From Useful Art to Service Design. Encouraging Migrants' Creative Thinking Through Translocal Services for Social Innovation

António Gorgel Pinto[1]([envelope]) [ID] and Paula Reaes Pinto[2] [ID]

[1] UNIDCOM-IADE/Universidade Europeia, Lisbon, Portugal
`antonio.gorgel@universidadeeuropeia.pt`
[2] CHAIA/University of Évora, Évora, Portugal
`pmrp@uevora.pt`

Abstract. Exploring the areas of *arte útil* (useful art) and service design for social innovation, the research focuses on an art and design hybrid practice that can be understood as transdisciplinary. The social art projects and social design services pointed out as case studies aim to give practical and significant answers to the lack of support given by governmental entities, developing innovative experimental solutions that may contribute to the sociocultural sustainability and inclusion of migrant communities and citizens living in urban areas. The Immigrant Movement International, the Conflict Kitchen, and the Shifting Ground case studies have in common a systematized practice that seeks to enhance social, cultural, and political issues through a creative process to stimulate critical thinking in the new culture where the migrants aim to be integrated. Regarding the Shifting Ground, a common denominator is the relational and dialogical aesthetics crossing all the project iterations, the migrant citizens' participation in ceramic workshops to encourage creative thinking, the production of ceramic sculptures later presented to the community at large in an exhibition-celebration, and the maintenance of an online archive to strengthen community bonds. The practice in question is also contextualized by Bell Hooks' *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*, and Rancière's *critical art* concept, to better understand the kind of relationship that may enhance interaction with migrant citizens when developing art and design services for social innovation.

Keywords: Useful Art · Service Design · Social Innovation · Digital Archive

1 *Arte Útil*

The concept of *Arte Útil*, created by Bruguera alongside the development of socially engaged art projects, is based on using a medium according to a particular social and political problem and on "the direct implementation of art in people's lives" [1]. According to Bruguera, *Arte Útil* aims at applying art to society, addressing the gap between knowledgeable audiences and the general public, along with the historical divergence between the language of avant-garde art and the rhetoric of urgent politics [2].

Bruguera highlights the meaning of *útil* in Spanish, which, like in French, Italian, or Portuguese, has a different connotation in the English word useful. Useful derives from *usare*, which means "make use of, profit by, take advantage of, enjoy, apply, consume," while *útil* derives from the Latin word *utilis*, whose significance is related to something "useful, beneficial, profitable." Although from *útil* to useful seems that the idea of benefit is less evident, both Latin expressions have a common origin in the word *uti*, which means "make use of, profit by, take advantage of" [3].

Bruguera's social art practice represents a new paradigm in the visual arts, as she was one of the first artists to develop work over long periods. According to Rinaldo Meschini [4], these examples of socially engaged art are intended both to study and create a common platform for discussing issues related to the theme of migration and to generate a commitment to reality through social and political work.

Among the criteria established by Bruguera to characterize a work of art as useful are issues that are specific to the contemporary art field and others that can be considered transdisciplinary. In this context stands out the importance of a project being time-specific and an answer to urgent needs; being implemented and working in a real situation with tangible results for the benefit of participants, using aesthetics as a system for social transformation, among others [5]. The time-specific issue is part of Bruguera's methodology, which relates to the political context when the artwork unfolds or is materialized. Thus, the object of art exists while certain political circumstances are taking place, becoming a document of a particular political period as soon as those circumstances end [6].

Arte Útil is a social art form that works as a "socially consistent (artistic) material" that reveals itself to the viewer, being more perceptible by a wider public, unlike other artistic possibilities that are difficult to understand. According to Bruguera, this useful dimension is "the key to solve this barrier of communication and interest by the non-informed/non-initiated audience in contemporary art." In addition, the political specificity of *Arte Útil* aims not to turn all participants into artists but that all artists should be aware of their powerful tools to be responsible citizens. Within the Immigrant Movement International project, Bruguera stresses that her role is that of an initiator rather than an artist or author of a social, cultural, and artistic initiative, which she intends to develop in a participatory manner, incorporating everyone's creativity and become the common property of the community in question [5].

