pain while Ellis and Weinman track Danticat's refusal of closure in one girl protagonist's grieving process. In line with these analyses, I claim that Danticat challenges the tendency of white U. S. power to read young people's experiences and articulations of migration through the lens of child exceptionality.

Although *Mama's Nightingale* is not itself an epistolary narrative, the focus of the text on letters, voice recordings, and other message-sending forms aligns with the robust body of epistolary works for young readers, including Danticat's young adult novel in diary form, *Behind the Mountains* (2002). The epistolary affinity of *Mama's Nightingale* advances its portrayal of a young person's narrating voice as both singular and collaborative. As Maya Socolovsky argues in her examination of epistolary form in Julia Alvarez's middle-grade novel *Return to Sender* [*Devolver a Remitente*] (2009)—a text deeply resonant with *Mama's Nightingale*—the epistolary form can enact “transformative experiences for both the writer and her community.” For Alvarez's young writer protagonist Mari, recording the separations and traumas of undocumented life in the U.S. through letters and diary entries supports both an individual child's self-expression and the cultivation of solidarity. In *Return to Sender*, as in *Mama's Nightingale*, this process is far from smooth, marked by “the problems of transmission... across the inevitable distances and disruptions of migrant life” (388). These very struggles, Socolovsky shows, make clear the yearning of young people's voices for response and the urgency of conceptualizing authorship communally in a border-policed world.

### **Scribal Childhood**

*Mama's Nightingale* opens with a crisis of adult voice. Saya and her father are living alone, with no sense of when or how Mama may escape detention. In the first pages of the book, Saya accidentally erases her mother's voice on the home phone answering machine after listening to the message over and over. The loss of Mama's speech parallels the situation of Saya's father, who “sits at the kitchen table and writes letters to the judges who send people without papers to

jail. He also writes to our mayor and congresswoman and all the newspapers and television reporters he's ever heard of. No one ever writes him back." As Papa fails to secure a public voice, he also struggles to find the words for family communication. When Saya asks once again when Mama is coming home, Papa enacts a layered confrontation with the constraints of speech: "He looks like he is going to get angry, but then he bites his lower lip. 'You know, Saya, Mama loves you *anpil, anpil*, very, very much,' he begins telling me, then stops. He suddenly looks sadder than sad." Papa first seems to censor himself, holding in his words and emotions by biting his lip. He then turns to the same reassuring words that he has offered Saya in the past—"Mama loves you *anpil, anpil*"—before faltering in the face of their inadequacy. These failures of speech leave Papa "sadder than sad," a phrase that itself pushes against the limits of language.

Saya's deletion of Mama's words and witness of Papa's linguistic frustration signal Danticat's concern with the intergenerational dynamics of narrating migration. Saya decides to "write [her] own story," which Papa sends to one of the reporters whose attention he has—unsuccessfully—been trying to catch. The child's single letter sparks a wave of publicity that eventually results in Mama's at least temporary release. The pointed implication here is that Saya's age enables her to intervene in public and legal discourse, as she becomes the "substitute" described by Laforest. To some degree, then, Danticat invokes the construction of the child as the ideal messenger of migration. The contrast of Saya's scribal potency to Papa's apparent powerlessness raises the possibility that only the child's narrative labor can ensure family survival.

Danticat provides a personal precedent for Saya's verbal responsibility in the Author's Note to *Mama's Nightingale*. The writer recalls her own childhood separation from her immigrant parents, who could not bring her and her brother to the U. S. for eight years for lack of "the right

papers.” “As children in Haiti,” Danticat writes, “my brother and I sometimes played writing games, making up passports, visas, and other documents that might one day reunite us with our parents.” Such serious fun mediated between intimate and official forms of speech, honing the children’s interpretive skill. Young Edwidge and her brother worked on paper in an imaginative and laborious project to reunite the family through textual production. That project continues both through the character of Saya and in the metaliterary act of authoring *Mama’s Nightingale* itself.

### **Mama’s Model**

Danticat revises the terms of child exceptionalism by rooting Saya’s apparently singular narrative power in a maternal lineage of collective communication practices. Throughout *Mama’s Nightingale*, Mama models communal approaches to storytelling, teaching both Saya and the readers that the child’s voice acquires force not in isolation but in family and cultural context.

