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29

THE DIGITAL AND THE SOUTH: QUESTIONINGS VOL. 2

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LO DIGITAL Y EL SUR: CUESTIONAMIENTOS VOL. 2

PROJECT

DYSPHORIA AS THE POTENCY OF CONTRADICTIONS:
A BET BY PAUL B. PRECIADO
DA DISFORIA COMO POTÊNCIA DAS CONTRADIÇÕES:
UMA APOSTA DE PAUL B. PRECIADO

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Abstract

This study aims to foster a critical reading of some aspects of digital culture in the Global South – understood here as more than a geopolitical category – but as a postcolonial condition of specific perspectives, practices, and counter-hegemonic strategies in the global context. In particular, it focuses on the uses and political implications of digital automation that govern many online platforms and interactive devices. More precisely, I propose a theoretical review of some implications of the notion of "dysphoria" that Paul B. Preciado develops in his latest book, situating it as an onto-fictional potency of the constitutive contradictions of digital life in the Global South. I begin by contextualizing the Foucauldian tools Preciado largely relies on and then position the notion of "dysphoria" within the post-pandemic landscape of digital and algorithmic automation. Finally, I outline some existing paths for recognizing the dysphoria of the world as an ongoing effect of digital technologies shaping contemporary life.

Keywords: Dysphoria, Digital Technologies, Paul B. Preciado

1   Introduction

> We are witnessing, live, the insertion of electronic or contactless skin onto our bodies. A couple of years of successive lockdowns, social distancing, and remote work were enough to initiate this mutation of the body and subjectivity. (Preciado, 2023, p. 324, our translation)

Among the many tensions traversing digital culture in the Global South, the technopolitical asymmetry of precarious ways of life (Lazzarato, 2014; Alves, 2011) is renewed by a dispersed set of digital dynamics, such as algorithmic automation and data extractivism. Anchored in the thought of Paul B. Preciado, this study aims to position some lines of critical interpretation of this emerging scenario, emphasizing the processes of subjectivity production in light of the dilemmas posed by digital automation. This scope, moreover, is delimited by the reading of *Dysphoria mundi*, recently published by Preciado (2023), and still largely unexplored in discussions about the Global South. Therefore, this study does not aim to deepen the topic within the scope of this debate but to suggest a reading that, it is hoped, might engage with authors from the Global South.

Around a century ago, with the advancement of cinema, advertising, and media, terms like "optical unconscious," "spectacle," and "simulation" were disseminated in European critical literature to describe the effects of mechanical reproduction and the mass circulation of images. Today, digital and algorithmic automation in media does not merely spectacularize the world; instead, it automates a reality of its own and a mode of existence suited to that reality. Social media has become a locus of surplus-value extraction, with images now functioning as commodities and mechanisms for that extraction. Across various scales — from the individual and domestic level to the use of big data by corporations with extensive data-mining and targeting capabilities — the automation processes increasingly impact many aspects of what can be known, governed, and experienced.

In the first decade of this century, digital platforms could still be seen as a means to challenge governments and corporations, reaching the height of this utopia when social media played a crucial role in the Occupy movements and the Arab Spring. However, since 2016, when it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica intervened in the U.S. elections that brought Trump to power, we have witnessed the global rise of neo-fascist governments and movements supported by big tech companies and think tanks (Wintroub, 2020). Besides Trump, leaders like Netanyahu, Erdogan, and Bolsonaro have taken advantage of the algorithmic logic by which, as Emmelhainz (2021, p. 3) summarizes, "rage has become currency: platforms drive and monetize anger as a mode of engagement." It is no coincidence, then, that the unprecedented expansion of digital automation has been widely associated with a neoliberal, colonial, and racist rationality that enforces an increasingly unequal and precarious way of life (Beccari, 2020).

The strategies of displacement and resistance that emerge within this regime are sometimes discussed in terms of diversion, decoding, and hacking of patterns; at other times, they are seen as radical openings of the black box aimed at removing the alienating layers that obstruct everyday experience. While the first emphasis derives from the post-structuralist tendency to scrutinize the epistemic and ontological surface

16

of signs (or data, codes, programs, algorithms, etc.), the second reactivate an old hermeneutics of suspicion, which denounces the deception of appearances in search of an underlying identity or material reality.

