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DISENTANGLING GLOBALIZATION
Towards a feminist geography of hair and beauty

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Introduction
Each year in May, Dubai hosts Beautyworld Middle East, a trade fair bringing together 2,000 exhibitors and 35,000 producers, distributors and cosmetologists from over 60 countries. It is now the world’s largest trade fair for the hair and beauty industry. The lucrative markets of Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) partly explain its dramatic growth and success. Also, increasingly attractive to Beautyworld visitors are the markets of East, West and Southern Africa and their cosmopolitan centres of Lagos and Accra, Nairobi and Kampala, Johannesburg and Cape Town. This success signals a growing desire in these places for cosmopolitan beauty, one that is rooted in a history of colonial and postcolonial international exchange. Africans are positioned not only as consumers in these commodity circuits; African entrepreneurs extend the beauty trade onto and within the continent, with African ‘saloonists’ adapting imported styles for their clients and innovative manufacturers producing hair weaves, skin lotions, fragrances and beauty technologies. Indeed, beauty is big business in the region, powerfully shaping and shaped by people and places.

Beauty is necessarily, then, deeply spatial. Its (im)material affects and objects, its ideologies and its imagined and embodied forms are powerful in producing, connecting and transforming our world. And yet, curiously, very little geographic attention has been paid to beauty (but see Fluri 2009; Wrigley-Asante, Agyei-Mensah, and Obeng 2017). In this chapter, we demonstrate some of the insights offered by a feminist and intersectional geographic approach to globalization, one centring hair and beauty. We do so through an analysis of the synthetic and human hair trade between the Gulf and East Africa. In particular, we demonstrate the methodological insights of studying hair and beauty via a feminist commodity-chain analysis. Building on the work of Priti Ramamurthy (2003, 2011) we centre three insights of this approach here: its postcolonial disruption of narratives of people and places in the Global South living with, affected by and driving globalization; its attention to the connected ideologies of gender, race, class and sexual power that reproduce and reinvent the industry; and its insistence on a ‘global–intimate’, relational understanding of scale. As we show, this approach reveals new insights into the embodied nature of globalization and the innovation, creative labour, trading ties and consumption politics that drive it.
Intimate geographies of globalization: feminist interventions

There is now an extensive, complex and often contradictory body of scholarship on globalization within the discipline of geography and across the social sciences. Scholars have argued that it should be understood both as a set of material processes of heightened spatial economic, political and socio-cultural integration (and in some cases, dislocation) and a powerfully dominant ideological discourse (Gibson-Graham 1996; Massey 2005; Yeoh 1999). Globalization has produced new kinds of mobilities and fixities, inclusions and exclusions and reconfigured circuits of commodities, as well as the entrenchment, recomposition and decomposition of values, norms and ideologies. Amid proclamations of an inevitable flattening of difference and a borderless world (Friedman 2005), critical scholars have pushed for grounded theorizations that attend to the ‘entanglements’ (Sheppard 2012) of global trade with a host of socio-cultural, economic and political spatialities that are, at once, material, discursive, emotional and power-laden (Domosh 2010; Gibson-Graham 1996; Katz 2001; Rankin 2003; Tsing 2005). One central area of interest is that of neoliberal globalization, a far more narrowly defined phenomenon concerning the emergent dominance of liberal political-economic ideology and practice around the world in the last 30 years (Carmody 2013; Peck and Tickell 2002; Power 2005). Political geographers have interrogated the biopolitical governing practices (Agnew 2005; Dodds 1998; Sparke 2006) of this form of globalization, how its logics are reinforced and reproduced (Gibson-Graham 1996), and how it has been resisted and reworked in multiple contexts (Hart 2002). Cultural engagements with economic geography, long concerned with uneven economic development and its place-based particularities, in developing and/or complicating spatialized economic models have contributed to deeper understandings of contemporary neoliberal globalization (Barnes 2001; Flew 2010; James, Martin and Sunley 2006; Warf 2012).