While incarcerated, Mama uses multiple forms to teach Saya an ethic of resourceful, reciprocal, and plural storytelling. In the phone message erased by Saya, Mama has recorded, “*Tanpri kite bon ti nouvèl pou nou!*” Please, leave us good news!” The bid to *leave* implies physical and temporal distance between *us* and *you*. Oral storytelling, electronically aided, may bridge that distance, so that “good news” works to counter separation. Mama’s recording structures vocal reciprocity in the place of physical proximity, proposing a kind of exchange of gifts: a message for a message. This reciprocity aligns with the term *answering machine*, a tool for facilitating dialogue and responsiveness in the face of absence.<sup>2</sup> The ethic of mutuality

suggested by Mama's recording resonates with forms of call and response, particularly the *Krik? Krak!* exchange that opens traditional Haitian storytelling and that Collins probes in this forum.

Mama extends her storytelling lessons through a second communication technology. To alleviate Saya's pain at their separation, Mama begins sending weekly cassettes of her recorded storytelling for Papa to play to Saya at bedtime. Mama's stories encourage Saya to operate within this density of narrative practices. "I close my eyes and imagine Mama lying next to me as she leans in to whisper the nightingale's story in my ear. I imagine Mama tucking me in, kissing me good night, then going to sleep in the next room with Papa." As she listens to Mama's voice, Saya responds by practicing the imaginative labor of bridging distance. Between the lines of stories "sad as melted ice cream" and "happy as a whole day at the beach," Mama may be understood as cultivating Saya's collaborative storytelling abilities, as if whispering to her, "leave us good news."

Mama's audio missives evade normative binaries of communication. Her voice recordings are neither fully oral nor scribal, neither completely ephemeral nor archival. Centering reciprocity, plurality, and formal hybridity, Mama's messages reflect an intricate network of narrative practices in the *dyaspora*. This density of communication forms extends through other recent works by Danticat, such as *Behind the Mountains*, which is populated by diaries, letters, phone calls, mailed cassette tapes, and other intimate missives among migrant families and communities, in addition to the state documents that discipline migration. Complex webs of storytelling and messaging, which always interweave a plurality of forms and voices, are a signature of Danticat's works for both children and adults and a primary tool by which she disrupts dominant discourses, lodges political critiques, and expresses nuanced, intersectional life experiences.



Mama's narrative practice constantly navigates silence and erasure. As Saya's mistake makes clear, message machines and tape recorders are designed as much for deletion as for preservation. Everyday uses of these devices involve recording new vocal entries over old. Mama may be working from a limited number of tapes, returned by Papa by mail or during visits to the detention center, and recording over her own voice. The core role of erasure in communication aligns with Danticat's pointed use of the antiquated technologies of answering machines and cassette recorders, which are themselves disappearing from U. S. cultural consciousness. Sitting awkwardly amid illustrator Staub's bright swoops of color, the black plastic boxes may have no meaning for many young readers, instead signaling the storytelling tools of Danticat's own past.<sup>3</sup>

The presence of erasure in *Mama's Nightingale* registers the risks and frustrations of language in the *dyaspora*. As Socolovsky observes of Alvarez's *Return to Sender*, migration marks communication with "failed reciprocity, incomplete narrative exchanges, and anxieties about transmission" (396). In her memoir of family love and loss in the landscape of migration and border policing, *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007), Danticat repeatedly declares her unquenched desire for family tales amid the older generation's reticence. During her childhood years of separation from her parents, her father wrote only the sparest of letters, in part of a family practice of withholding stories amid the painful distances of *dyaspora*. From both Haiti and the U. S., relatives carefully restrained their words for "fear... of shattering all hearts involved" (117). Danticat's memoir lingers on myriad forms of frustrated speech, including her uncle's need for an artificial larynx to speak after a surgery. The writer's empathy for these silences lives in tension with her lifelong hunger for disclosure, the plea to "tell me more" (161), the "dream of smuggling him [her father] words" (21).

