

*Dirassat & Abhath*

The Arabic Journal of Human  
and Social Sciences



مجلة دراسات وأبحاث

المجلة العربية في العلوم الإنسانية  
والاجتماعية

*EISSN: 2253-0363*

*ISSN : 1112-9751*

**Analysing Intertextuality: How the Vietnam War is Represented  
in Literature and Film**

**تحليل التناص: كيف تم تمثيل حرب فيتنام في الأدب والسينما**

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تاريخ القبول : 2025/09/20

تاريخ الاستلام: 2025/07/11

## ABSTRACT

This study examines how intertextuality serves as a critical framework for analyzing representations of the Vietnam War in American literature and film. Focusing on Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. The paper investigates how these works reconfigure trauma, memory, and ideology through literary and cinematic intertextual references. The analysis draws on theories by Kristeva, Genette, Caruth, and Baudrillard, as it combines close reading, narrative theory, and visual semiotics to uncover how each text destabilizes conventional war narratives. The results demonstrate that intertextuality not only transcends media and genres but also exposes the mythologising processes of cultural memory, deconstructs militarised masculinity, and challenges American exceptionalism. The study presents a compelling framework for analysing war narratives, but it also acknowledges that to comprehend the evolving memory of the Vietnam War fully, more comprehensive and inclusive viewpoints are necessary, particularly from Vietnamese sources and new digital media .

**Keywords :** Vietnam War; Intertextuality; Cultural Memory; Trauma Theory; Postmodernism Myth vs. Reality

## المخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة كيف يمكن اعتبار التناسل إطاراً نقدياً لتحليل تمثيلات حرب فيتنام في الأدب والسينما الأمريكية. تركز على رواية الأشياء التي حملوها لتيمن أوبراين، وفيلم القيامة الآن لفرانسيس فورد كوبولا، وفيلم سترة معدنية كاملة لستانلي كوبريك. تستقصي الورقة كيف تعيد هذه الأعمال تشكيل مفاهيم الصدمة والذاكرة والأيديولوجيا من خلال إشارات تناسلية أدبية وسينمائية.

تعتمد التحليلات على نظريات كل من جوليا كريستيفا، وجيرار جنيت، وكاثي كاروث، وجان بودريار، حيث تم دمج القراءة التحليلية الدقيقة مع نظرية السرد والسميائيات البصرية للكشف عن كيفية زعزعة هذه النصوص للسرديات الحربية التقليدية.

وتُظهر النتائج أن التناسل لا يتجاوز الوسائط والأنواع الأدبية فقط، بل يفضح أيضاً عمليات التأسيس الأسطوري للذاكرة الثقافية، ويقوّض مفهوم الرجولة العسكرية، ويتحدى فكرة الاستثنائية الأمريكية.

تقدم الدراسة إطاراً تحليلياً فعالاً لفهم سرديات الحرب، لكنها في الوقت ذاته تُقرّ بضرورة وجود رؤى أكثر شمولاً وتنوعاً لفهم الذاكرة المتطورة لحرب فيتنام، خصوصاً من مصادر فيتنامية ومن وسائط الإعلام الرقمي الحديثة. الكلمات المفتاحية: حرب فيتنام؛ التناسل؛ الذاكرة الثقافية؛ نظرية الصدمة؛ ما بعد الحداثة؛ الأسطورة مقابل الواقع.

## Introduction

Intertextuality is defined as the relationship between two or more texts, extending beyond written texts to encompass films, images, and other media. This paper focuses mainly on the intertextual nature that connects literature and film. That is, no film is free from a literary work, and no literary work is free from film. Texts are not entirely free from other, preexisting texts. Similarly, films are not free from preexisting texts, and they go on between past and present in a never-ending circle. Therefore, images, texts, and films should be studied through a connecting thread, as human productions have relationships.

Concerning this definition of intertextuality, this article provides an analysis of *The Things They Carried* and *Apocalypse Now*. The intertextual perspective used here analyses the Vietnam War's impact on trauma through texts, images and films. The selected works explicitly interrelate with each other, while those that do not, in most cases, refer to the same texts, images, and sounds, shaping a similar representation of the Vietnam War.