In *Dysphoria mundi*, Paul B. Preciado (2023) problematizes these strategies by showing that the effects of digital automation impact the Global North and Global South asymmetrically — understood not so much as geographic regions but as distinct conditions (which often coexist in the same place) of access and exclusion in a supposedly real-time connected world. Consequently, it is not enough to speak in terms of a post-disciplinary or control society; we must also consider how new technological devices are grounded in old extractivist and colonial values. Rather than proposing any rhetorical mitigation or Luddite retreat, Preciado wagers on the imminent subversion of this epistemic regime — which for him is not only algorithmic but, above all, petrosexoracial, that is, driven by fossil fuel combustion and the hierarchical segmentation of sex and race — through the exacerbation of its contradictions.

> While petrosexoracial power structures resort to nationalist and identity myths and embrace digital, biochemical, and military technologies as primary forms of value production and control over living bodies, these same subaltern, supposedly dysphoric bodies—bodies for which power prescribes only work, consumption, and death—are inventing dissident forms of subjectivation and new collective assemblages with other human and non-human bodies and with energetic machines: the cell phone, the computer, biomolecular technologies. (Preciado, 2023, pp. 51-52, our translation)

In this paper, I present a reflection limited to the implications of this thesis in the critique of digital media, although the book's scope is far broader. This focus seems relevant to me because it considers the entire critique of digital surveillance, which, when aimed only at control techniques, tends to overlook the dysphoric potency of the subjects over whom this control is exercised. To carry out the proposed review, it is first necessary to summarize some Foucauldian tools that Preciado largely uses, even though he also critiques and supplements them. Then, I situate the notion of dysphoria within the post-pandemic context of digital and algorithmic automation. Finally, I outline some existing paths to recognize the world's dysphoria as an ongoing effect of digital technologies shaping contemporary life.

2   Power Techniques and Digital Subjectivation

> The strength of the Foucauldian notion of technology lies in its ability to escape the reductive understanding of technique as a set of objects, instruments, machines, or other artifacts [...]. For Foucault, a technique is a complex apparatus of power and knowledge that integrates instruments and texts, discourses and bodily regimes, laws and rules for maximizing life, bodily pleasures, and the regulation of truth statements. (Preciado, 2017, p. 154, our translation)

In Foucault's later work (2009), the analytics of power no longer focused solely on discursive, punitive, and disciplinary practices but encompassed both governmental rationality and technologies of the self. In this way, he deepened the productive and strategic dimension of power by examining the various techniques (spiritual, subjective, institutional) that historically enabled certain behaviors and forms of life. In this context, the notion of technology takes on the meaning of practice and rationality that connects disparate elements — bodies, values, uses, techniques, etc. — to coordinate a field of action. This allows us to understand algorithmic automation, in Nocek's terms (2021, p. 118), as "a creative practice actualised in the techniques it uses to guide the possibilities for action towards rational ends."

This conception is productive in highlighting that digital apparatuses were designed not only with certain outcomes in mind but rather to enable certain modes of existence over others—following, in fact, Simon's (1996, p. 129) well-known proposition of design as a practice of "changing existing situations into preferred ones." This means that normative forces must be aligned to enable a particular apparatus and, consequently, to shape situations considered desirable. The misaligned, subaltern, and deviant subjects are not foreign to these forces; as Preciado (2023, p. 209, our translation) points out, on the contrary, "they are at once the material effect of these forces and of resistance to these forces." After all, all normality is defined by its margins, by what it excludes, so that racism, colonialism, sexism, etc., are "epistemologies, cognitive infrastructures, regimes of representation, bodily techniques, power technologies, discourses and verification apparatuses, narratives and images that continue to operate in the present" (Preciado, 2023, p. 42).

