

What Can Adaptation Studies Learn from Fan Studies?

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In 2013 I published an anthology, *Global Jane Austen*, in collaboration with Robert G. Dryden from the University of Hartford that examined the author's shifting reputation in various socio-historical contexts as well as through different media—radio, television, and online. Dryden's contribution ("Pleasure, Passion, and Possessiveness in the Jane Austen Community") surveyed the Austen fan phenomenon, where aficionados of her work (known as "Janeites") attend an annual festival dressed up in period costumes, creating what artistic director Jackie Herring describes as "a giant fashion show, which regularly stops the traffic" (114). Dryden draws attention to the extensive range of Austen fan fiction now available on the *Republic of Pemberley* website (116).

The capacity of fan fiction to generate interest in Austen has also been explored in an account by Misty Krueger of her work with undergraduates interested "in the joys of extending much-loved narratives and characters," while developing the critical skills necessary "to understand the nuances of the moves made by the adapters" (2.2).¹ Her learners were encouraged to be auto-ethnographical as they examined where their inspiration for adapting texts had come from; their projects were subsequently completed through different media—text, pictures, poetry,

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music, dancing, and online. The entire scheme of work proves beyond doubt that “A pedagogy of adaptation can and should include fan fiction in its framework” (6.1), bringing together two separate interest groups—the aca-student and the fan-student (6.2)—in a deliberate challenge to “the long-standing bounds of canon.” Learners are transformed into “creators of literature, film, and art, and, even better, to share their work with their peers and beyond the classroom” (7.2).

Dryden and Kreuger draw attention to the gradual theoretical crossover between fan studies and adaptation studies. While adaptation studies maintains its prevailing concern with the source/target text binary, the preoccupation shifts away from comparative analysis (what is gained and lost through transformation) and concentrates instead on *affect*: the emotional experience of engaging with Austen that stimulates the creative impulse. By acknowledging fan participation in the process of textual reshaping, adaptation studies has also become more democratic in focus.

Perhaps there are more theoretical parallels between the two disciplines that might be profitably explored. We need to consider in more detail the issue of *participation*: who is actively engaged in the act of adaptation and how does that act take place? Do our brains respond in idiosyncratic ways as we watch film, television and other media products? In light of our capacity to produce increasingly sophisticated fan-flicks, do we need to rethink the familiar binary separating creative workers from their supposedly passive audiences? In sharing our responses—as well as our products—with others, how has the web expanded the possibilities for transnational and transcultural communication? We should look at affect in closer detail and how it relates to adaptation as an interpretive act. If our initial response to texts is primarily emotional, how does that reshape the kind of scholarly discourse that underpins most adaptation theory to date? How do we distinguish “academic” and “fan-based” discourses? Finally, we need to address the issue of *expertise*: how do self-expression and participation determine the way we look at adaptations? Should we accommodate more auto-ethnography into our research agenda? And how do person-centered investigative methods influence the future of adaptation studies as an academic discipline? In addressing such questions, this article will suggest that the two disciplines attempt to deal with the ontological question of the relationship between the real and the imaginary, and how the answers are intrinsic to our perception of the world. We reconstruct an alternative humanism inspired by “a desire to live, to make possible, and to rethink the possible as such” (Ross 23).

The question of participation in adaptation studies has been comprehensively discussed by Claire Monk. Based on the author's doctoral thesis at London's British Film Institute, she uses qualitative and quantitative research to explore how and why heritage films have proved so enduringly popular with selected focus groups. In my review of the book I drew attention to Monk's analysis of "creative spectatorship," which is not quite as liberating as might be assumed. Her research illuminates how her respondents' answers were over-determined by advertising and medium-specific discourses distributed by the producers (Raw, "Active" 2). In another piece published in the anthology *Screening European Heritage*, Monk surveys a variety of fan responses to the Merchant-Ivory film *Maurice* (1987) across cultures; this represents something of a liberalizing of her views as expressed in her earlier work, as she suggests that fans have the freedom to explore their obsessions in different ways, using the internet as the principal mode of communication (209–234).