Danticat positions her own authorship within this context of her elders' verbal hindrance. During her uncle's years of speechlessness before acquiring an artificial larynx, young Edwidge served as his speaker in a twist on the common role of the bilingual child interpreter: "Unlike anyone else, I could now doubly interpret my uncle, both from silence to voice and Creole to English" (129). Composing *Brother, I'm Dying* decades later, after the double loss of her father and uncle, she declares, "I am writing this only because they can't" (26). This statement is particularly tragic given that Danticat's uncle died in ICE detention in Miami after failing to convince his jailors of his urgent need for both political asylum and medical attention. Danticat's portrayal of the inability to be heard haunts the detention narrative of *Mama's Nightingale*, in which the child Saya could also be imagined as saying, "I am writing this only because they can't." In line with Weinman's discussion of nonlinear mourning in *Untwine*, *Mama's Nightingale* circles back to the losses of *Brother, I'm Dying*, centering grief in the very successes of the writing act. Danticat's engagement with verbal restraints and failures tempers the valorization of the child spokesperson in the picture book.

Saya's voice gathers force specifically within the context of the plural, reciprocal, and loss-plagued web of family and community storytelling modeled by Mama. Saya's letter elicits a reporter's response in the form of "a message on our answering machine," completing the circuit of call-and-response or *Krik? Krak!* begun by Mama's bid to "leave us good news." The letter and subsequent local television interview launch a wave of phone calls and letters from readers and viewers, creating enough public pressure to move up Mama's trial, in which a judge rules that "Mama can come home with Papa and me while she is waiting for her papers." The child spokesperson supports her family's survival not through her voice alone but by cultivating

multiple forms and voices of storytelling, from the TV segment, phone calls, and letters to the judge's decision.

### **Figuring Child Voice**

Danticat examines the child's voice in migration partly through the play of two central images in the book: the nightingale and the rainbow bridge. The deceptively simple association of Saya with the nightingale of Haitian folklore in fact evades definitive alignment. Early in the book, readers learn that Mama has given Saya the nickname *Wosiyòl*, or nightingale, in reference to a traditional tale and song in which the bird "keeps mean old witches from eating little children by distracting them with her beautiful song."<sup>4</sup> Saya's story departs from this original framing in multiple ways. Traditionally, the nightingale's song protects "little children" from adults—"mean old witches." Danticat's version, in contrast, presents a little child who saves adults, using her voice to liberate her mother. Saya thus occupies the roles of both the savior and the saved. This double identity expresses the simultaneous dependence and power of a child and suggests Saya and her mother rescue each other. In another departure from the original tale, whereas the nightingale sings to distract, Saya uses her voice to direct. Rather than drawing attention away, Saya calls public interest toward her mother's story in an apparently straightforward act of visibility politics. Even as Saya uses her position as a child of migration to practice advocacy, however, her connection to the trickster nightingale's tactic of distraction lends a shadow of fugitivity to her spotlight. Behind Saya's narrative success stands the unsettling sense that Mama's humanity could be recognized by U. S. power only when refracted, or distracted, through an idealized construction of innocent, depoliticized childhood.

Mama further complicates Saya's symbolic position with a bold revision of the *wosiyòl* tale. In her first cassette recording for Saya, "Mama tells me a new bedtime story, one she made up herself. It's about a mommy nightingale who goes on a very long journey and is looking for a rainbow trail in the sky so she can return home to her baby nightingale." When Mama finally returns home, she composes an end to the new story: "'A smart and brave little nightingale helps her mommy find the right rainbow trail,' Mama says. 'And the mommy follows it home.'" In addition to its association with human and civil rights through the LGBTQ movement, a rainbow suggests both high visibility, with its full spectrum of colors, and evasiveness, with intangible, unapproachable form. Even as Mama's addition of the rainbow image emphasizes Saya's success in giving direction, not only to public attention but also to Mama herself, such tight focus disperses in the multiplicity of a rainbow's shades, which create optic effect not by containment but by the scattering of light. Mama's doubling of the nightingale figure into "mommy nightingale" and "baby nightingale" deepens the story's air of plurality and undefined possibility. No single, stable voice can capture the experience of families and communities in migration. Even while celebrating Saya's verbal power, Mama ensures that the child nightingale will not sing alone.

