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REPORT....

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE NATURE OF ART EDUCATION
FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

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This paper is concerned with the art education of Aboriginal children. An attempt has been made to look at the situation as it exists, particularly in relation to fringe-dwelling Aboriginal children. This has been accomplished by means of a questionnaire and direct teaching and observation of Aboriginal children on Palm Island and library research. The authors made a number of comparisons with data from research carried out overseas on similar groups, although they realise that no dogmatic conclusions can be made concerning Aboriginal children without further research in Australia.

DEFINING THE SITUATION

Of all the school subjects taken with Aboriginal children, one frequently reported by practising teachers as being the most popular with these children is art. It is clearly a school activity in which Aboriginal children readily participate and through which the teacher may seek rapport and gain their confidence. These are aims which some teachers of Aboriginal children have difficulty in accomplishing. However, the popularity of a subject is insufficient justification for its inclusion in a curriculum. The data presented in this report strongly suggest that art education plays a far more important role than merely providing pleasure for Aboriginal children.

It is important to define the different groups of Aboriginal children for whom educational programs have to be planned. For convenience, they are classified into two groups:

- a. *Tribal or traditional* - those who have had little or gradual contact with Europeans, live as a tribal entity, speak their own language, and retain most of their customs and beliefs.
- b. *Fringe-dwellers* - these are more numerous. They have had considerable contact with European society with all its consequent problems. They consist of the rural group living on missions, reservations, and fringes of towns, and the urban group living within the towns or cities. They face similar problems although those of the latter may be more intense due to their closer and more frequent contact with the European society.

Because of the difference in experiences, values, customs, and culture between these two broad groups, it should be obvious that variations in the approach to education should exist. Art education is no exception in this respect. It is also incorrect to say that Aboriginal children are culturally deprived, for each group has a culture or sub-culture which is rich, meaningful, and satisfying to its members. Only when in contact (and therefore in competition) with European society should the Aboriginal be seen to be disadvantaged in some respects. Thus, the fringe-dwellers exhibit many of the characteristics common to socially and economically disadvantaged white children: poor language development, slow progress in school subjects, lack of ambition, rejection of school and education. However, in attempting to cope with the school, the Aboriginal child also has to contend with problems which arise due to his ethnic membership. These are mainly cultural and value problems.

The teacher needs to appreciate two things:

- a. All Aboriginal children have their own culture or sub-culture which is generally different from that espoused in white middle-class schools. Their culture is not inferior and should be respected.
- b. The pre-school experiences of Aboriginal children may put them at a disadvantage when attempting to cope with subjects taught at school. This is a problem which may be treated in basically the same way as for white children suffering from a paucity of pre-school experiences.

The form that educational courses have taken for Aboriginal children has depended on the *social plan* the European community

has had for them. To date, this plan has been one of assimilation in which an attempt has been made to impose the white man's culture on the Aboriginal.

"...the fundamental assumption is that the Australian state educational systems and their values should be taught to Aborigines: one must teach the Aborigine how to become a white Australian, then teach him a trade, and then expect achievement in the white Australian sense of the term." (1)

Dennis Walker, an Aboriginal, echoes the same sentiments:

"The aim of the education of black children has always been to make them as much like whites as possible; to make them conform to society - the social approach." (2)

This policy is clearly evident in the adoption for Aboriginal children of courses and syllabi with little or no modification to those in general use throughout Queensland schools. The same may be said of the Queensland Primary Art Syllabus, although some flexibility is inbuilt and could be used to advantage by an enterprising teacher.

Informed opinion seems to favour a change from the policy of assimilation to a policy of accommodation which is oriented toward the Aboriginal people. Tatz claims that:

"we need to develop outlooks and programs that start not from our own perceptions of what Aborigines ought to be, but from their perceptions, from their realities." (3)

These 'realities', Tatz claims, are that each Aboriginal group sees itself as a distinct cultural or sub-cultural entity with its own values and culture which it wishes to retain. Accordingly, art educators should become familiar with, and sensitive to the values and cultural orientation of their Aboriginal students and structure or modify their courses for more relevant teaching.