The development of relational and dialogical aesthetics is an aspect intensely explored by Bruguera, whose projects delve into several forms of interaction with the Other and the respective inclusion for participation in the programmed artistic initiatives. Among the relationship methods implemented, such as the creation of associations and workshops, among other forms of collaboration, Bruguera uses dialogue to create bonds of understanding and potentiate synergies. Another particularity is the relevance that these collaborative dynamics assume in the projects' communication, in which the collaborative processes are instrumentalized to enable the reproduction of the social contexts in question.

Relational art, which aims to create interactions between the observer and the social context, is associated with the advent of modern art, namely through the aesthetic, cultural, and political movements that have emerged since then. This artistic practice represents a social emphasis, where social relations that stimulate communication between participants are explored to generate spaces for free thought [7].

1.1 Immigrant Movement International

Immigrant Movement International, IM International, or IMI[1], were the terms given to a local organization dealing with legal and political immigration issues, whose aim was to set itself up as "an alternative to the mainstream position in the tradition and legacy of civic movements in the history of political advancement." According to the IMI's statement, it is a creative and educational community focused on developing sustainability systems and alternative economies based on a culture of cooperation; a collective that acknowledges the role of (im)migrants in the progress of society; a lab for developing "artivist tactics" and innovative methods for communication to the larger community; a platform where empirical knowledge is combined with creativity through *Arte Útil* [5].

IMI existed between 2010 and 2015 in the Corona neighborhood of Queens, New York, with the support of the non-profit organization Creative Time and the Queens Museum of Art. In the initial phase, Bruguera lived in a local flat, sharing living quarters with other residents, and ran a community support center for recently arrived immigrants. This space, located in a shop in the multi-ethnic neighborhood of Corona, was characterized as a hybrid conceptual art space in addition to a social support center [1].

Among the social support provided stands out the legal advice, multimedia classes, English, Spanish, Aztec dance and philosophy, and Ecuadorian dance. Always present was also the objective of disseminating the concept of *Arte Útil* in society, focusing on the problem of the precarious living conditions of immigrants. Also noteworthy was Bruguera's ethnographic performative approach in the interviews with emigrants in the metro about their life experiences in the USA [1, 5].

The IMI initiative is characterized as a long-term project that functions for Bruguera as an experimental platform for developing the *Arte Útil* concept. In the artist's view, creating art objects based solely on the problematization of social inequality is no longer sufficient. Bruguera experiments with a new status for the artist, merging the creative agency with strong political activism, which becomes a "yardstick of an art which wants to define itself as useful" [4].

One of the IMI's characteristics is that it establishes a direct interaction with social and political organizations to call attention to the perception, recognition, and representation immigrants have in society. To this end, Bruguera experiments with a strategy for defining models of social organization, highlighting the global problem of immigration and bringing it to public discussion, as well as creating significant conditions for immigrants in search of their own identity through difference and a voice with which they can assume their knowledge and demands [2].

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[1] http://immigrant-movement.us/wordpress/.

A peculiarity of this social artwork is that Bruguera avoids producing a specific object of representation to value the whole interaction process in the IMI project. However, it is possible to identify a set of media whose aim is to document all the actions produced and inform the different audiences, such as creating and maintaining a website, blog, and social networks, from which greater visibility is given to the initiative [2].

2 Designing Services for Social Innovation

The goal of service design for social innovation is to create and establish situations that result from social innovation cases. This allows services to align with the reality where they are offered since they are founded on relationships developed between all social agents in the community, including local culture and know-how [8].

Services are mainly human-centered, relational, and social entities. They are also cyclical and with a degree of unpredictability since interactions develop over time with no certainty that specific outcomes will be achieved in a predefined manner. When a person engages with a service through a touchpoint, a service interaction takes place. The touchpoints are the tangible representation of services and include the objects that facilitate concrete interactions, playing a crucial role in making relationships smoother, increasingly effective, and more meaningful. Thus, services are physical as they are attached to or backed by an artifact of certain nature. Also relevant is the fact that services may be provided through person-to-person interactions, through multiple relational situations, by means of appropriate digital interfaces, or even through hybrid touchpoints that combine different means [9].

Manzini [10] refers that a common aspect between these modes of design is that they adopt "processes in which what has to be designed are hybrid, dynamic artifacts where products, services, and communication are systemized and presented as a whole."