This analysis, therefore, contributes to the understanding of the Vietnam War by examining how various works are interconnected and influence one another.

This paper also analyses and provides a close reading of a selection of literary works, specifically those by Tim O'Brien. It analyses how Vietnam novels intertwine with images and movies through the broader cultural impact of war ideology. Other significant works, such as *Apocalypse Now*, are scrutinized through a close analysis of their visual, narrative, and symbolic elements. This close analysis aims to dig deeper into the work, uncovering more than just a war movie. As a work that widely and explicitly interweaves a short story by Joseph Conrad, it is also the one where stage directions, images, and sounds play a crucial role.

Therefore, while analyzing its intertextualities with other works, this paper identifies and accounts for these elements in detail.

Historically speaking, the Vietnam War, which lasted from 1965 to 1968, was supported politically, socially and culturally as it occurred in the context of the Cold War and the clash of ideologies. However, as the war progressed, people's opinions began to shift. The Tet Offensive in 1968 led to a significant cultural shift. Anti-war groups started to present a problem, and protests and demonstrations mainly were about fighting the US government and dealing with social problems. As more people learned about the war, local groups held fake funerals for the dead. To Investigate the cultural consequences of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the analysis of the experiences and attitudes of soldiers and the political and social unrest that happened in the US during the war seems necessary.

## Literature Review

Multiple studies employ intertextual approaches in analyzing representations of the Vietnam War in both literature and film. Middleton (2008) demonstrates how texts like *The Things They Carried* use strategies such as metafiction and intertextuality to represent their notion of the war. Using allusion, pastiche, and self-reflexivity, these works aim to question historical truth and the same war ideology that got Americans involved in the war.

Furthermore, Carpenter (2003) compares postmodern fragmentation with mainstream realism by using intertextual techniques to examine how different texts subvert prevailing narratives. Vietnam literature's subversive character is based on a sophisticated web of cultural symbols and classic texts.

Similarly, Middleton (2008) emphasizes the significance of intertextuality in re-creating the myth of Vietnam in American culture by fusing simulated narratives with historical facts to create multi-layered meaning.

The interdisciplinary work presented by Ye (2018) explores multiple mediums, including literature and film, to analyze how cultural identity and thematic resonance are shaped. Ye argues that the Vietnam War is not just a historical event, but a broader cultural framework that extends beyond literary texts.

Finally, Phan (2012) stresses the larger cultural implications of these intertextual techniques through the reconciliatory nature of literature. This cathartic aspect of literature allows individuals to negotiate trauma, memory and national identity. By doing this, he incorporates political and social critique into his intertextual analysis.

In conclusion, the existing research provides a comprehensive examination of intertextuality in the portrayal of the Vietnam War in literature and film. Each of these works has examined a different facet of this historical event through literary deconstruction, cinematic analysis, or cultural memory studies. These realizations come together to provide a thorough examination of intertextuality in this area.

### **Cultural reception**

The critical reception of Vietnam War literature and film has been profoundly impactful and often contradictory, challenging traditional notions of war narratives and truth itself (Middleton, 2008). These works significantly reshaped how Americans understood and remembered the war, moving beyond conventional heroic portrayals.

Key aspects of their critical reception include:

- **Redefining "Truth" and Realism:** A central paradox in the reception of Vietnam War literature and film is that highly fictionalized and unrealistic texts were often perceived as the most realistic or authentic representations of the war (Middleton, 2008).

- o For example, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, despite being intentionally surreal, became a "standard of realism" against which other representations

of the war were judged (Middleton, 2008). A 1980 survey showed 61% of respondents found *Apocalypse Now* presented "a fairly realistic picture" of the war (Middleton, 2008).

- o Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* was critically praised for both its "specificity of observed physical detail" (realism) and its capture of "surrealism of combat" (Middleton, 2008). This aligns with O'Brien's own concept of "story-truth" versus "happening-truth," suggesting that emotional or psychological truth, even if fictional, can convey a deeper reality.

- o This critical stance stemmed from the belief that the Vietnam War itself was experienced as surreal, confusing, and contradictory, making metafictional techniques uniquely suited to capture its reality (Middleton, 2008). The war was often perceived as a "simulation" due to media coverage and soldiers' prior exposure to World War II films (Middleton, 2008).