What requires further discussion is the question of how and why we participate in fan-based activities, or why certain films (including adaptations) should impinge themselves so powerfully on our minds. Jeffrey M. Zacks's recent work *Flicker* (2015) offers penetrating insights into the way our minds accommodate the cinematic experience. As our brains are not wired for a predominantly visual medium, directors can exploit perceptual gaps through cuts, dissolves, and other strategies (173). Films have a hypnotic effect; they weave stories that our brains absorb and subsequently use to determine our futures (135). Whenever we go to the theater or watch online we negotiate adaptive processes (135). The consequences are fascinating: while understanding that a film adaptation is completely different from its source text (55), we allow ourselves to be drawn into the fictional world onscreen that prompts reflection on our relationship to the world we inhabit (118–120). This is what psychological adaptation involves—a commitment to reshaping the narratives through which we make sense of our lives (296–297).² Any form of fan intervention—a fictional reconstruction, verbal exchange, e-mail, or a tweet—represents the outcome of this assimilation process. Zacks's model reminds us of the psychological as well as the textual consequences of adaptation, as well as revealing how production and reception represent two sides of the same theoretical coin. Hence we are inclined to question Simone Murray in *The Adaptation Industry* (2012), who follows Monk in claiming that audience responses are over-determined by commercial interests.

The outcome of research involving a working group of scholars from different scholarly backgrounds, Annette Kuhn's anthology *Little Madnesses* (2013) goes a long way towards explaining why film is such a powerful vehicle for participation. Drawing on the work of child psychologist D.W. Winnicott, Kuhn treats films as transitional objects similar to the objects used by toddlers to broaden their view of their world; these could include toys, trinkets, or media texts. She invokes Winnicott's term "little madnesses," through which "we find the enthusiasms and the passions that excite our creative imagination, and thereby exploit the possibilities of play" ("Little" 1). Kuhn sees this form of identification as the bedrock of "transitional processes" through which we reshape our life-narratives that remain "historically and culturally anchored" ("Home" ch. 5). Matt Hills characterizes this process as a fusion wherein audiences "are shown not simply to fuse emotionally with media texts (a kind of dependence), but also to (re-)shape and (re-)orient the self" ("Media" ch. 7). The anthology builds on Hills's model in *Fan Cultures* (2002), whereby the primary transitional object—that which is represented onscreen—is transformed into a secondary transitional object (the fan culture, the fan-flick) representing the outcome of the reshaping process through which we communicate our reactions to others: "the 'retained' object must negotiate its intensely subjective experience with its intersubjective cultural status" (*Fan* 108). Participation operates at two levels: through the act of interpretation through which the primary transitional object is identified; and through the communication of our reactions to others by means of the secondary transitional object. Fan studies' theoretical agenda concentrates on the ways in which these transitional objects create new cultures, new traditions, and new forms of response, whether individually or collectively (Hills, *Fan* 116, 118). Eleven years later Hills showed how the web expands the possibilities of fan communication: "As [they] watch TV [or other products] and then live-tweet along, they contribute ... to a breaking down of semiotic, enunciative and textual productivity, with the former two categories being readily expressed via, or transformed into, textual productivity" ("Fiske's" 136–137).

This kind of research dispenses with those binaries (source/target text, imagined/actual responses, producers/audiences) that mostly inhibit rather than expand adaptation studies' theoretical possibilities. If nothing else, fan studies' emphasis on participation has widened the academic agenda by explaining fan phenomena through psychoanalysis,

while accommodating increased textual productivity among a variety of socio-economic groups. The rapid growth of Web 2.0 communication strategies has enhanced this kind of research. Adaptation studies could profitably follow such developments by looking at *why* texts are transformed as well as *how* such transformations are enacted. While psychoanalysis yields new insights into fans' commitment to particular fandoms, there remains the problem of researchers being placed "in a spectator position, not [being involved in] a lived experience." Fans might be positioned as colonial others, "a biological essentialism evident in Freudian concepts of the structure of psychic life" (12). Similar criticisms could be leveled at Monk's research on heritage film audiences, however much insight we have been offered into cinematic tastes. In an attempt to address this issue, fan studies looks at the role of affect, placing particular stress on the ways in which authors of fan fiction identify silences or absences in source texts, and "fill these silences with their imaginative activity, enabling their own deeper understanding of the world." As well as being a secondary transitional object, fan fiction is "a heuristic tool: a mental technology that facilitates understanding ... by means of an affective hermeneutics—a set of ways of gaining knowledge through feeling" (Wilson 1.4). Knowledge-producing hermeneutics stimulate a sense of empathy, connection, or intimacy between the reader [or fan] and the characters in the text, as revealed in Dryden's example of Janeites donning eighteenth century costumes in a celebratory fashion show.