What is at stake in digital technologies, therefore, is not so much the constraints they impose upon us, but the ways in which it is possible to incorporate (or resist) the rationality that engenders them. This type of agency is recursive; it is not located in a particular subject, given that

the rationality implicated here does not exist independently of the mechanisms and apparatuses that enable it. The recursiveness in question is situated in the very field of action concatenated by technological devices, so that a neoliberal logic, for example, is both cause and effect, both conditioning and resulting from these devices. It was by considering this recursive dynamic that Foucault focused on the historical production/transformation of techniques and their corresponding rationalities, and that Preciado, in turn, has striven to show how current technologies succeed in ontologically redesigning the material and symbolic spaces of human life. "Politics, in this sense, is a task of ontology-fiction: the art of inventing the existence of the in-existent or of making an in-existent that was once taken as natural cease to exist" (Preciado, 2023, p. 210, our translation).

In the case of algorithmic automation, Nocek (2021, p. 129) argues that "smart systems structure the field of possible action not by putting up boundaries and erecting borders (through disciplinary techniques), but by eliminating them, […] by reducing friction and forging new possibilities for relation." At the same time, this apparent borderless Mobility — translated into voice command, geolocation, AI assistants, etc. — is inseparable from the algorithmic flows that comprise a rationality Couldry and Mejias (2019) have termed data colonialism, in which capital accumulation arises from data extraction rather than production. Thus, old practices have not ceased to exist; they have only been redesigned, even though they remain practically invisible. Or better yet, as Beiguelman (2021, p. 63, our translation) succinctly puts it, "the big eyes that monitor us see through our eyes" — we are seen based on our own uses and interactions.

Algorithmic platforms not only translate disparate data into useful information patterns; rather, they are notably designed to predict user behavior, redirect their actions and decisions, and ultimately reduce uncertainty for the financial market, the political sphere, and subjectivities (Sadin, 2015). Consequently, we see more and more each day the consolidation of a renewed far-right as a source of personal, corporate, and political engagement, whose main strategy lies in individualizing the enunciation of what can and cannot be true (Primo, 2020). And as Dardot and Laval foresaw more than a decade ago, this evident reconfiguration of ways to participate and act politically, in which the subject is constantly compelled to reaffirm their identity against all sorts of perceived threats — often flirting with fascist rationality — constitutes a persuasive game of identification:

> Especially because this game could lead the subject to take refuge — lacking anything better — in a compensatory identity, which at least has the advantage of some stability, in contrast to the imperative of infinite self-surpassing. In fact, the fixation on identity, of whatever nature, far from threatening the neoliberal order, appears instead as a retreat for subjects weary of themselves, for all those who have abandoned the race or were excluded from it right from the start; worse, it reproduces the logic of competition at the level of relations between "small communities." (Dardot & Laval, 2016, p. 401, our translation)

3   The Emergence of Dysphoric Disidentification

Since the construction of subjectivity is increasingly tied to the algorithmic apparatus of digital platforms, possible strategies of dissent cannot avoid engaging with the same techniques and procedures. Based on the technological recursion that Foucault's work historically reveals, we must consider that dissent may not be external to the devices against which it rises, but rather made possible by those very devices. Both Foucault and Preciado, after all, place particular emphasis on mutations, on the breaches in normality, on the point where modes of functioning begin to shift the previously established patterns — allowing subjugated subjects not so much to break away from the techniques that subjugate them, but to use them, bending them to their limits and exposing their contradictions.

In *Dysphoria Mundi*, Preciado argues that the COVID-19 pandemic had abrupt consequences on the petrossexual-racial regime still in force, both by intensifying its practices of subjugation and by exposing and destabilizing its normative patterns, whose necropolitical dimension was laid bare on a daily basis[1]. This was thus a doubly opportune moment: on the one hand, for refining techniques of political-subjective capture, and on the other, for a potential cognitive interruption of the techno-mercantile flows of identification and normalization.

> The climate and somatopolitical crisis (of which the pandemic is a part) sharpens the "gap" (*décalage*) between "our capacity to represent and our capacity to produce," between conventions of perception and the apparatuses of truth production (social, scientific, and media discourses, etc.), between the desire and the ability to act in the world. (Preciado, 2023, p. 258, our translation)

18

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[1] "Democratic institutions supposedly designed to protect the most vulnerable [...] reveal their complicity with the structures of petrosexoracial capitalism and behave as the State has always done in totalitarian or colonial contexts: abandoning, extorting, oppressing, lying, administering punishment and death" (Preciado, 2023, pp. 511-512, our translation).