Feminist scholars have productively engaged with and extended political and economic studies of globalization. Centrally, such work has critiqued the tendency in both subdisciplines to focus (albeit often critically) on: formal and ‘public’ spheres of politics and economics and their associated spaces, places (e.g. firms and institutions, ‘global cities’, advanced economies of the Global North) and scales (e.g. the supranational and national); and on particular subjects and actors (e.g. supranational bodies, elite global managers) (Nagar et al. 2002; Staeheli and Kofman 2004). Such attends to ‘peripheral’ subjects and spaces, arguing that these are, in fact, central to understanding global political and economic relations (Oberhauser and Hanson 2008; and see Mbembe 2001). Here, feminist and cultural geographers have extended the insights gained by attending to the cultural workings of globalizations as they intersect with and co-produce those of the economic and political (Gökankesl and McLaury 2010; Rankin 2003). Feminist scholars here have brought historical archival and contemporary ethnographic methods to geography to interrogate the power-laden processes of meaning-making that both underpin and are produced through global circuits of production, trade and consumption (Domosh 2006, 2010; Rankin 2003).

Global commodities through a feminist geographic lens

Commodity chain analyses were first developed by Hopkins and Wallerstein to document the respatialization of capital accumulation in ‘core’ nations at the expense of the ‘periphery’ through the journey of a commodity (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986; Leslie and Reimer 1999; Wallerstein 2009). Studying processes of capital accumulation from production through to the point of sale has been the hallmark of realist commodity chain analyses undertaken by world systems scholars since the rise of the new international division of labour. Such analyses
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have focused on the macro-economic — valuably tracing new geographies of commodities, the relations that they formed between the Global North and South, and the parallel shifting of sovereignty between nation states and multinational corporations. With heightened economic integration, the heuristic was taken up by Gereffi, Korzeniewicz and Korzeniewicz (1994) and reconceptualized as ‘global commodity chain analysis’. A host of conceptual variants have been developed since, with shifts towards an understanding of commodity ‘networks’, which usefully moves beyond the linearity of the original chain conceptualization (Blair and Werner 2011). Put simply, Leslie describes its most contemporary formulation as a way to ‘trace the entire trajectory of a product across time and space, including the movement of material, resources, value, finance, and knowledge, as well as signs and symbols’ (2012, 65).

In parallel with those broader feminist developments described above, studies of commodities in economic geography have undergone productive critical interrogation. The global commodity chain analysis has been criticized for its privileging of primary commodity production or extraction (and elision of distribution and consumption, for example) and its interest only in those ‘nodes’ where flows of commodities touch down momentarily (Leslie and Reimer 1999), with little interrogation of the grounded spatialities of commodity chains, the agency of participants or the varied place-based meanings, values and norms attached to commodities and consumption practices (Bell and Valentine 1997; Cook and Crang 1996; Fine and Leopold 1993; Miller 1995; Slater 1997). This work is richly complemented by Appadurai’s call for an interrogation of the ‘social life’ of commodities (1986), one that traces their journey through space from production to consumption to better understand how seemingly abstract global circuits produce, shape and remake embodied relations of power (Bassett 2002; Cook 2004; Gökariskel and Secor 2010; Hollander 2008; Leslie 2012; Ramamurthy 2004). Of particular import to this project is the work of feminist scholars such as Bair (2005, 2009) and Leslie (2002, 2012), who have called attention to the interwoven classed and gendered relations bound up with commodity networks (Ansell, Tseou and Hajdu 2014; Oberhauser 2010; Oberhauser and Johnston-Anumonwo 2011; Oberhauser and Yeboah 2011). Most recently, these critical insights have been complicated by postcolonial interventions in economic geography and in the study of commodities (Maclean 2013; Pollard et al. 2009; Pollard, McEwan and Hughes 2011; Poon and Yeung 2009; Participants of the 2010 Economic Geography Workshop 2011). This work demands that attention be paid to the colonial legacies of race and racism that underpin contemporary economic structures.