Designing services for social innovation is also significant in terms of place-making, which is a notion that merges both the perspectives of specialists focused on problem-solving and those who are more concerned about the production and communication of meaning. It is a specific activity related to certain places, in which approaches with different scales take place, which in turn are interconnected in a global logic. In this field, the relationship of agents with local institutions and citizens to enhance the development of specific projects is a recurrent practice. This type of partnership and intervention is particularly paradigmatic for the design discipline since there was no great concern with the place in the tradition of profit-based industrial design.

The advantage of social innovation resulting from the understanding and interaction between designers and other social innovation creatives, makers, and stakeholders is twofold: on the one hand, it is a collaboration for the implementation of ideas to solve societal needs, and on the other hand, it is a demonstration of the will and capacity to act through different synergies. Therefore, all kinds of civil associations, communities, families, and other social groups are significant partners that can actively collaborate with experts to experiment and systematize different approaches. The need to entrench this logic of social performance and citizenship stems from the fact that most governmental measures are ineffective in solving some recurrent problems and overcoming "the

conventional polarities of private versus public, local versus global, consumer versus producer, need versus wish." Contrary to the tendency towards contrast, social innovation proposes a dilution between these principles [10].

According to a social innovation art and design practice focused on generating subjectivity, we find authors who use their knowledge to create new products, services, or communication objects. At the same time, there are multiple innovative possibilities streamlined by activist makers seeking to influence cultural attitudes and behaviors, professional artists and designers acting as place makers for local communities, and creative industries working in networks as open services.

Such as in the practice of *Arte Útil*, one of the central aspects of service design for social innovation is the relational dimension, where the service beneficiaries are perceived as relational beings rather than as users or clients. The relational approach is based on the notion of being open to others, allowing interpersonal interaction, which is the raw material for services that might happen. The relational qualities that are established between individuals substantially influence how smoothly the relational service operates. Contrary to other types of services developed around a predetermined interaction between clients and service providers, relational services are better compared to a relationship between guests and service hosts. A more open and unpredictable interaction that encourages the participation of all users taking part in the social innovation service [11].

Art and design services strategically disseminate innovative forms of action and understanding throughout communities to empower and scale social innovation. Empowerment is a key mechanism by which participants develop the capacity to gather resources to accomplish a desired objective. This process depends on the empowerment subjects' "access to resources and the capacity and willingness to mobilize resources to achieve a goal" [12]. In this context, Avelino et al. highlight the importance of getting the willingness, such as referred to above in a citation by Manzini [10], which depends on a set of psychological dimensions, namely relatedness, autonomy, competence, impact, meaning, and resilience. Relatedness is about a sense of community and belonging to a social group, as well as obtaining recognition from it; autonomy refers to the capacity to make decisions for oneself and to behave in accordance with one's ideals and identity; competence refers to acquiring skills and an awareness of one's own efficacy through action; impact is the confidence that is possible to take actions that make the difference; meaning is related with the development of collective identity; resilience is connected with the psychological and behavioral strategies that allow the maintenance of a motivation to pursue goals and to take further steps [12].

This notion of empowerment is relevant to understand how the protagonists of social innovation art and design can feel stronger and more confident in the context of translocal networks, which are a combination of local and transnational synergies. These translocal systems of interconnections focused on transformative social innovation operate on both local and global scales. The different dimensions of empowerment in local services are better suited for specific development, while in the translocal networking they are disseminated in an expanded field of potential synergies. In this context, combining specific local action with translocal diffusion is particularly empowering [12].

2.1 Conflict Kitchen

Pittsburgh's Conflict Kitchen[2], Pennsylvania, USA, is an example of a translocal service for social innovation. The restaurant was open from 2010 to 2017 and was created by the lead artists Jon Rubin and Dawn Welenski, together with the graphic designer Brett Yasko and the culinary director Robert Sayre. As collaborators, the project counted on Afghan, Black and African American, Cuban, Haudenosaunee, Iranian, North Korean, Palestinian, and Venezuelan communities in Pittsburgh and their worldwide diasporas, who contributed with their heritage through stories, opinions, recipes, and creative guidance. The Conflict Kitchen served food from every country with which the United States had a conflict, from Afghanistan to North Korea. It was open seven days a week, changing its visual identity in response to different geopolitical developments [13].