From this diagnosis, Preciado adopts the notion of dysphoria — critically reappropriating all its historically pathologizing connotations[2] — as a conceptual key to rendering productive a certain ontological, political, and epistemic convulsion that would have emerged in the post-pandemic world. Drawing inspiration from William Burroughs' famous electronic revolution, as well as from the shamanic rituals of stopping the world described by Viveiros de Castro, Preciado contends that the mechanisms that govern and precarize digital life are also capable of producing a kind of short circuit that illuminates a horizon of saturation and disidentification with the petrosexoracial order.

It is worth briefly reviewing how this glimpse of a world dysphoria also derives from the main theses Preciado has developed previously. Since *Pornotopia*, which stems from his doctoral thesis in Architecture, Preciado (2020, p. 173, our translation) identified in the Cold War period "a transitional space in which the new prosthetic and hyperconnected subject is modeled." In his *Countersexual Manifesto*, after discussing the symbiotic hybridization that Donna Haraway interpreted from the cyborg as a political-fictional potential, Preciado (2017, p. 168, our translation) emphasized how "contemporary bio and cyber technologies are at once the result of power structures and the potential pockets of resistance to this same power." Later, in *Testo Junkie*, we see this kind of potential recursion again in what the author described, within the scope of the book, as the pharmacopornographic regime:

> In terms of political agency, subjugation or empowerment does not depend on the rejection of technologies in the name of nature but rather on the differentiated use and reappropriation of techniques for producing subjectivity. […] The pharmacopornographic emancipation of subaltern bodies can only be measured by these essential criteria: involvement and access to the production, circulation, and interpretation of somatopolitical biocodes (Preciado, 2018, p. 139, our translation).

Throughout these propositions, Preciado reaffirmed himself as the result of the reappropriation of certain gender and sexuality technologies, with the aim of unveiling new forms of subjectivation. Nonetheless, as Axt (2023) summarizes, the critical reception of his work in Latin America has not hesitated to highlight the Eurocentric and universalizing character of his concepts and, above all, the risk that his emancipatory promise might itself be assimilated and subverted by the mechanisms it intends to subvert. On this point, Axt (2023, p. 22, our translation) is assertive in understanding that "Preciado's theorizing is mobilized by practices and not the other way around";[3] that is, in his ever-moving dysphoric dissidence, Preciado's most notable effort (2023, p. 58, our translation) lies in renaming things and repositioning political-normative fictions by creating counter-fictions: "It is not enough to analyze the neoliberal condition; we must change all the names of all things" — simultaneously recognizing that

> The supporters of heterowhite supremacist ideology and conspiracy theories also enforce unauthorized knowledge, anti-scientific narratives, and local accounts to restore archaic forms of petrosexoracial sovereignty. This is the complexity in which we are entangled, the epistemic tangle […] that cannot be overcome by a simple binary opposition or inversion of power. We must open ourselves to the mutation of technologies of consciousness. (Preciado, 2023, pp. 290-291, our translation)

Among the many concepts that make up the grammar proposed in *Dysphoria mundi*, the notion of the telebody is relevant to the scope of this article: as an unexpected offspring of Haraway's cyborg, it is an entity situated at the intersection of material life and cybernetics, of carbon and silicon. Existing solely through the normative algorithms that render it visible, the telebody "is an economic datum. It is digital wealth. The telebody is at once the consumer and the producer, the client and the provider, the commodity and the buyer" (Preciado, 2023, p. 305). If, on one hand, this indistinction implies increasingly oppressive forms of exploitation — as in the classes Preciado (2023, p. 331) calls e-slaves, teleworkers, and life reproducers — on the other, it also reveals the fleeting nature of sharing a common identity amid so many techno-political fictions. Gender and race markers, for instance, no longer indicate a natural fact but rather struggles for sovereignty, which in turn come to occupy the same ground as struggles for survival[4]. And, if part of digital surplus value resides in the maintenance of seemingly stable and standardized identities, the gap opened by the telebody points toward the reinvention of identification practices.

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[2] If the dysphoria of disciplinary modernity was hysterical, and that of Fordism, neurotic and schizophrenic, that of cybernetic extractivism expands to all sorts of syndromes, disorders, disturbances.