Adaptation studies have begun to embrace the affective mode: Eckart Voigts's "Bastards and Pirates, Mixes and Multitudes" includes in its wide-ranging argument an analysis of *Sherlock* fandom (82–99). We can go further by deconstructing the relationship between affect and religiosity, both of which inspire devotional acts. The term "religiosity" is significant; as Hills explains, it created "a privatised and individualised space [that] remains open to voluntary adoptions of sacred themes and ideas" (*Fan* 88). Sometimes religiosity can be rejected as a fan's worship of a particular object conflict with their religious convictions; hence religion should be approached anthropologically as an instrument in the construction of the self, arising from "the everydayness and ready availability of media texts" (*Fan* 97).

Religiosity can be approached in different ways in adaptation studies—for example, in analyzing the ways we respond to canonical texts, which have acquired quasi-sacred status in many cultures. Two contributors to the *Global Jane Austen* anthology discussed this

question, one from the standpoint of teaching in Communist China, the other including a series of response papers from educators at different levels in India (Horniman 221–237; Trivedi et al. 239–253). We are encouraged to reflect on the connection between religiosity and the value of literature as a vehicle for addressing aesthetic, political, and ethical issues, as well as questioning its allegedly elitist purpose.³ Alternatively, we can approach religiosity as “a strong and active form of identity that is formed after certain freedom was already given [to the individual]” (Obydenkova and Libman 146). I have recently explored the relationship between adaptation studies and mesearch—a form of work combining shifting studies of selfhood with scholarship to forge new constructions of identity and transcultural engagement. “I,” as Laurence Raw, participate in adaptive communities involving learners, peers, and members of personal and professional networks (Raw, “Prolegomena” 9). To make sense of my experiences with any text, I record my impressions in a private journal or in published blog posts, examples of what Robert J. Nash terms Scholarly Personal Narratives (SPNs) that combine academic and personal speculations in secondary transitional objects (38–39). If someone replies to them, then real dialogue might follow among people of like mind to debate the issue of religiosity and identity (re)formulation.⁴ These practices are already evident in fan studies research (Evans and Stasi 15); we might benefit from similar initiatives in adaptation studies. The SPN can be likewise used as a means of understanding how we negotiate those gaps in our consciousness that prevent us from understanding visual materials. Zacks believes that for many viewers the film-watching act stimulates memories of late adolescence (88–89), that time when we started going to the theater alone as well as cultivating personal relationships. His claim has been corroborated by Kuhn, whose essay “Home Is Where We Start From” looks at the memories of those who spent their formative years frequenting the so-called “Picture Palaces” in the Thirties (“Home” 53–65).

Let me elaborate on this point with an example from my recent research. I was asked to write a piece on Clint Eastwood’s *Invictus* (2009), based on John Carlin’s bestselling book about the South African triumph in the rugby union World Cup of 1995. In formal terms the film recasts its source text as a personality-focused chronicle of how Nelson Mandela (Morgan Freeman) encounters the Afrikaans rugby captain François Pienaar (Matt Damon), and together they plan to win the tournament for the nation’s future health. Mandela takes a strong

personal interest in the team's results, and makes the courageous decision to appear in the pre-match presentations at the final dressed in a Springbok rugby shirt. Previously the symbol of apartheid, Mandela transforms it into the embodiment of multiculturalism. My initial analysis of the film concentrated on its treatment of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), as portrayed in the ways by which Mandela and the Springbok players come to terms with the national past. This task not only requires behavioral but also psychological adjustments; ingrained responses need to be suppressed and new life-narratives formulated to prove whether postcolonialism can work.