Publications, performances, conversations, and several other activities to increase public awareness around cultural and political issues at stake in different world geographies, such as printing interviews with locals in the reverse of food containers, were held in the restaurant, which received new iterations according to the themes in question. Among the most uncommon actions of the Conflict Kitchen: customers were invited to have lunch with a citizen of the featured country in a series called *The Foreigner*; for those who couldn't visit the restaurant in person, there were synchronous international public dinner parties and cooking classes, held in several time zones; research activities based on food experience and culture worldwide to enhance the economic and social networks where the participants were part; books, such as one with conversations featuring Palestinian youngsters and a North Korean cookbook with annotation [13].

The objects that were designed to support the project activities have an impactful influence on community re-identification patterns. The expression and emotive character of the Conflict Kitchen visuals, such as the facade and the wrappers, allowed the customer participants to envision and perform different ways to put into question the conventional narratives about Pittsburgh's multicultural reality and the US international affairs. This is related to the concept of *agonism* [14, 15], which is a paradigm that, in this kind of design, enhances the quality of dissent rather than avoiding it, allowing the construction of multiple identities that represent the emergency and vulnerability of contemporary social structures and simultaneously anticipate possible alternatives. *Agonism* is a kind of antagonism, but contrary to the incompatibility of opposing adversaries or enemies who share no conceptual ground, it enables a space where opponents can negotiate the construction of a mutual understanding. Pushing the Conflict Kitchen service users to reconsider societal conventions led to the rise of a citizenry that recognizes and values differences [16].

Conflict Kitchen's actions were not intended to represent a single perspective or judgment but rather to dismantle existing prejudice systems and collective beliefs by highlighting their unfairness and oppression. Despite the social and political purpose of the restaurant, the many activities did not contain specific political orientations or procedures to follow but rather aimed to establish an uncensored context to allow meaningful dialogue and broaden the discussion around the country's international affairs and

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[2] https://www.conflictkitchen.org.

politics of immigration with the direct involvement of the communities in question. However, the diversity of thoughts generated points of common interest and identification that enabled the creation of a public [16].

3 Intercultural Dialogue

Central to the relational and dialogical aesthetics, as developed in the Immigrant Movement International and the Conflict Kitchen, is the way it occurs the interaction with the Other and their involvement for cooperation in the proposed community projects.

In the essay *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*, Bell Hooks [17] points out how nonwhite cultures are often commodified, which is a tendency that has become dominant in Western societies since the mid-twentieth century, such as is well known in the sphere of food culture and business, but also in the visual arts and design fields. Following Hooks' understanding, it is possible to acknowledge that nonwhite cultures are usually contextualized within a white and paternalist narrative through which certain cultural phenomena are appropriated. In commodifying another culture, the object or service is taken out of context and transformed into something easy to consume. On the contrary, consuming the Other's culture should not be the focus, but understanding and appreciating it as a complex human manifestation with common aspects and differences.

This understanding of racism establishes relationships with the Other as an object of play and exotic experimentation without considering the human sameness that should prevail in intercultural interactions. Hooks [17] states that this transformation of racism, from something related to the idea of the nonwhite as something the white culture used to deny, repudiate, and fear to something they obsessively wish to appropriate and enjoy, is related to a colonial past when western countries used to conquer territories to change them according to their principles of civilization. In Western culture, colonialist longing involves reenacting and ritualizing the colonial power, where conquering adventures work as narratives and imaginary of dominance and desire for the nonwhite. The attitude facing the Other is basically the same as it was in the Middle Ages in terms of dealing with the other culture solely for the white benefit, without caring for mutual respect and intercultural dialogue.

Understanding how curiosity for the nonwhite is manifested, experienced, and enhanced through diversity and the significant difference depends upon a sensitive human behavior that might suggest if those potentially transformative feelings and emotions are reciprocal and ever realized. A relationship that may enhance interaction with otherness must start from "one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference" to interact closely with those who have a different culture, and it should be a mutual choice and negotiation to allow "cultural appreciation" to the detriment of "cultural appropriation" [17].