This does not mean, of course, that if a group of Aboriginal children was distinctly oriented towards their traditional culture that their art course would involve only instruction in Aboriginal art. Accommodation also implies that reciprocity of understanding and appreciation of their respective arts takes place between the white and black community. To this end, such Aboriginal children should be given some instruction in European culture and arts,

necessary to enable them to adjust or operate confidently and effectively whenever they make the inevitable contact with the European community. Aboriginals *will* come into contact with European society, and while it would be tragic to totally enculturate them into it, it is equally tragic that they should experience cultural discontinuity when they are confronted by it. McFee comments on this approach:

"We find evidence that it is possible for people to operate effectively in more than one culture, provided they understand each culture. This evidence indicates that the school does not have to force children to reject their sub-culture in order for them to operate effectively in the dominant culture." (4)

An implication for art education is that among the fringe-dwellers there will be those who are oriented towards their ethnic culture and a few who identify, or wish to identify, with the European culture. Art teachers will find that the former group should benefit from a program where instruction is predominantly in their own artistic tradition, whereas the latter group may not be motivated in this way at all, and may require an art education similar to that suggested in the Queensland Primary Art Syllabus for white children. (5)

THE ROLE OF ART IN THE LIFE OF THE ABORIGINAL CHILD

In the traditional culture, children of primary school age are not initiated into the viewing (nor meanings of) the major art forms which are used as intermediaries between the tribe and the spiritual ancestors. They are, however, confronted by song and dance and the visual symbols which accompany such activity. Aboriginal children in their traditional culture look on the visual arts as an integral part of their dance and music making, much more so than do white children. They are also familiar with traditional motifs, symbols and patterns found on the less sacred gallery areas, on weapons, bodies, and some utensils, and with many of the legends and myths which are the basis of much of traditional Aboriginal art.

The fringe-dwelling child, however, may be unfamiliar with much of this. The extent of his knowledge will be related to his geographic location. The Aboriginal children at such places as Mornington Island, Aurukun and Kowanyama would have ready access to their own tribal culture and art forms. Those on Palm Island,

where contact with white society is more frequent and immediate, appear to be brought up knowing only European art forms. Consequently, their concept of the visual arts is generally similar to that of white children. Analysis of data collected at Palm Island in 1973 suggests that they have a positive attitude towards the making of art but that their concept of art and artists is a very restricted one. One reason for this is probably that they associate art mainly with school where, generally, instruction only in European art forms is given. Also, most homes are devoid of art. As well, their general preference for reading matter seems to be comics, so that any exposure to art forms would probably be in the popular arts contained in sources of light reading such as magazines and comics.

It would seem, then, that art plays a minor role in the conscious lives of fringe-dwelling Aboriginal children. It is generally limited to production only and seen as a school activity. Thus, it is with this group that art teachers should be particularly concerned, since art should, and can, play a larger role than it apparently does in enriching their lives.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ART OF FRINGE-DWELLING ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

Research (6) has shown that the art of children from non-Western countries is basically the same as that of children from Western countries. Thus, it could be assumed that the art of young Aboriginal children should be very similar to that of young white Australian children. In addition, Lark-Horovitz, quoting from research of Germann (7), found that:

"the course of drawing development is similar the world over. The familiar sequence occurs; scribble, primitive schema with its characteristic details, and even the adolescent 'plateau'." (8)

Lowenfeld and Brittain (9) give a detailed description of this developmental sequence in children's art. They describe the following stages:

Scribbling Stage	2 - 4 years.
Preschematic Stage	4 - 7 years.
Schematic Stage	7 - 9 years.
Stage of Dawning Realism	9 - 11 years.

Pseudo-Naturalistic Stage	11 - 13 years.
Crisis of Adolescence	13 - 17 years.

With these reports in mind we analysed the art work of Palm Island children. On the Lowenfeld and Brittain scale, the art work of Grade Two children should manifest characteristics of the Schematic Stage. Close analysis of Grade Two art on Palm Island reveals that these children are mainly in the Schematic Stage and therefore have achieved normal artistic development. They use the same recognizable symbols as white children for such things as the sun, houses, chimneys (perpendicular to the roof slope), humans and trees. Their spatial concept is represented by use of the base line and the sky line. The most notable characteristics are the freedom of brushwork used, the large size of the symbols generally, the utilization of all the picture space, the clean, fresh colour, and the feeling for balance and design.