In affective terms *Invictus* had a profound influence on my life-narratives. Watching the fictional Pienaar's efforts to adjust to a new socio-economic order, I recalled my struggles to cope in the wake of an operation that rendered me vocally impaired as well as prone to intermittent panic attacks. As I write, I am trying to reconcile myself to another panic attack occasioned by an abortive military intervention designed to overthrow the Turkish government. I might not be a de facto fan of *Invictus*, but the film offers lessons in how to deal with trauma through process rather than outcomes (Alred 10–11), based on our capacity to adapt to new experiences: we have nothing to fear except ourselves (Alred 120–121). We should clear our mind of everyday stresses, and project ourselves back into a childlike state when everything appeared new and thrilling—precisely the same process that Zacks suggests while responding to film. We embrace a primary transitional object and transform the experience into a secondary transitional object, in this case, an SPN. Fan studies have shown us the importance of subjectivities; by sharing our insights, we can understand more profoundly how texts are produced and consumed while reflecting more on ourselves. SPNs can expand participation in the interpretive act as well as disproving the often-invoked (and fallacious) canard that certain texts are unadaptable. They might be textually complex but we can all reflect on our responses to them (Forsyth 15).⁵

This mode of research might run the risk of being accused of being too populist: David Papineau, in a review of recent philosophy texts, claims that “serious academic work need not always be transparent to the general public,” as it gives early career academics the opportunity “to display the kind of super-smartness that their elders so prize” (4). Such comments evoke more general speculations on the purpose of education at the secondary and tertiary levels wherein non-traditional subjects

like fan studies lack “sufficient seriousness” to warrant their inclusion on most academic curricula; while making demands on a student’s precious time, they do not afford “much chance of actually achieving the hoped-for results” (Bok 169–170). Henry Jenkins responds to this kind of criticism by characterizing himself—and other fan studies scholars—as “aca-fans,” or hybrid creatures that are part-fan and part-academic:

The goal of my work has been to bridge the gap between these two worlds. I take it as a personal challenge to find a way to break cultural theory out of the academic bookstore ghetto and open up a larger space to talk about the media that matters to us from a consumer point of view. (Jenkins)

Although aca-fans are expert in their preferred area of research, they do not lose sight of the interdependency between the theoretical and the personal: anything they teach, analyze, and publish should be rigorously assessed through direct experience and discussed in community settings, both face-to-face and online. Hills develops this argument by observing that in mediatized worlds the expert—the fan studies specialist who cites their experience in other fandoms—might not necessarily have the authority to pronounce judgment on their inferiors. Rather than upholding traditional value-systems based on distinctions between good and bad, all fans evaluate good textual practice according to aesthetic standards and moral codes “stressing moral virtues of fellowship and non-hierarchy” (Hills, “Fiske’s,” 149).⁶ Decisions are contingent and perpetually reshaped through consensus.

Many of these arguments hold true for adaptation studies. Even if we restrict our research agenda to the literature-film-transmedia paradigm, we should recognize that all artistic products evolve out of lengthy discussions between various talents—directors, financiers, writers, producers, actors—and thereby move away from the notion of the auteur-director. Drawing on work published in the *Journal of Screenwriting* (2010), as well as interviews in professional journals such as *American Cinematographer*, we can draw upon a variety of resources to understand more about how and why adaptations emerge. Occasionally, different versions of a screenplay appear online and in print; comparing them will offer insight into the artistic decisions taken before and during filming. We can find out more about the screenwriter’s creative decisions with source texts by means of practical activities inside

and outside the classroom (Lake 85–95).⁷ In the six years since Lake’s article was published, more and more adaptation scholars embraced the collaborative approach to research and pedagogy with stimulating results (Whelehan and Sadler 56–71). Yet to date no one has considered whether the aca-fan can be reconstructed in adaptation studies—an acadapter, perhaps. The issues involved are more complex than might be first assumed. If we write SPNs combining the academic with the personal, and treat adaptation as psychological as well as textual in effect, we are not just bridging two worlds (the academic and the personal), but amalgamating them. Our object of study encompasses textual as well as ontological questions. Theory still has a part to play in the construction of our life-narratives, but only insofar as it makes sense of our reactions to the mediatic event (as shown through Zacks’s analysis). The SPN recognizes no distinction between producers and consumers: everyone adapts material for themselves.