- **Challenging American Myths and Ideologies:** Critics recognized these works for their fundamental critique of deeply ingrained American myths and values, especially those related to war and national identity (Middleton, 2008).

- o Works often highlighted the "death of the American mythos" and the "deconstruction of the hero myth," portraying soldiers not always as traditional heroes, but as victimized, traumatized, or even committing atrocities (Sharrett, 1986).

- o Early films like *The Green Berets* (1968) were poorly received because their traditional heroic war story and patriotic tone did not resonate with an increasingly unpopular war, with critics calling it "rotten and false in every detail". Soldiers themselves viewed it as "unintentional high camp" (Middleton, 2008).

- o *The Deer Hunter* (1978) was a box office success, drawing significant public attention and winning five Academy Awards (Middleton, 2008). While some critics saw it as politically and ideologically misleading for dramatizing Vietnamese brutality and emphasizing American suffering, others

praised it as a breakthrough in representing war horror through the Russian roulette metaphor and for critiquing the displacement of immigrants (Ye, 2018). Its ending, a collective singing of "God Bless America," was interpreted both as patriotic and as a "cynical and helpless reaction to the tragedy".

- o *Apocalypse Now* (1979) was initially "denounced for its casual gloss of the politics of Vietnam" and "strained intellectualism" (Sharrett, 1986). However, it quickly became recognized as a "pivotal American film" and a "problematic masterpiece" that served as a "bitter and elaborate satire" of American folly (Ye, 2018). Critics noted its "deconstruction of war film, film noir, and horror genres" and its exposure of the "mythic apparatus of war" (Sharrett, 1986). Baudrillard notably categorized it as a "super film" that cinematically "won" the war, surpassing military and industrial power (Ye, 2018).

- o *Platoon* (1986) was highly acclaimed for its "social realism", vividly depicting the mundane and terrifying experiences of the ordinary grunt, and for portraying the "antagonisms of race, region and class" within the military folly (Ye, 2018). It was seen as contributing to a "national catharsis" and allowing the public to express their confusions about Vietnam folly (Ye, 2018).

- o *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), a significant box office success, was praised for its "profound and comprehensive attack on the authoritarian macho mentality" that led to Vietnam folly (Ye, 2018). Critics recognized its "more realist depiction" of the psychological and physical trauma of war, including literal castration, and its inclusive portrayal of veterans' struggles to regain dignity in society (Ye, 2018). It was viewed as part of a collective "healing process" in the late 1980s.

- **Genre-Bending and Narrative Innovation:** Critics lauded many of these

works for their innovative approaches to storytelling and their blending of genres.

- o *The Things They Carried* was seen as a "new form" that blended autobiography, short stories, and philosophical commentary.

- o Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) was recognized as a work of "New Journalism," a "hybrid form" that blurred traditional genre distinctions and employed subjective, fictional devices to convey the war's "secret history" (Carpenter, 2003).

- o Critics have debated whether the war itself and its literature should be characterized as "postmodern" (Carpenter, 2003). While some argued the literature conformed to classic war narrative structures, others insisted it was a direct product of a "postmodern event and postmodern consciousness," exhibiting traits like relativism, diversity, parody, and metafiction (Carpenter, 2003).

- **Ethical Debates:** The highly fictionalized nature of some works also sparked ethical debates among critics. Some argued that presenting the war as surreal or unreal mystified its "material fact" and prevented meaningful lessons from being learned (Middleton, 2008). However, others contended that these texts, by exposing their own constructed nature, empowered readers to critically engage with and deconstruct other historical and political narratives, thereby fostering a deeper, albeit different, understanding of the war (Middleton, 2008). In summary, the critical reception of Vietnam War literature and film was complex and dynamic. It moved beyond simple judgments of factual accuracy to acknowledge the innovative narrative techniques that captured the unique, often surreal, experience of the war, even as it sparked debates about the ethical implications of fictionalized representations of such a significant historical event. These works became canonical, influencing how subsequent conflicts, like the Iraq War, were represented in literature and film.