Normally, children in Grade Four should be entering Lowenfeld's Stage of Dawning Realism. The Grade Four Palm Island children's work reveals this development. The spatial concept has developed to the degree where planes of colour are used for the sky and ground. Thus, overlapping has been invented. Typically, their colour still remains flat, without any attempt at modelling. There also appears to be a greater stiffness in style compared to that of Grade Two. (This is also a tendency with white children at this stage.)

Children eleven to thirteen years of age should normally be in the Pseudo-Naturalistic Stage. The work of the Grade Eight Palm Island children generally accords with this stage. Their pictures look more true to life. Such things as trees are individually recognizable, and the human figure is drawn with greater precision and proportion. Symbolism has been abandoned for more naturalism. Spatial representation is also more natural. Except for a few examples, the art of these children is somewhat tight, and there seems to be an aversion to mixing colours. However, this is typical of children at this age level in Queensland schools.

In summary, these few examples of painting point to the following conclusions about the art work of fringe-dwelling Aboriginal children:

- a. They appear to pass through the same stages of artistic development as white children at about the same rate.
- b. Their symbols and visual representations are similar to or identical with those of white children.
- c. Like that of white children, their art tends to deteriorate in terms of freshness, confidence and spontaneity of approach as they grow older.
- d. The only characteristic (and the one to be expected) that helps to distinguish their work from that of white children is in their preference for subject matter. This is naturally dictated by their environment.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RELATED RESEARCH

There are several characteristics of their art which could not be investigated in this study, but which deserve further attention. The fringe-dwelling Aboriginal child can be regarded as coming from a disadvantaged environment, particularly when he has to cope with school tasks. Many pre-school opportunities and learning experiences normally available to middle-class white children are denied Aboriginal children. They are not likely to have available the art materials necessary for them to begin scribbling experiences at about the age of two years. Since this pre-school activity is a pre-requisite to developing geometric shapes, motor coordination, and hand-eye coordination, it is possible that Aboriginal children may begin school with a relative handicap in these abilities.

Secondly, does the Aboriginal child's development of spatial symbolization lag behind that of the middle-class white children? McFee states:

"The use of the base line is probably associated with Western-style education in which children learn to put symbols on lines. Advantaged children who have more experience with books are more often exposed to the base line orientation." (10)

It is generally agreed that the opportunity for an Aboriginal child to read and write in the home is not great. Barclay (11) in fact found that children coming from depressed areas showed a lack of development in visual, colour, texture, and spatial awareness in their beginning art works.

Finally, a much larger sampling of art work should be studied in order to determine whether or not these hypotheses are valid. For example, in a United States study of developmental drawing characteristics of disadvantaged children, Eisner (12) found that an advantaged (middle income level) group of children achieved a higher degree of development than disadvantaged (low income level) children in all four (1st, 3rd, 5th and 7th) grade levels studied.

THE ROLE OF ART IN OVERCOMING OR ALLEVIATING PROBLEMS COMMON TO ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

Brief reference has already been made to certain problems and deficiencies apparent in some Aboriginal children when they begin school. Some are probably caused by the school situation itself, while others appear to be the result of the environment and child-rearing practices in the Aboriginal community. Numbers of compensatory and remedial programs have been devised or put into practice to help Aboriginal children in their adjustment to school life. However, it seems that the full potential of art education in helping the Aboriginal child to adjust to society and the school environment has not been appreciated or investigated.

Art is perhaps one of the few school subjects that provides a link between home life and school for the Aboriginal child. There is no discontinuity in the demands of this activity when attempted in the classroom. It is simply an extension in the classroom of a pleasurable outside activity. As such, art education should help to break the barrier which separates the traditional life from school routine.

So far, one of the most unfortunate consequences of the Aboriginals' contact and interaction with white society is the development of a negative self-image. Colour of skin, economic inferiority, differences in values and behaviour are all used by the dominant culture to denigrate the image of black Australians.

The school, as part of the Aboriginal child's environment, is in an influential position to prevent or rectify this problem. Dimitroff (13) suggests that a positive self-concept is essential for balanced emotional development which will enable the child to cope with emotional stresses at school.