This interpretive model sounds plausible but remains fraught with methodological problems. A proliferation of SPNs might create academic cultures so pluralistic that no one could talk to one another in their attempts to broaden adaptation studies’ agenda. In their essay on new directions in fan studies research Evans and Stasi confront this problem by proposing “a core investment” in theory: feminist academics can speak to their colleagues in politics through “notions of ‘voice,’ reflexivity, and positionality.” Inspired by the idea of the aca-fan they propose that interventions in politics and consumerism need to be couched in terms of context and difference (16). An alternative mode of research can be provided by theoretically formed ethnographic studies analyzing research subjectivity and researcher disclosure: “how and when the researcher reveal themselves [*sic*] as ‘fan’ and/or ‘academic’; and how such considerations change the nature of the knowledge they can hope to produce” (17). This form of questioning sheds light on the notion of expertise and how it differs across cultures. Such strategies have also been embraced in adaptation studies. Shelley Cobb’s recent work on female authorship argues how feminist adaptations are conversations designed to de-privilege literary authors and directors as sole bearers of meaning. Through Bakhtinian dialogism she demonstrates the importance of collaborative modes of analysis involving women as authors and filmmakers combining both roles in texts reminiscent of SPNs (Cobb). Cobb’s framework can be extended into audience studies to understand more about how cinematic events influence human behavior, as well as

investigating questions of whether a woman's brain responds differently to texts from their male counterparts. Combining ethnography, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and textual analysis, this approach to adaptation studies would offer innovative models of how texts are psychologically consumed. If the author declared her subject position, she would participate in the conversation, not as an academic or a fan, but as a member of a community devoted to female authorship.

One of the benefits of community-based approaches to research is that every member should regard themselves as valuable participants in the decision-making process. Ideally, this should help to negotiate the stereotyping process that inhibits rather than promotes mutual understanding. The importance of achieving this goal emerged as I read a recent review of sociologist Sudhir Hazareesingh's *How the French Think* (2015) that traces intellectual development through generalization: religious thinking derived from Republicanism; late twentieth-century thinkers searched for an elusive third way between capitalism and socialism; while recent years have witnessed the evolution of holism that avoids social and multicultural realities (Jackson 5). Such interpretive frameworks neglect diversity as the basis of mutual understanding; adaptation studies can respond to this through various forms of production—blogs, SPNs, online groups, video conferencing—based on sound theoretical principles. Tony Gurr and myself have shown in detail how this mode of work creates communities of purpose dedicated to transnational as well as transcultural research (55–56, 133–144).

I offer one or two suggestions of how this approach might work in practice. Many institutions offer modules in world cinema devoted to nonwestern histories and traditions, as a way of understanding how concepts such as realism and narrative are reconstructed in different contexts. Viola Shafik observes that: “The essential innovation of Arab *cinéma d’auteur* are its choice of subjects and its dissociation from conventional narrative structures [characteristic of classical Hollywood] ... [through] flashbacks, dreams, and visions of the adolescent protagonist” (186). Recently I published an article on *Yeşilçam* (Green Pine) cinema in the Republic of Turkey, a phenomenon that flourished in the mid-twentieth century. Producing films in assembly-line mode reminiscent of Hollywood's so-called “Poverty Row” outfits, directors reshaped American source texts according to local conventions such as asynchronous sound and vision, the use of rapid zooms in and out on the actors, and deliberately plagiarized material from films worldwide.

The end products might seem primitive today, but at the time of production they fulfilled the important purpose of affirming belief in national unity. In a culture where the distinction between originals and copies seldom existed—due to a lack of copyright laws—plagiarism had no stigma attached to it (Raw “Transcultural,” 141–151).

An adaptation-centered treatment of this material reflects on what the term “adaptation” denotes in local cultures and its relationship to collective identities past and present. Comparing Arab art cinema or Turkish *Yeşilçam* to related Hollywood material tells us a lot about the relationship between the local and the global and the evolution of global communities of purpose dedicated to genres. From a socio-historical perspective we learn a lot about the life narratives embraced in Arab and Turkish cultures at particular moments in time. Deploying such insights as a basis for SPNs tells us a lot about our own adaptive processes; for westerners this process works to negotiate the kind of orientalist assumptions that inhibit rather than develop transcultural understanding as we investigate the affect of such texts past and present while rethinking concepts such as colonialism and resistance. Fan studies’ deliberate dismantling of the distinctions between academic and fan is essential to *Yeşilçam*, whose fans enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with local stars, who regularly toured the country visiting People’s Houses (*Halk Evleri*) that were designed to strengthen local communities and foster belief in the national future. Many fans thought of themselves as members of a task force incorporating themselves and their screen idols dedicated to a common purpose (Raw “Faces,” 261–262). Comparing *Yeşilçam* fans’ reactions to selected texts with our own opens up new discursive spaces for sharing different forms of knowledge (Williams 56), and by doing so shifts the focus of attention in world cinema away from the text-based “cinemas of the other” towards reflection on how identities are constructed and reconstructed over time and space.