### **Intertextuality in Vietnam Literature:**

The anarchic and morally ambiguous nature of the Vietnam War is highlighted in both

literature and film. In literature, intertextuality connects different works through allusions, references, and thematic parallels, all of which underscore the violent realities of the war. A prime example is Tim O'Brien's 'The Things They Carried', which blends fiction with autobiographical elements, creating a narrative that reflects the fragmented nature of memory. Thus, the writer echoes with a broader cultural movement, postmodernism, which encompasses the techniques mentioned above. Inviting the reader to question the boundaries between truth and fiction, O'Brien's use of metafiction reflects the contradictory and chaotic nature of the Vietnam War in particular, as he challenges the established Grand narratives of American heroism. Thus, through allusions to literary and cultural traditions, referring to earlier war literature, O'Brien uses intertextuality to allow the reader to subvert established notions of the war (Ye, 2018).

### **Intertextuality in Film**

When it comes to visual representations, films and images often speak louder than words, as these channels utilize intertextuality through visual references, narrative structures, and thematic motifs. In the context of the Vietnam War, the impact of images is more substantial, as cinematic techniques aim to portray the meaninglessness of the conflict.

Inspired by Joseph Conrad's novella "Heart of Darkness" (Conrad, 1902), Francis Ford Coppola's "Apocalypse Now" is a significant example. The film transposes Conrad's portrayal of colonialism and moral ambiguity to the context of the Vietnam War. He thereby creates a powerful commentary on the nature of war and human decadence.

Stanley Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket" serves as a profound example of intertextuality, skillfully incorporating a multitude of elements drawn from various literary and cinematic sources. The film's vivid and unsettling depiction of military training, as well as the profound

psychological effects of war, references a range of both historical accounts and impactful pop culture artefacts. This fusion creates a richly complex narrative that offers a powerful critique of the romanticization often associated with warfare (Kubrick, 1987). Through its layered intertextual references, "Full Metal Jacket" invites and challenges audiences to confront the harsh and brutal realities of the Vietnam War, compelling them to reflect on the often-glamorized images of combat and the actual cost of human suffering in the pursuit of military objectives.

### **Impact OF The War**

The Vietnam War was a turning point in American history and culture, marking the first time a war was filmed and broadcast, contrasting with the fabricated celebrity of World War II. It also marked the first time a segment of the population staged elaborate protests and demonstrations, leading to political debates and the creation of new movies that criticized government reporting. This war raised questions about the fractured psyche of America and its impact on culture and reflection (Middleton, 2008). Due to this impact, the war became an intertextual framework that reinterprets the war experience through a variety of texts and images. A significant example is Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, exploring how the narrative trauma of the Vietnam War has been both remembered and misremembered in literature, often distorting the real complexities of the conflict (Middleton, 2008).

Intertextuality is essential for understanding the cultural impact of the Vietnam War. Texts engage with culture through various references and symbols, and the narratives surrounding the war are complex and multifaceted. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien explores how the trauma of the Vietnam War has been both remembered and distorted in subsequent literature (Middleton, 2008).

Moreover, existing cultural myths and narratives were frequently reshaped and

referenced in literature and cinema. According to Middleton (2008), this interaction raised critical questions about the nature of reality, war, and American identity.

Before the Vietnam War, American culture was shaped by a "hyperreality" of World War II, which was depicted as a righteous and powerful conflict through newsreels, photographs, films, and history books. However, the Vietnam War presented a stark departure from this idealized narrative. The confusion and fear of Vietnam appeared surreal to many Americans, and the John Wayne-style heroism associated with WWII failed to resonate with the chaotic reality of Vietnam. Soldiers mocked it as "high camp," and this shift forced a reevaluation of American military history, even recasting World War II as a "meaningless horror story" in later works (Middleton, 2008).

Vietnam was dubbed the "first television war," with fragmented and decontextualized media coverage creating a jarring juxtaposition for viewers. The portrayal of the war in the media prioritized image over authentic experience, reinforcing the disconnection between the real war and its representation.

#### **Ideological Confrontation and Deception:**

The Vietnam War was primarily framed as a Cold War struggle to limit Soviet influence in Southeast Asia and prevent the spread of communism, while preserving U.S. security and prestige. However, real-world events increasingly exposed the government's deception regarding the war's origins, necessity, and consequences. This exposed the contradictions in the myth of American exceptionalism—the belief that the U.S. was free from imperial desires and served as a legitimate defender of freedom.