This commitment to collectivizing exceptional child voice takes visual form in Leslie Staub's softly vibrant oil paint illustrations. Portraying Saya within a layered, thickly communicative visual world, in which each image tells a story in multiple ways, Staub suggests that the child's speech draws from the expressive life around her. In densely patterned waves of bright rose, turquoise, and leaf green, Staub repeats motifs across multiple levels of image. She tucks birds, for instance, into the windows of Saya's house, the fanciful visions of a dialogue bubble, and the patterns of Saya's dresses. Birds often appear either encaged or flying with keys in their beaks,

merging the Haitian folklore of the nightingale with the African American trope of the caged bird. The plurality of birds asserts a chorus of voices behind the seemingly singular perspective of the child narrator. Staub's continuation of patterns across narrative frames reflects the intricately networked world of storytelling in the text. Like the communication practices portrayed by Danticat, the illustrations are always in motion, swirling into new positions. Staub uses this dynamic energy to represent visually the effects of words in Saya's world. As Saya lies in bed listening to her mother's recordings, the dolphins and mermaids of Mama's tales emanate from the cassette player. At the trial that releases Mama, a gust of red hearts and singing birds carrying keys floats out of the judge's gavel. Staub's images ply the porous border between imagination and reality, asserting that state documents are not the only kind of words that matter.

Danticat thus embeds Saya's role as a child protagonist of migration within a context of collective, reciprocal storytelling practices. At the end of the story, tucked in bed at home by her mother once again, Saya recruits Mama into a moment of collaborative storytelling. Requesting the story of the rainbow trail, Saya asks, "How does the story end?"... even though I already know the answer." Saya knows the answer because she has written the ending herself through her work of advocacy. The daughter prompts her mother to re-narrate that ending in her own voice, sealing their joint creation. After Mama recounts her journey across the rainbow bridge, Saya reassumes the narrative voice, closing the book by declaring: "I like that it is our words that brought us together again." Her joining of the singular and plural first-persons—*I* with *our words*—reframes the exceptional child as a participant in collaborative acts of speech.

In line with this plural view, the working title for the book up to a late stage of development was *A Story for Saya*.<sup>5</sup> Whereas the title *Mama's Nightingale* prioritizes Saya's narrative work as a singing nightingale, juxtaposition of the two titles suggests the interdependence of Saya's

storytelling *for Mama* with Mama's storytelling *for Saya*, in a mutual provision of narratives.

Although Saya's triumph of advocacy partly invokes the achievement of social change through exposure, the story counters any singular embrace of visibility politics with a host of reciprocal exchanges, private tellings, and fugitive nightingale songs.

### **Conclusion: From *This Bridge* to Rainbow Trail**

Mama and Saya's co-authored vision of the rainbow recalls the iconic bridge of the groundbreaking 1981 anthology of women of color feminism, *This Bridge Called My Back*. Edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, the collection untangles the punishing oppressions and liberatory possibilities of women's intersectional identities. Kate Rushin's "The Bridge Poem" provides one interpretive approach to the anthology title, conceiving of the bridge as a symbol of Black feminist experience:

I've had enough  
I'm sick of seeing and touching  
Both sides of things  
Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody  
....  
I do more translating  
Than the Gawdamn UN (xxxiii)

Rushin represents both the visceral and verbal aspects of bridging labor, from "seeing and touching" to "translating." Only a few years past the U. S. withdrawal from Vietnam, Rushin's reference to the "Gawdamn UN" ironically relates Black feminists' burden of diplomacy to an institution of global power that has arguably served to facilitate violence as well as peace. While keeping in mind the specificity of experience expressed by "The Bridge Poem," I suggest that the

poet's portrayal of intersectional identity provides a way to think through the place of children's voices in contemporary migration. Rushin's account of translation, both literal and figurative, parallels Saya's linguistic labors, as well as those recalled by Laforest, Hyppolite, and Danticat herself. Young people, perhaps especially young women and girls, perform narrative work to bridge distance and proximity, the private and the public, scribal and oral, recorded and erased.