[3] Furthermore, as Preciado (2023, pp. 59-60, our translation) also recognizes, there remains "a cognitive gap (which sometimes manifests itself as segmentation of struggles, sometimes even as incompatibility and antagonism) between the theory and practices of the radical left and those arising from political ecology, grammar and practices of resistance and emancipation of sexual, gender and racial minorities".

[4] Preciado (2023, p. 509, our translation) argues, in this regard, that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the bodies of the global North were temporarily exposed to the same condition of vulnerability "in which the bodies of refugees, immigrants, impoverished, feminized and racialized classes of the colonized global South were and continue to be exposed".

Accordingly, it is as if the entire discussion around digital transformations, with its focus on both the automation of historical practices of oppression and the limited means of resistance, has distracted us from the crucial shift brought by this somatic-algorithmic condition: yes, the old protocols of identification and exclusion remain fully active, but they are also made explicit in their arbitrariness, artificiality, and fallibility precisely through the constant need for algorithmic learning. It is curious that, while many are concerned with the need to bring digital literacy to all layers of society, so-called artificial intelligence assimilates and reproduces the very processes that segregate this same population. What is often ignored in this gap is the continuous flow of epistemic maintenance and cognitive reconditioning that integrates us into digital networks. For Preciado, it is clear that this flow can only be understood through a relational (or symbiotic)[5] ontology rather than an essentialist one. This conception, somewhat unexpectedly, echoes Vilém Flusser's notion of the telematic society proposed in the early 1990s, particularly in its post-identity and post-humanist sense, as noted by Erick Felinto:

> Flusser not only grasped the potential of networks with remarkable clarity, but also employed an intriguing complex of poetic images to describe what he considered as the opposition between the "bundling" (*Bündelung*) model and the "networking" (*Vernetzung*) model — in other words, between mass communication and digital communication. [...] the telematic society also dissolves the illusion of the closed self, comfortably enclosed within its identity capsule. The network is made up of relations, not isolated entities. (Felinto, 2022, pp. 72-73, our translation)

In his time, Flusser recognized the utopian nature of this societal model, though he also considered it technically achievable. And what would be the way to realize such a fiction? Precisely through error, noise, dysphoria: "When Beethoven played his sonatas, people would run out. Gradually, the disturbing elements are integrated [...] and they begin to radiate in a peculiar way" (Flusser, 2014, p. 196, our translation). Envisioning a society in which everyone would be telematically connected, Flusser believed in a shared consciousness that would open unforeseen paths within the informational structure that links them: "The network vibrates, it's a *pathos*, a resonance. This is the basis of telematics, this sympathy and antipathy of closeness" (Flusser, 2014, p. 325).

In a less utopian tone, Preciado recalls how, in the 1980s, Act Up and various other collectives fighting against AIDS not only gathered categories that had previously been dissonant (from sex workers to media celebrities) but also initiated an unprecedented performative reversal, aiming to disidentify and actively intervene in the fictions that connected them as mortal and vulnerable bodies. Preciado (2023, p. 526, our translation) sees that, similarly, telebodies carry within them the strategic potential for autobiohacking, that is, the capacity to decode the normative patterns that constitute them, and, as relational symbionts, to critically redirect the uses and effects of digital connectivity. In short, the dysphoric emergence that Preciado points to in the post-pandemic context does not reside precisely in the connections Flusser termed telematic, but rather erupts from the multitude of telebodies who, situated at the base of the system that connects and subjugates them, are the first to glimpse the gaps and margins of maneuver within this system.

4   Considerations on the Power of Contradictions

> I like dysphoria and its exaltation against the norm, because it is what I have known since childhood. Dysphoria is bad. It is our misery. It is painful. It destroys us. It transforms us. But it is also our truth. We need to learn to listen to it. It is our wealth, the dysphoria. It is the intuition that allows us to know what needs to change. (Preciado, 2023, p. 543, our translation)

As can be inferred from the review conducted thus far, Preciado makes use of the contradictions that traverse the digital world to propose a viewpoint in which these fissures are constitutive, rather than accidental or excessive, to the petrosocial-racial regime, betting on the onto-epistemic-fictional dysphorias that can germinate, especially in the context of the Global South, from this understanding. As a closing remark, it seems more pertinent to me, instead of pointing out any conclusive synthesis, to list some theoretical and practical initiatives that, in my view, dialogue, albeit *avant la lettre*,[6] with Preciado's perspective, in order to indicate possible paths for recognizing the dysphoria of the world as an effect already underway of the digital technologies that shape contemporary life.