Numbers of suggestions have been put forward as solutions to this problem. As part of the Van Leer program (14) a mirror is often used to help give Aboriginal children a stable self-concept. The children are encouraged to stand before the mirror and either describe themselves and their clothes, or watch their own actions. Might not the same results be accomplished by having these children draw, paint and model themselves in various situations during art activities? Art education is also one of the few areas in which these children can be guaranteed some success.

"Many art teachers report having watched such children gain in self-respect by producing things in art that gave them a sense of accomplishment. The successes seemed to tell them that, in spite of all society said, they could create something of value." (15)

As well as improving self-image, success of this kind could also serve the purpose of reducing the feelings of anxiety that many Aboriginal children experience in competitive school atmospheres.

Closely related to the problem of self-image is that of cultural identity. Many Aboriginal children, particularly the fringe-dwellers, have lost much of their cultural past but find it difficult or impossible to identify with the European culture. They are in a cultural limbo. Satisfactory personality adjustment demands that they identify with one culture or the other. Since art is one of the major human activities through which culture is transmitted, its use in the school is highly likely to give the Aboriginal child something with which to identify and understand. Care must be taken, however, that the child is able to choose the culture with which he wishes to identify. Not always do these children wish to identify with the Aboriginal culture.

"Children and youth who are rejecting their ethnic backgrounds and making extreme efforts to become accepted in the dominant society may be affronted by the use of the language and art forms of their families' culture." (16)

This situation is more likely to be encountered in areas where close and frequent contact is made with European society.

Most of the literature dealing with disadvantaged children indicates that their *perceptual* and *cognitive development* may not have attained full potential. As perception is largely a learned behaviour (17), the extent and direction of its development will depend on the environment in which the child is reared. Many Aboriginal children come from homes where stimulus deprivation is common. There are a number of reasons why this occurs. The families of fringe-dwelling Aboriginals are often large so that the amount of attention each child is able to receive from parents is correspondingly reduced. According to Dasen:

"Verbal exploration also seems to be discouraged, and Aboriginal children do not apparently go through the period of asking 'why'." (18)

In the traditional culture, most knowledge was passed on verbally, thus encouraging rote memory learning and discouraging intellectual curiosity. It has also been found that Aboriginal children interact earlier than white children in their own peer groups (19). Thus, the opportunity to ask questions and receive information is reduced further. And finally, the economic deprivation of many Aboriginal families may preclude the purchase of stimulus and learning objects such as books and toys which are commonplace in middle-class homes.

For these reasons, the development of curiosity and motivation to perceive may not be actualized in Aboriginal children.

Such an environment is also likely to have an adverse effect on their cognitive development. One study in Central Australia found that a substantial percentage of Aboriginal children did not mature to Piaget's concrete operational stage, let alone to the stage of formal operations where abstract thought would be expected. Dasen believed this situation also to exist elsewhere:

"The findings of this study and their educational implications are specific to Central Australia, but it is likely that they would be applicable to the majority of Aboriginal children in other parts of Australia, including the Eastern states, as recent research projects have shown (Bruce, 1970; Nurcombe, 1970; de Lacey, personal commun.)." (20)

If this developmental retardation in the faculties of Aboriginal children is as widespread as suggested, urgent remedial and preventive programs are needed. Art education could play a vital role in such programs since, by its very nature, it is largely dependent on perception. Silverman (21) found that art experiences resulted in significant improvement in children's visual discrimination, especially among lower socio-economic groups. Also, because art experiences involve the manipulation of ideas and concrete materials, they have value in the development of cognitive structures. McFee acknowledges this function:

"His (the child's) art enhances his experience, giving him opportunity to develop and relate his growing concepts and ideas. His experience enhances his art, giving him new ideas to express." (22)

One of the problems - the sources of anxiety - often facing traditional Aboriginal children when they begin school, and again in the cultural sense when they contact European society, is *discontinuity*. An example of this is found in the fact that most teachers of Aboriginal children report that their time orientation is generally only for past events and that they are not motivated by future expectations. This *present time* orientation is characteristic of traditional as well as fringe-dwelling Aboriginal children. Some would argue that there is nothing wrong with this attitude. However, it could be argued that this time orientation leaves the Aboriginal at a disadvantage when trying to operate in the white society where competitiveness depends to a large degree on a future time orientation. Breaking from this traditional temporal concept would give the Aboriginal greater flexibility in operating between cultures. Methods to help the Aboriginal child to extend his time concept must involve practice in thinking and talking about past and future events. Many of the topics used in art activities can purposely be of this nature so that the children not only think and talk about these ideas, but reinforce them through delineation in visual form.