Seeking the fairest and most impacting ways to inform our "political choices and affiliations," where a desire for interaction with those who are different, have another culture or are labeled as Other, is a human behavior that should be followed when the situation is not regarded as biased, or politically subjected to bad principles [18]. Regarding art and design for social innovation, and particularly when collaborating with migrants and refugees, it is possible to consider it within a sphere of critical art. According

to Rancière [18], this is a territory between art and politics. The main aim of critical art is to stimulate the observers' awareness of the existence of control systems aimed at transforming them into conscious actors concerning the evolution of the world. Thus, critical art practices, situated between art and non-art forms, have developed an activity based on the articulation between different discourses, thus being able to communicate doubly. In the case of the representation or self-representation of otherness, recognizing how "the desire for pleasure" shapes our politics and our awareness of diversity allows the citizens who observe to grasp "how desire disrupts, subverts, and makes resistance possible" [17].

4   Shifting Ground

The Shifting Ground is an art and design service for social innovation that started in 2019 in the city of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, USA and continued in Lisbon, Portugal, with two other iterations. In Lisbon, the project was held in 2021 and 2022 and will return to Iowa in the fall of 2023. The main motivation that boosted the project is the times we are living in nowadays, marked by intolerance and social injustice regarding immigration policies, which most probably will grow with the human and environmental crises we are experiencing, such as climate change and war, among others, that force people to migrate and seek a new place with fair conditions to live and expect a better future. With this in mind, a group of artists/designers, namely Jane Gilmor, António Gorgel Pinto, and Paula Reaes Pinto have been experimenting a community-based service for migrants and refugees focused on encouraging creative thinking and ceramic sculpture as survival strategies. In the course of the different editions, the Shifting Ground service already involved immigrants from Mexico, Honduras, Indonesia, Angola, Mozambique, and Sao Tome and Principe, as well as immigrants and refugees from Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The interaction with these citizens and the way to establish empathy with the group is established through a game titled MOT (acronym of memory, object, talent), which represents a strategy to allow the participants continuous input in a fluid and customized approach and also as a way of encouraging more spontaneous participation (see Fig. 1). In order to stimulate self-representation, the MOT game arises as a means of generating a creative relationship between the service users, newcomers to a nation, and the host community.

Throughout the Shifting Ground three iterations, different nuances of the MOT have been experimented. In the first workshop sessions, the participants were asked to share through the MOT a personal narrative, a meaningful object, and what they regarded to be their major aptitude. It was also stated that these three issues should be somehow related. In the last Shifting Ground in Lisbon, the life story that was asked focused on memories related to food experiences and knowledge. Every person has a connection to food, some of which are good, while others can be negative. Nevertheless, all experiences are related to impacting feelings and emotions that we aim to explore further through participatory sculpture (see Fig. 2).

The remaining steps were common to all the service iterations, namely the conversation around each participant's MOT, where they shared their personal experiences. The
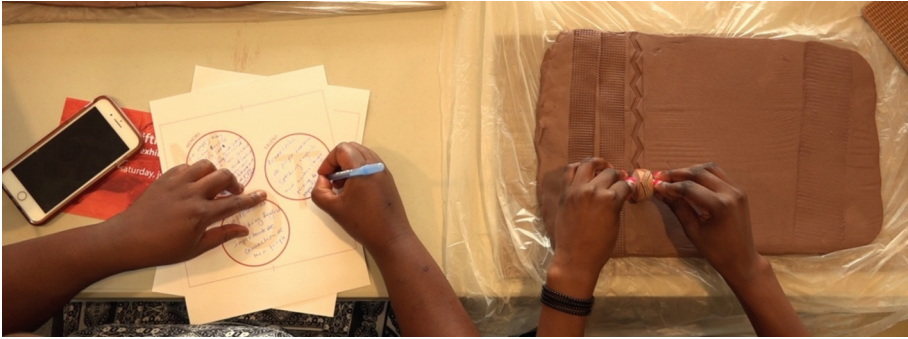
Fig. 1. Shifting Ground Workshop, participant writing her MOT (memory, object, talent), Cedar Rapids, Iowa, US, 2019.