The My Lai Massacre, initially covered up, is a prime example of this deception. Once exposed, it revealed that America "neither had a superior morality nor ideology over Vietnam." These revelations led to critical reflections on American actions, prompting works that

challenged these atrocities and government cover-ups (Ye, 2018).

As the war dragged on, its costly and ambiguous nature spurred widespread public dissatisfaction and fueled anti-war movements, deepening social conflicts within the U.S. Works of literature and film began to focus on the traumatic experiences of soldiers—highlighting the psychological toll, incidents of friendly fire, and the brutalizing aspects of combat. Soldiers were often depicted as struggling with PTSD, and the notion that war transforms men into "crazy killers" rather than heroes became a key theme (Ye, 2018).

The Vietnam War played a pivotal role in shaping postmodern literature and film, fostering dissent, disillusionment, and radical skepticism. It was seen as a chaotic "quagmire," which disrupted grand narratives and demanded new forms of representation, such as metafiction, surrealism, and intertextuality.

#### **Methods**

To investigate how Vietnam War narratives reprocess and subvert earlier texts, producing a "palimpsest" (Genette, 1982) of cultural memory, this study employs Kristeva's concept of intertextuality as a lens. The author contends that fragmented storytelling, such as O'Brien's episodic vignettes, reflects the psychological traumas of the war by incorporating Caruth's theory of trauma. Baudrillard's simulations, meanwhile, reveal the "hyperreal" mediation of Vietnam and explain how movies like *Apocalypse Now* blur the lines between myth and war. This method reveals how intertextuality both creates and destroys national war myths by bridging textual analysis with ideological critique.

#### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative, intertextual approach to examine how representations of the Vietnam War in American literature and film construct, deconstruct, and mediate cultural memory, trauma, and national identity. Grounded in

the intertextual theories of Julia Kristeva and Gérard Genette, as well as trauma theory (Caruth, 1996) and Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal (1983), the methodology focuses on both textual and audiovisual analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The primary sources—The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien, *Apocalypse Now* by Francis Ford Coppola, and *Full Metal Jacket* by Stanley Kubrick—were selected for their cultural prominence, explicit intertextual engagement, and thematic focus on the psychological aftermath of the Vietnam War. These works also exemplify diverse narrative forms and stylistic techniques, making them ideal for comparative intertextual study.

### **Analytical Framework**

1. Intertextual Mapping (Kristeva, Genette): Identifying references to earlier texts.
2. Trauma-Centric Narrative Analysis (Caruth): Examining Fragmentation and Memory Representation.
3. Visual Semiotics and Hyperreality (Baudrillard): Analyzing filmic elements—mise-en-scène, sound, editing.

### **Coding and Themes**

Analytical categories included masculinity, trauma, myth vs. reality, and media/simulation. Comparative matrices were produced to trace themes across literature and film.

Through close reading, the analysis of literature centered on intertextual references, metafiction, trauma indicators, and representations of masculinity and moral ambiguity, interpreted through Caruth's trauma theory and Genette's frameworks.

The analysis of film focused on intertextual parallels with *Heart of Darkness*, symbolic visuals, sound design, and Baudrillardian hyperreality. The paper also analyzed allusions to pop culture and military narratives, the dual structure, the psychological breakdown of characters, and the use of irony and pastiche. Through a thematic matrix (Trauma; Myth vs. Reality; Masculinity; Media/Simulation), the paper

clarifies how each work engages with shared motifs and narrative strategies.

### **Results**

The analysis revealed that intertextuality functions not merely as a stylistic device but as a critical mechanism for interrogating national myths, collective memory, and ideological constructs surrounding the Vietnam War.

First, all three works—The Things They Carried, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Full Metal Jacket*—deploy narrative fragmentation and reflexive structure to mirror the psychological disorientation experienced by soldiers. O'Brien's metafictional blurring of fact and fiction recreates trauma as a cyclical, non-linear event, resisting closure. Similarly, Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* adapts *Heart of Darkness* to reframe war as moral descent, not national triumph, using intertextual allusion to recast imperialism as timeless and transhistorical.