A feminist commodity chain analysis interweaves these feminist and postcolonial interventions. Ramamurthy is a leading scholar of this approach (e.g. 2004, 2011, and see Schmidt 2018). Although not a geographer, the theoretical reframing and methodological intervention that she poses in her approach is deeply spatial and thus incredibly instructive for geographic work on globalization. We put this approach into conversation with insights from feminist geography around the ‘global intimate’ (Pratt and Rosner 2006; Smith 2012), demonstrating new and innovative ways to understand globalization and the social, political, economic and geographical lives of global commodities. In doing so, we centre three connected interventions for work on globalization: first, the disruption of dominant and orientalist narratives of people and places viewed as peripheral to and marginalized by globalization; second, a feminist commodity chain relies on a performance-based theorization of power: racial, classed, gendered, and sexualized power; and, last, the use of a relational understanding of scale that refuses to disconnect supranational, national and regional policy and practice from the household and the body. What emerges is an intersectional feminist geographic approach that attends to the embodied and emotional workings of commodity circuits and that reveals new stories of globalization and ways of engaging with and understanding it. We turn to each intervention below, demonstrating their insights by
grounding them in moments from the global hair and beauty trade operating through and beyond the Gulf–East African region.

Putting a feminist commodity chain analysis to work: snapshots from the Gulf–East African hair trade

Insight 1: disruptive stories of globalization: Uganda and Dubai as drivers of global beauty

To begin, feminist analyses of commodities, and their lives, aim to disrupt orientalist narratives of people and places in the Global South. A snapshot of the beauty industries in, and connecting, the Gulf and East Africa dramatically upturns the ‘single story’ (Adichie 2009, and see Owusu 2012) of Africa, of globalization and of beauty. While most scholarly and popular attention centres the Global North or emphasizes Africa’s marginalization through global economic exchange, a look at Gulf–East African beauty industry through the lens of a feminist commodity chain analysis offers another story.

The African trade in beauty products has a long history, rooted in global circuits of colonial and postcolonial international exchange (Horton 2004; Nicolini 2009; Thomas 2008), with long-standing ties to Europe and the Americas and also to the Gulf, East and South Asian regions. From the early 1990s on, East Africa underwent rapid economic growth. Uganda, along with Kenya and Tanzania, are particularly vibrant centres for the East Africa trade in beauty products, influenced continentally by the innovative fashion centres of the Congo, Ghana, South Africa, Nigeria and further afield, through African diasporic circuits (Balogun 2012; Thomas 2012). Focusing on Uganda, between 1992 and 2011 the country saw an average rise in GDP of 7% per year (AEO 2013), albeit unevenly centred on the south, particularly the capital, Kampala. In connection, Uganda has a growing middle class, estimated to be around 6.1 million people, mirroring that of Kenya and Tanzania (ADB 2011; Tentena 2012). While the consumer base of the hair and beauty trade extends beyond the middle class, these economic shifts have helped to position Uganda as an increasingly important site for the trade in and consumption of beauty products. Kampala, the main economic centre of Uganda, is at the heart of this vibrant global connection. The city hosts some of the largest markets for clothing and beauty goods, including Gazaland Mall, known popularly as ‘The House of Hair’, and Luwum Street, a long-established centre for bridal shopping across the region (Whitesell and Faria 2018). The city also holds year-round beauty-related events, including a range of pageants such as Miss Uganda and Miss Tourism-Uganda, and since 2013 has hosted the internationally recognized Kampala Fashion Week (Elledge and Faria 2018).

Uganda is also the home of an industrial base for the manufacturing of beauty goods. In the hair industry, Darling Ltd is the longstanding leader. Until its recent buy-out by giant Indian conglomerate Godrej, Darling was owned and operated by an extended Lebanese family based in Africa for over 20 years, with operations in 22 countries across the continent, according to a personal communication (in June 2012). The Ugandan branch is a leading producer for the East African region, exporting products to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of Rwanda and the new Republic of South Sudan. The branch designs, tests and releases 50 new styles a year, drawing on inspiration locally, across the region and internationally and expanding its consumer base (which spans low- to high-income levels from as young as 8 to 10 years old) through fashion-show advertising, ‘saloonist’ training, social media and mobile salons that travel to rural areas to introduce Ugandans to the latest in synthetic hair fashions. In 2014, Darling Ltd
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was named ‘Superbrand of the Year’ in Uganda, and it continues to be one of the most successful and influential hair manufacturers on the continent.