Lest any readers think I am being too idealistic in my suggestions, let me end this chapter with another personal reflection. In the wake of a failed military intervention, designed to remove the current government, several of my colleagues in different university departments have been questioned, suspended, or removed. For those in power, the academic expert represents a threat to the status quo. This state of affairs is not new: Erich Auerbach wrote his seminal *Mimesis* (1946) at the University of Istanbul, whence he fled after being suspended by the Nazis a decade previously. While Auerbach was a literary critic by training, with a firm

belief in its humanizing power, his methodology was overwhelmingly historicist, centered on the ways in which texts were shaped through their socio-historical contexts of production. He believed that his *métier* consisted of writing history in pursuit of truth—the kind of truth accessible to all readers irrespective of cultures and backgrounds. Although an acknowledged expert in his field, he understood the potential of criticism to reshape popular opinion; hence his determination to write about his favorite authors, despite the fact that *Mimesis* has been criticized for its lack of an overarching argument (Landauer 83–96).

Auerbach offers an example to all of us in fan and/or adaptation studies so that we shed the elitist mantle and prove instead how we can make major contributions to transcultural understanding irrespective of our disciplinary specialism, and hence avoid the fate experienced by many of my unfortunate colleagues. By expanding its agenda into audience-based work, we can understand how adaptation comprises “a series of simultaneous surfacings, collidings and juxtapositions ... in which fiction, poetry, graphic story, quotes [and memories] come together to make a verbal geology” (Smith 12). Deconstructing that geology through SPNs draws attention to the idea of “everywhereness” as well as particularity: we not only appreciate difference but paradoxically appreciate how there is “no longer any experience ... that is particular to that moment, that place” (Tauris 13). Online interactions scaffold such moments with simultaneity so that they exist in multiple places at once in a four-dimensional state.⁸ Reflecting on four-dimensionality proves the truth behind Judith Butler’s comment appended to the second edition of *Gender Trouble* that all academic work should spring from “a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such. What would the world have to be like for my uncle to live in the company of family, friends, or extended kinship of some other kind?” (10).

NOTES

1. By “adapters,” Krueger means those professional screenplay writers involved in reshaping Austen for film and television adaptations over the last two decades.
2. I have explored this process in greater depth in my piece “Psychology and Adaptation: The Work of Jerome Bruner.” *Linguaculture* 1 (2014): 89–101. Web. 19 July 2016.

3. These issues are discussed in detail in a recent anthology *The Values of Literary Studies: Critical Institutions, Scholarly Agendas*. Ed. Rónán McDonald. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015.
4. This process is seen to work through the ways in which followers on my academia.edu site are prepared to contribute their views online.
5. Forsyth claims that *Paradise Lost* defies the very limits of filmic possibility (15). I remember the late Chris Brooks, Professor of Victorian Culture at the University of Exeter, inspiring undergraduates to read the epic poem as a seventeenth-century antecedent of the Fifties Hollywood epic. Since then I have always imagined the narrative as a conflict between two outsize personalities—Yul Brynner and Burt Lancaster, perhaps.
6. A good example of how this works in practice is provided by the 2015 documentary *Bronies*, concentrating on adult male fans of the *My Little Pony* series. Through a series of individualized case studies of subjects from the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Germany, the film shows how fans acquire a sense of social identity as well as embracing the series' positive moral messages. When they gather at a convention they form an impromptu community whose future life is guaranteed through the Internet, while retaining their own individualized approaches to their fandom.
7. Diane Lake, the author of this article, co-wrote the screenplay for *Frida* (2002).
8. The term has been coined by Laurence Scott to sum up the fluidity of online existence.

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