The value of art in *language development* and remedial programs with Aboriginal children is well recognized by researchers and teachers in this field. Studies by Weaver (23), Deutsch (24) and Mickelson and Galloway (25) indicate that disadvantaged children may be better stimulated to respond verbally by visual cues and motor activity than by other means. Art involves both of these stimuli. In fact, the Van Leer scheme (26) utilizes the children's

art as a basis for further discussion and clarification of ideas. The child is encouraged to tell the story of his picture to classmates, the teacher, and to parents. As well as providing stimulus to discussion, art can be used to enrich the concepts to which words apply, and to provide pleasurable application of classificatory concepts in size, shape and colour.

So far we have emphasized the importance of art as a remedial agent in the development of Aboriginal children. However, this should not detract from the far more important positive role that art can play in their lives. As for all children it provides the most natural avenue for the tangible expression of feelings, ideas, and fantasies. To young children it is the most natural, self-developed method of 'saying something'; of externalizing the inner-self. As such, it is fundamental to the early socialization process.

"All types of children, even prodigies of skill in naturalistic representation, use their drawings ...
... as a 'feeler', a spontaneous reaching-out to the external world, at first tentative, but capable of becoming the main factor in the adjustment of the individual to society." (27)

In stimulating the affective domain, it lays a foundation for a desired balance with the child's cognitive functioning; and provides the insights and skills for the Aboriginal child's deeper understanding and appreciation of the visual world.

"Self-expression through art will immeasurably enrich their emotional lives and promote their mental health." (28)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR METHODOLOGY IN TEACHING ART TO ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

In taking art with Aboriginal children, methods should be used which cater for their needs and ethnic differences. Most teachers, especially those teaching in the remote tribal areas, report that competition is not a motivating force with Aboriginal children. In the traditional life, competition was not a part of the culture. This attitude, however, may be breaking down in areas such as Palm Island. The responses to the questionnaire administered seem to indicate this change in attitude. Boys appear to be less motivated by competition than girls. It would seem, then, that in areas where competitive attitudes were absent, these children may prefer to work cooperatively in groups. There

are many activities in art which can be adapted to group work. Allowances will also have to be made for certain other community practices. For example, boys and girls of certain ages may not normally be permitted to work together. Group work in art lessons should respect these practices.

Teachers also report that these children do not like to be singled out and often feel ashamed or distrustful of verbal praise. This is consistent with the finding of Barclay (29) who suggested that, initially, concrete rewards should be given to disadvantaged children for work well done. This attitude may also have implications for evaluation of practical work at the completion of the art activity and teachers may have to organize this on a less individual basis. McFee (30) even states that such children may feel threatened by self-expression and self-direction if they are group-oriented. Under these circumstances, it would be advisable to initiate directed activities and gradually lead the children into self-expressive activities.

Teachers commonly report that Aboriginal children love outdoor activities. Many enterprising teachers capitalize on this by organizing lessons in many subjects outside the school room. Art should be no exception since there is much that can be accomplished in developing the children's perceptual abilities and aesthetic sensitivity when in the natural environment. Great opportunities would also exist for normal practical activities such as painting and drawing as well as experimenting with traditional art materials.

ART SYLLABUS DESIGN FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

In Queensland, there is only one Primary Art Syllabus (31) for use in schools. It has obviously been designed to educate children in the majority white culture, although the flexibility it proposes could be used by an enterprising teacher to plan a program for those Aboriginal children who wish to identify more closely with the European culture. However, it has many limitations in aims, methodology and content when we consider the needs and development of Aboriginal children who are more truly fringe-dwellers. Since this paper is concerned with Aboriginal art education in general, it is not proposed to suggest a program in any detail, or to suggest specific modifications to the Queensland Primary Art Syllabus. Only generalities are possible here.