While Darling Ltd is a major supplier of synthetic hair products across the continent, beauty products are also imported, and Dubai is a vital trading point. Many of the products flowing into this region from Europe, China, the US and elsewhere arrive via Dubai, transforming the city into one of the largest trading hubs, wholesale and logistical sites and centres for cosmetological connection via the Beautyworld Middle East trade fair. Dubai is also an influential arbiter of style, being home to Huda Kattan, a renowned beauty influencer. Although a large volume of goods now arrives in East Africa directly from places such as China, Dubai remains influential. This is in part due to its proximity to Africa and the neoliberalizing imperatives that continue to ease travel and business operations.

Distributors like Mohammad and Lee, operating in the wholesale district of Deira, have worked in Dubai for over a decade. They moved from Iran and the Philippines, respectively, in search of employment and found work in the city’s ‘old town’ in the lucrative hair and beauty trade. Small- and mid-scale entrepreneurs dominate the emergent African trade, purchasing less than 100 kilogrammes of hair on each visit to the city’s downtown wholesale hair shops, a number of which are also owned and run by Africans. These traders are highly mobile, often (but not always) middle class and include members of the African diaspora. Rather than exporting via the Jebel Ali free zone, these traders fly smaller quantities via suitcases and/or plane cargo packages to the cosmopolitan market centres of Lagos, Accra, Nairobi and Kampala. Traders making larger purchases move their orders through cargo companies, which transport their goods by container from the Gulf to the port of Mombasa in Kenya. Traders like Lubega, a Ugandan man in his forties, buy hair in bulk that has been freshly shipped into Mombasa, filling the markets of Nairobi. He hired porters to help him to pack and move five or more bags filled with hair onto a bus back to Kampala. When he began his business in the early 1990s, he was one of the first to import synthetic hair into the country, and it was lucrative. He ran three shops in the city under his business name of Lubex Hair and Beauty, pioneering a trade in a commodity that would become big business across the region.

Insight 2: sigh … ‘Russians have the best hair’: ideologies of power in the global hair trade

A feminist commodity chain analysis secondly insists that we attend to power: the connected and complex ways that racial, gendered, sexualized and classed norms, ideals and geometries of power operate over the life course of the commodity. A look at hair, hair care and hair management through this lens is instructive.

I (Author 1) overheard the words in the quote above at a 2015 Beautyworld Middle East trade fair. The comment gave me the chills: a simple articulation of the power-laden work of hair and beauty. Indeed, critical race scholars have long argued that hair — and hair technologies like wigs, weaves and extensions — is highly visible and meaning-laden (Hill Collins 1990; Wingfield 2009) and is powerfully used to promote, reinforce and culturally diffuse gender, race and class-based norms and hierarchies. In one way, hair beauty norms rely on and exploit historical precedents and beliefs about race, class and gender, providing products of corporeal alteration to meet these ideals (Thomas 2012). In turn, hair — and those traders, stylists and clients who work with and wear it — both troubles and reworks these norms (Balogun 2012).

A feminist analysis of the commodity reveals the ways that these seemingly contradictory processes are at work together. Interviews with traders and consumers and an archival analysis of decades of fashion coverage in the country suggest that, until 15 to 20 years ago, only the
Elites bought and used hair additions. At that time, these purchases acted as a marker of class, urban, gendered and cosmopolitan distinction (Faria 2013; Weiss 2009). However, this symbolic power of hair extensions heightened demand for them. In response, the material object itself has been modified, with a range of qualities, styles, lengths and modes of attachment, to expand the socio-economic consumer base. This raises new and interesting questions about a ‘sub-altern’, ‘vernacular’, ‘working-class’ or otherwise non-elite cosmopolitanism (Gidwani 2006; Kurasawa 2004; Mohan 2006; Oza 2006), expressed through consumption. Young students in Uganda who regularly purchase hair extensions often described the way it made them feel: up to date; worldly; modern; successful. Women of the times. Of course, these modern hairstyles and textures create anxieties about threats to ‘Ugandan’ national or ‘African’ continental ideals of womanhood, as evidenced elsewhere on the continent (Balogun 2012; Faria 2013; Hackspiel 2008; Thomas 2008, 2012; Weiss 2009).