Second, the deconstruction of militarized masculinity emerges as a shared motif. Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* stages boot camp as a psychological gauntlet that strips individuality and rebuilds it around aggression and conformity. O'Brien and Kubrick both subvert the myth of the heroic male soldier, portraying characters consumed by fear, absurdity, or numbness. These intertextual representations challenge traditional images of bravery and instead expose vulnerability, confusion, and ethical ambiguity.

Third, the films—particularly *Apocalypse Now*—embody Baudrillard's hyperreality, where the war is consumed as spectacle. Cinematic techniques—like disjointed sound design, surreal imagery, and exaggerated mise-en-scène—construct a war that feels more fictional than real. This simulation not only distorts memory but also questions whether audiences can meaningfully distinguish cinematic myth from historical fact.

Lastly, the comparative matrix reveals that each work consciously references not only canonical texts (*Heart of Darkness*, war

memoirs) but also each other, creating a palimpsestic cultural memory. These intertextual echoes highlight how the Vietnam War, as remembered through American culture, is less a record of fact than a contested terrain of ideological narratives and mediated images.

Together, these findings illustrate that intertextuality acts as both a tool of critique and a mirror of cultural ambivalence, exposing the fractured, mythologized, and mediated nature of Vietnam War memory in American literature and cinema.

### **Discussions (Times New Roman, bold, 12**

This study reveals that intertextuality functions as a disruptive and metacognitive force. O'Brien's metafiction challenges historical linearity, Coppola's visual transposition critiques imperialism, and Kubrick's irony deconstructs militarized

masculinity. The works shift from heroic myth-making to nuanced explorations of trauma, institutional violence, and postmodern scepticism. Cinema, in particular, emerges as a site of myth-production through hyperreality and simulacrum, revealing how audiences consume mediated memories of war.

### **Conclusion**

Intertextuality proves essential for understanding how American cultural memory constructs and contests the Vietnam War. By integrating the works of Kristeva, Genette, Caruth, and Baudrillard, this study highlights how literature and film collaboratively reshape ideological narratives of war, identity, and trauma. It calls for more inclusive future research that incorporates Vietnamese voices and digital media to capture the war's multifaceted legacy in its entirety.

intertextual analysis. Examining alternative media, such as graphic novels (*The Best We Could Do*), video games (*Call of Duty: Black Ops*), or music (anti-war protest songs), may reveal new facets of intertextual war representation. Deeper understanding of the development of war memory may be obtained by combining intertextual analysis with trauma theory, postcolonial studies, or digital humanities (such as examining war archives or AI-generated narratives). The way intertextuality adapts to shifting political and cultural contexts could be investigated through a longitudinal study that contrasts narratives of the Vietnam War from the 1970s with depictions of the conflict after 9/11 (e.g., *The Hurt Locker*). In an era when younger generations primarily interact with the Vietnam War through mediated representations rather than firsthand experiences, research could examine how audiences interpret intertextual references differently over time.

### **Acknowledgement**

I hereby declare that the work presented in this dissertation is entirely my own and has not been submitted, either in the same or a

### **Limitations and Future Studies**

The *Things They Carried* and *Apocalypse Now* are the primary focus of this study; although important, they do not fully represent the variety of representations of the Vietnam War. Additional viewpoints might be offered by other significant works, like *Dispatches* (1977) or *Platoon* (1986). The analysis primarily focuses on American literature and film, overlooking Vietnamese narratives that offer alternative perspectives on the trauma and legacy of the war, such as *Bảo Ninh's The Sorrow of War*. Although intertextuality offers a helpful framework, it might not take into consideration non-textual factors that also influence war narratives, such as political propaganda, veteran testimonies, and oral histories. By focusing on late 20th-century works, the study may overlook the more recent reimagining of the Vietnam War in contemporary media, such as *Da 5 Bloods* (2020).

Future studies could examine how the war is portrayed in Vietnamese literature and cinema, offering an alternative viewpoint to American ones and enhancing

different form, for any other academic degree or qualification.

All sources of information, quotations, and ideas have been appropriately referenced and acknowledged.

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