Fig. 2. Shifting Ground ceramic sculpture, Florence Nshimirimana Taylor, 2019.

relational approach reveals itself very significant because, through personal memories, objects, and willingness, the interaction is expanded to other topics of self-representation. This process of conceptualization is followed by an individual exploration of possible forms with clay, from small to large-scale ceramic sculptures. In a collaborative engagement, permanent feedback from peers and artists is maintained. The artists' contribution in this phase is mainly as facilitators, intervening whenever necessary and attempting to increase the participants' initiative while giving technical or conceptual assistance when necessary. The goal is always to create a set of ceramic sculptures to allow the organization of a final show to the community at large, which happens a few days after the workshop while the bonds of friendship are still fresh between everyone involved in the service (see Fig. 3).

The exhibit-celebration has been counting on the presence of participants and artists, their friends and family, local artists, researchers, and stakeholders. This last gathering was emphasized by the immigrants and refugees involved, along with everyone else there during the activity, who agreed that such a demonstration clearly recognized immigrant culture and cooperation across local communities, especially by showcasing their innermost resourceful qualities.

Fig. 3. Shifting Ground Exhibit/Celebration, Cherry Center Space, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, US, 2019.

4.1 Digital Repository of Sculptures

The Shifting Ground translocal system is also supported by a website[3] where networking is seen as a vehicle to expand potential synergies. Besides happening in specific places such as Iowa and Lisbon the art and design service for social innovation has a digital presence. It is a dynamic touch point that facilitates meaningful and interactive experiences with users and participants. Through interactive communication, the Shifting Ground website creates an archive where users and participants feel heard, engaged, and valued. In this context, the service prioritizes a user-centric approach, through which the touch point becomes crucial for building lasting relationships in an increasingly intercultural digital world.

This form of archive, in the words of Miessen [19], generates "a set of spatial and content structures, which produce new works on the basis of the archived material." Within the Shifting Ground website, the idea is to build an archive focused on the act of gathering experiences, and as a type of knowledge that comes from the interaction between all the project participants. The archive in question is supported by an empathetic strategy based on dialogue, and the recounting of life stories represented through ceramic sculptures to engage participants and stimulate the creative process. This is done by using a performative structure and a hybrid and intermedia approach. As a result, this practice serves as a tool for fostering social and cultural sustainability. The collection of movies that depicts the entire procedure and, in particular, the created art objects within the workshops, represents each culture. Because it is founded on an archiving procedure, the digital repository of sculptures is therefore both a process and part of the creative work.

Wolfgang Ernst, in his book titled *Digital Memory and the Archive* [20], explores the impact of digital technologies on memory and archiving practices, discussing how digital platforms generate new forms of cultural memory and transform the traditional notions of archiving. Ernst highlights the transformative power of digital memory and its implications for our understanding of history, culture, and technology. Digital technologies have fundamentally transformed our relationship with memory, leading to a

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[3] http://shifting-ground.org.

shift from the archive as a stable entity to the archive as a dynamic and processual system. In this context, the archive is not merely a storage space but an active agent in the construction and reconstruction of cultural memory.

Such as Foucault [21] compares the archive study to the practice of learning about the past through its material remains left behind by a specific historical period and culture, Ernst explores the notion of the archive as an archaeological site. In this context, the Shifting Ground digital platform works as an archaeological site where users can uncover and analyze layers of subjective information and memories of past activities. It is a dynamic engagement with digital materials documenting concrete actions of service for social innovation, uncovering hidden histories and alternative narratives.

5 Final Considerations

Designing services for social innovation, such as the Immigrant Movement International, the Conflict Kitchen, and the Shifting Ground, is strongly based on relational and dialogical aesthetics to enhance interactions with the involved participant users. Using dialogue as a central medium to create social and cultural bonds of understanding potentiates synergies allowing further development of the provided service to the community.

Also common to the three projects is the fact of being inserted in translocal networks, combining local and transnational sociocultural characteristics, which define the implemented collaborative platforms involving artists, designers, and other social innovation creatives, makers, and stakeholders for societal transformation and empowerment. This is a key mechanism through which the migrant participants are encouraged to gather the motivation they need to complete their desired objectives.

Creating a sense of community and belonging to a social group, where the socially integrated citizens recognize the importance of welcoming the newcomers to the community and accepting the different ideals and identities as powerful cultural resources, is a way to legitimize collective identity and reinforce social and cultural resilience.

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