Direct marketing techniques by Darling Ltd and competitor companies, and well-travelled traders like Lubega, have introduced hair extensions into markets across Uganda, building consumers even in more rural and poorer communities. Here newer, synthetic alternatives and cost-effective designs have sharply increased the number of those who can afford these products in Uganda, according to a personal communication in 2014 (Faria and Jones, in review). On the international market, a similar widening of price and product ranges has driven the growth of hair additions over the last two decades. Here, price is determined by ‘quality’, a notion that reflects, and reproduces, a longstanding and racialized ideal of hair beauty. For example, one trader at the Beautyworld trade fair described how first the ranking is determined on the ‘authenticity’ of the hair (whether it is human or synthetic). Then it is based on phenotypical categorizations, such as the shape of individual strands of hair and their straightness. These thinly veiled racial hierarchies centre on their likeness to Indo-European hair. For this reason, Indian ‘Virgin Remy’ hair (i.e. that which has not been chemically treated and where individual strands all run in the same direction) is among the most expensive hair on the global market.

This ranking system also speaks to a very embodied classed, sexualized, gendered and racialized politics of hair that has been interrogated in the wider (primarily North American) African diaspora (Banks 2000) yet remains largely unaddressed in continental Africa (but see Asante 2016; Fritsch 2017; Thomas 2008, 2012 regarding skin lighteners). A feminist commodity chain analysis pushes us to pay attention to the racialized complexities of the sale and profitability of long, straightened, European-styled hair that mimic those of White bodies and are linked with the cultural practices and structural advantages of Whiteness.

However, Ramamurthy’s framework also prompts deeper interrogation. A feminist commodity chain analysis insists that racial power is not fixed but performed, socially and historically rooted and malleable. Even as they live within the racial logics described above, the women who buy and style hair also do so in defiance or outside of these logics. For example, women consumers of synthetic hair in Kampala spoke about how ease, fashionability and playfulness guide their decision to buy and style synthetic hair. In turn, the use of hair weaves and the popularity of styles named after cultural icons such as Beyoncé and Rhianna demonstrate how the women who sport them identify with a wider pan-African diaspora, connecting them to global cultural circuits of Blackness (Rahier, Hintzen and Smith 2010) while also refashioning local styles. There is much more at work than simply an effort to mirror Whiteness. The complexities of these relationships – between consumers and their products, and between the people and places of the beauty trade and wider processes of globalization – are revealed in these moments through the lens of an intersectional feminist commodity chain analysis. We see, for example, how commodified hair and the wider beauty trade are produced by, perpetuate and disrupt the logics of capitalism. And that these logics are braided with, and rely upon, others – those perhaps...
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...of nationalism, colonialism, racism, heterosexism and ableism – to produce this powerful ideal, practice and industry of beauty.

**Insight 3: scalar innovations: the global intimacies of hair and beauty**

Lastly, a feminist commodity chain analysis challenges the macro-economic and political emphases of previous commodity chain studies, insisting upon a *relational understanding of scale* that understands seemingly abstract supranational, national and regional policy, as always bound up with the body, as themselves corporeal. Attention to the embodied and emotional workings of commodity circuits here relies productively on the conceptual geographic work of the ‘global intimate’ (Pratt and Rosner 2006). This is a particularly elegant conceptualization of power, space and scale that we use in our research to better understand globalization. Centrally, it troubles understandings of ‘global’ processes as masculine, distanced and disembodied, and the simultaneous rendering of the ‘local’, the ‘domestic’ and the ‘bodily’ as essentialized, feminized and characterized by the minutiae of the everyday (Mountz and Hyndman 2006, 446).

Through this framework, seemingly abstract processes like neoliberal globalization can be rethought by examining the intimate, the familiar, the sensory and the embodied experiences of ‘living and knowing the global’ (Mountz and Hyndman 2006, 448). The global intimate frame also draws upon Katz’s (2001) methodological and epistemological call to construct ‘counter topographies’ by recognizing connections produced through global processes to other places, people and times. In doing so, the global intimate framework ‘trac[es] lines across places to show how they are connected by the same processes, [while] simultaneously embedding these processes within the specifics of fully contextualized, three dimensional places’ (Pratt and Yeoh 2003, 163). By moving away from the conflated binary of the global and local, where scales are rendered discrete, oppositional and in a moral- or power-based hierarchy, the global and/as intimate framing foregrounds the embodied, sensual, emotional, grounded operations of global capital. In this move, it is ‘undoing’ (Pratt and Rosner 2006, 20) the grand narratives of neoliberal and postcolonial globalization.