20

5 Inspired by the propositions of Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, the concept of "symbiont" is adopted by Preciado as a displacement of the notion of political subject, in the wake of his previous reflections on the intersubjective and micropolitical tactics of disidentification.
6 This type of anticipation was, by the way, even performed by Trevor Paglen, one of the names mentioned below. In 2012, this photographer selected one hundred films that portray human disasters, recorded them on a disc under the inscription *The Last Pictures*, which, in turn, was launched in the form of a

Starting with the famous essay *The Wretched of the Screen* by the German media artist and theorist Hito Steyerl (2020, p. 32), which delves into the "waste that accumulates at the margins of digital economies" to make visible the multiple relationships between cybernetic processes and the expropriation of natural resources, the concentration of wealth, data mining, etc. In the critical reading of Hal Foster (2021, p. 141, our translation), "[Steyerl's] motivation is 'I do not want to resolve contradictions; I want to intensify them,' and her *modus operandi* is not so much the demystification of ideological beliefs, but the exacerbation of corporate protocols to, in theory, the point of a transformative explosion." In contrast, and through a path that Foster considers more productive, the American artist and geographer Trevor Paglen (2014) has been articulating a series of long-range photographs that depict the physical infrastructure of digital systems: satellites in orbit, submarine cables, servers on remote islands, warehouse-cities, etc. In other words, Paglen highlights the fragile and material nature of the digital and, in doing so, invites us to redefine certain notions such as cyberspace or digital clouds based on this evidence. But, unlike Steyerl,

> [Paglen] is skeptical about the value of confrontational artworks, which can "simply be incorporated into machine learning exercises." "In the long run," he concludes, "there is no technical solution" and "no evident way to intervene in machine-to-machine systems." All he can do is point us in the general direction: "We need to create deliberate inefficiencies and spheres of life removed from the predation of the market and politics — 'shelters' in the invisible digital sphere [...]". (Foster, 2021, p. 155, our translation)

Indeed, the strength of this type of artistic-documentary intervention lies less in interrupting digital processes than in critically restoring all that has been colonized from our field of vision through these processes. In this regard, among the numerous works that theorist and artist Giselle Beiguelman (2021) gathers in *Políticas da Imagem*, the project *Disruptions* (2015-2017) by Palestinian photographer Taysir Batniji stands out as emblematic. This project consists of eighty-six screenshots of video calls with his mother and family, who live in Gaza, where he was born and raised but to which he has not been able to return since 2006 due to the Israeli blockade. "Pixelated, corrupted, fragmented, these images bear all the marks of contemporary interruptions: exile, nomadism, displacement, and connection failures" (Beiguelman, 2021, pp. 160-161, our translation). The telebody, in turn, is what restores a minimal affective connection.

Each in their own way, the aforementioned artists advocate for a certain reframing of the digital world from its margins, gaps, and short circuits. If this world, on one hand, is increasingly governed by algorithmic and petrosexoracial protocols, on the other hand, the fictions that structure these mechanisms are made explicit as such, even as a result of the speed and abundance of narratives. The dysphoria of the world is nothing more than this onto-fictional eruption that traverses us as telebodies, whether for the purposes of maintaining and updating old fictions or in the sense of opening, reframing, and contesting the realities thus produced and incorporated. And if the present time, as Foster (2021, p. 183, our translation) states, "is always mortgaged as collateral for a time to come (a time that never actually arrives)," perhaps Preciado's dysphoric promise is a way of advocating, from digital contradictions and in an equally contradictory manner, for a future time that restores the present to us.

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21

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satellite into outer space. For Paglen (*apud* Foster, 2021, p. 157, note 30, our translation), these photographs are future artifacts "from aliens from the past (ourselves)", artifacts that suggest that "the future already exists, even if we have not yet managed to reach it".

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22