The most important aims of such a syllabus should be:

- a. To preserve cultural meaning and provide the experiences and knowledge necessary to enable the child to operate confidently and effectively in both cultures. Cultural meaning for the child will depend on where he lives and what he wishes to identify with. If he is tribally-oriented, it is obvious that the art program should incorporate, and be based on, his own culture and art forms. This does not mean that only traditional topics and materials be used; it does mean, however, that the child is made aware of both traditional and European art forms in proportions best determined by the needs of individual communities.
- b. To develop the creative abilities of these children. Dasen (32), believes that divergent or creative thinking is not encouraged by Aboriginal parents in their children. Creativity in practical activities should also be related to the culture relevant to the child.

Another interesting method is the 'Developmental Approach' set out in the 1972 Special Schools Curriculum (Intermediate and Senior Section of the Primary School) by the Aboriginal Education Branch, Welfare Division, Northern Territory. It attempts an amalgam of traditional Aboriginal art with European art.

"By keeping at least one element consistent with traditional art-craft, and varying others, but in a way closely related to a traditional element, an art form could be developed which would be Aboriginal in character, but would neither be traditional nor non-Aboriginal. This approach offers the child the opportunity to use initiative yet contain in the art or craft identifying elements of his culture." (33)

This particular method of taking practical work could prove most useful in areas such as Palm Island where traditional culture has been lost or broken down.

In all cases it is important that teachers give the Aboriginal children picture topics related to stories or experiences they know well. Familiarity with Aboriginal myths will provide an unending source of interest and inspiration to some of the children.

It is also important to give Aboriginal children a broader concept of art than that which is apparent with the Palm Island

children. They should be helped to realize its relevance to their environment and mode of living.

There does not seem to be any logical reason for using traditional materials only, *unless* the child expresses a preference for them. However, occasional use of such materials would serve to show the children the remarkable achievements of their ancestors using limited materials. Generally, however, they should be given a wide variety of modern materials (and techniques) to encourage maximum creativity in two or three dimensions. It is also important to keep in mind that some children may be unfamiliar with modern materials and may need gradual introduction.

Aboriginal schools should have an extensive collection of books on Aboriginal life, mythology and art, since all are interrelated. This may serve to give their own art forms the importance they should assume in the eyes of the children.

INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

It is generally agreed that involving Aboriginal parents and community leaders in the education of their children is of crucial importance if the child is to develop an interest in his education, and if parents' suspicions about what is being taught are to be broken down. Teachers can involve the parents in the art program by:

- a. Inviting parents to school to view children at work on a new art technique; or to view an exhibition of their work.
- b. Allowing children to occasionally take home pictures or articles of a utilitarian nature, for example, pottery, fabric painting, etc.
- c. Inviting anyone with skills or knowledge of traditional Aboriginal art to talk to or to instruct the children. This will be particularly important in areas where parents resent a white teacher giving instruction in Aboriginal art and mythology; or where the teacher has a limited knowledge of local art and culture.

TEACHERS OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

Much has been written on the training required for teachers of Aboriginal children. For the effective teaching of art the following is suggested:

- a. Teachers should be familiar with the background and culture of the tribe or people where they are teaching. They should have a knowledge of how this culture is recorded and transmitted in art, music, and dance. And they should have training in art techniques, activities and use of art materials.
- b. Teachers should be made aware of their middle-class prejudices and that other groups may have very different values which are equally valid.
- c. In areas where standard English is not commonly used, teachers should attempt to become fluent in the language or English variant spoken, particularly for use in the lower grades.
- d. Teachers should be made aware of the self-fulfilling prophecy phenomenon. If the teacher expects Aboriginal children to produce inferior art and to lag in their aesthetic growth, they will oblige him.

In conclusion, preliminary findings suggest that, in Queensland, teachers of Aboriginal children are given no special training (except for infrequent in-service seminars) and this is reflected in the art work produced and the children's knowledge of art and artists. Little has been done by teachers to maintain or revive a pride in, and enthusiasm for their traditional art forms. Art education for Aboriginal children in Queensland appears to be almost a replication of that given to white middle-class children.

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Further Reading

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