This lens is particularly instructive to think through a particular encounter in our research on the global hair and beauty trade. At one Beautyworld Middle East booth, a Russian saleswoman woos a group of Iranian visitors. They are part of a contingent of about fifty female salon owners, distributors and clients who arrive together via a high-end chartered bus.

She hopes her product, a high-quality ‘Virgin Remy’ Indian hair, dyed blonde, available in 8, 10, 12 and 14 inch lengths, will appeal to them. Demonstrating how to attach and style the pieces, she encourages the women to touch them – to feel the softness and attest to the hair’s purity, its lack of prior chemical treatment, its cuticles that run in the same direction and, above all, to its authenticity as human. They comply, teasing strands of hair between their manicured fingers, sighing, laughing with pleasure and nodding in agreement, while others clamour to photograph the stylists’ fashionings so they can replicate them back at home. Indian hair, dyed, processed and sold by Russian workers and sales representatives in Dubai, for the high-end markets of Iran: the varied travels of purity, authenticity, beauty, glamour.

In this moment, we see the power-laden nature of the global hair and beauty trade and of this particular expression of economic globalization. Global intimate scale-thinking pushes us to tell this new geographic story: of the always and already embodied and emotional nature of international commodity exchange and globalized political decision-making: its sensory experience, its grounding in the tired limbs of travel-weary traders, the aching fingers of stylists, the relief, excitement, satisfaction of representatives who make that sale; the pleasure and anxieties, too, around consumption, around dressing-up.
Conclusion: towards a feminist geography of hair and beauty

Just a few weeks before the 2014 Beautyworld Middle East opened its doors, the first African Global Business Forum was held in Dubai. Organized by the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) (Geronimo 2013) regional investment agency, the event was designed for African countries to ‘display their main attractions, facilities and business opportunities’ and to ‘highlight Dubai’s strategic link between the continent and the rest of the world’ (Africa Global Business Forum 2013). The Ugandan Prime Minister Amama Mbabaza and the Ugandan Minister of Trade Hon. Amelia Kyambadde were key speakers at the event, demonstrating the central role that Uganda has begun to play in promoting more open trade between the Middle East and East Africa. This vibrant, emergent and multi-billion-dollar beauty industry thus reflects, yet has also driven, the rising economic integration of Africa and the Middle East over the past 15 to 20 years. Hair is a significant part of this trade. African entrepreneurs are extending hair beauty products onto and within that continent, and local manufacturers are developing their own styles through the labour of women braiders and stylists. In connection, the hair trade is driven by the magic of the material object itself: the complexly gendered, classed and racialized desire evoked by commodified hair and its promises of class distinction and cosmopolitan style, its visage of modernity.

But there are many other geographic stories of beauty that should also be told. Beauty is a powerful ideology, a set of material objects and practices that dramatically shapes lives and places. Ideologies of beauty, their material objects and effects, and the people and places brought

Figure 12.1 Showcasing hair at the Beautyworld Middle East trade fair, 2015.
Source: C. Faria.
Disentangling globalization into the webs of beauty are many and varied. These stories are produced across our field for a deeper understanding of health and well-being, migration and mobility, urban change, national development and tourism, the reproduction of violent sexual, gendered and able – its norms in our everyday environments, to name a few. There is a long-established work outside of our field on beauty, such as that by Priti Ramamurthy, led by scholars of colour, critical gender and race theorists and Crip-studies theorists (Baggio and Moretti 2018; Balogun 2012; Cepeda 2018; Clare 2017; Dolan and Johnstone-Louis 2011; Ford 2016; Gentles-Pearl 2018; Oza 2006; Özdemir 2016; Wingfield 2009, to name just a few examples). As geographers, we can valuably build on and extend this scholarship with our own spatial insights.

We close, then, with a call for a feminist geography of hair and beauty, one that is postcolonial and intersectional: attentive to the connected work of racial, gendered, sexualized, classed power and its grounding in, and escape from, the past–presents of colonialism.

Key readings


References


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