Even while rejecting the burdensome bridge, Rushin leaves room for its reclaiming with the resolution, "The bridge I must be/ Is the bridge to my own power" (xxxiv). This revision of the bridge provides a precedent for Danticat's turn to the rainbow trail as a mother-daughter narrative tool. The conception of Mama's rainbow trail as a bridge takes vivid form in the double-spread illustration that concludes the main text of *Mama's Nightingale*. Staub portrays Saya and her mother flying across an arcing rainbow leading from an unlocked birdcage to a house, where Papa awaits with open arms. The rainbow bridge portrays the liberatory potential of collective narrative in line with Saya's ending sentence: "I like that it is our words that brought us together again."

Saya's concluding message aligns with the mutuality of distinct selfhood and collectivity in *This Bridge Called My Back*. The singular first-person assertion of "my own power" found in "The Bridge Poem" emerges in solidarity with a plurality of women of color in a sometimes challenging but vital balance between self and service. This ethic finds articulation in Toni Cade Bambara's Foreword to the First Edition of *This Bridge*: "How I cherish this collection of cables, essoesses, conjurations and fusil missiles. Its motive force. Its gathering-us-in-ness" (xxix). Bambara's emphasis on women of color feminists' plurality of forms—antiquated and modern, magical and military—and dynamic process of continual becoming—"gathering-us-in-ness"—could also describe the density of narrative practices portrayed in *Mama's Nightingale*. Bambara

and Danticat share an investment in collective, reciprocal, ever-shifting, and irreducible acts of communication. Reading *Mama's Nightingale* through *This Bridge* makes clear that Danticat immerses her work for young readers in a long-running conversation about the relationship of individual and collective voice and the risks, possibilities, and ethics of storytelling against divisive structures of power.

By embedding Saya's narrative acts within the layered textures of collective communication in the *diaspora*, Danticat both upholds and complicates children's central role in discourses of migration. *Mama's Nightingale* celebrates a young person's agential voice while positioning it within broad practices of family and community. Danticat thus enables readers to examine children's special position in ways that resist isolating narratives of exceptionality and contest the state logic of family separation. She asserts the persistent ability of young people and their families and communities to "leave [each other] good news" amid the ruptures of border policing.

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<sup>1</sup> On the persistence of family separation practices, see, for instance, Jordan, Miriam. "No More Family Separations, Except These 900." *The New York Times*, 30 July 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/30/us/migrant-family-separations.html>. On childhood studies in the context of these current events, see Duane.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "good news" may also draw on Christian Gospel. For the sake of concision, the possible religious connotations here remain outside the space of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Danticat offers some explanation of her interest in low-tech communication tactics in her Author's Note to *Behind the Mountains*: "Being from a family with rural origins, I have observed how many rural families... even without advanced means of communication, such as home telephones, faxes, and e-mail, still manage to remain in close touch with their loved ones abroad through cassettes, letters, or telephone calls, scheduled for appointed times at local telephone centers in the nearest towns" (loc. 1445). Such tools may reflect Danticat's own history, as well as her interest in communities' strategic uses of limited resources. The place of black plastic boxes in *Mama's Nightingale* may be as unexpected to many scholars as to child readers. As Jennifer Stoeber has argued, "Despite its cultural centrality, the tape recorder has been woefully ignored" by both music studies and sound studies (804n13).

<sup>4</sup> Versions of "Ti Zwazo," the traditional song or nursery rhyme about the *wosiyòl*, are widely available online, such as on Lisa Yannucci's website *Mama Lisa's World*. 2019. Web. 1 Aug. 2019. <https://www.mamalisa.com/?t=es&p=2551>.

<sup>5</sup> In April 2012, Leslie Staub posted on Facebook two images from "the soon to be published book, 'A Story for Saya' by the award-winning Edwidge Danticat. These images appear in the final version of *Mama's Nightingale*. Leslie Staub Books. Photo posts. *Facebook*, 23 Apr. 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/LeslieStaubBooks/photos/a.350545308327153/350551351659882/?type=3&theater>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2019.



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