

# Portrayal of American society in Jack Kerouac's "On the Road"

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The Portrayal of American Society in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*

Završni rad

Mentor (doc.dr.sc. Sanja Runtić)

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## Summary

The mid-twentieth century in United States of America was marked by political and social unease. The beginning of the Cold War brought on a general public fright; the growing economic pressure was accompanied by social revolutions in the form of the Civil Rights Movement and feminist protests - these revolutions were among the strongest markers of that specific time in the United States' history. The Beat Movement developed in those circumstances as a form of free speech of young writers and poets commonly known as the Beats. Among this group of young writers, Jack Kerouac developed his specific style of writing and as his classic novel *On the Road* was published in 1957, it managed to influence future generations of young Americans. In his novel *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac refers not only to American society of the 1950's but also to the current political and social circumstances of which he does not approve. In a specific manner he describes not only the general situation of American society but also the protest and an alternative way to approach life. He takes pride in the way he and his friends refuse to be part of the mainstream society and consumer politics which were starting to develop in the 1950s. Throughout his novel, Kerouac expresses critique against American conformity and consumerism of the 1950s and manages to influence future generations in their view of modern American life.

Jack Kerouac, Beat Movement, American society, 1950's

## Introduction

Jack Kerouac was one of the pioneers of the Beat Movement which developed in the USA throughout the 1950s. At that point in history of the United States, after World War II, the country faced a series of different changes and revolutions from the Civil Rights Movement to exploding jazz era and feminist protests to the beginning of the Cold War between the USA and Soviet Russia. The consequences were the Red Scare, McCarthyism and the occurring anti-communism. This is the time in which Kerouac wrote his autobiographical novel *On the Road*, describing his adventures while travelling across the United States with his friend Neal Cassady. This paper will discuss the relation between Kerouac's novel *On the Road* and the society of the 1950s. It will take a look into how Kerouac regards American society, economy, politics and general state of the country at the time of Sal and Dean's travels, expressing his critique of American society, conformity and consumerism of the 1950s.

### 1. United States of America in the 1950's

In the middle of the twentieth century United States of America embarked on a new phase of its history. After World War II people of the USA seemed to wish nothing more but to retry to their quiet homes and live happily, undisturbed by the problems of the outer world. United States' economy was experiencing enormous growth at the time and the general political climate was socially conservative. In general, the 1950s in the United States can be described as a time of conformity, initial start of consumerism and highly materialistic worldview which was forced upon people of the USA by the media and the government, as the economy needed not only workers but also consumers. Of course, not everything was as shiny and bright as the media presented – the 1950s were also a time in which the fear of communism was the strongest and spread nationwide, while the Cold War between United States and Soviet Russia was at its

beginning. This is the reason why anti-communism caused public fright. As the era of McCarthyism, Korean War and Red Scare joined its frightful hands with revolutions in the shape of African-American Civil Rights Movement, visual art movements, rock music and jazz, along with science and technology advancements – an average citizen of United States was caught between TV appliances commercials and fear of the nuclear attack by communists.

## 1.2. The Beat Movement

This is the era in which the literary movement that later became known as the Beat Movement was born. The Beat Generation or the Beat Movement was a group of writers and friends who wrote poetry and prose, experimented with drugs, traveled across the country while being involved in alternative forms of sexuality and subsequently had a major impact on the future of American literature. They rejected materialism of the 1950s and instead developed an interest in Eastern religions and experimentation with both literary and physical freedom. Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs are considered to be the three crucial writers of the Beat movement, with Kerouac himself coining the term “beat” which held various meanings, from being “beaten down” with life to “beatific”- being holy in the face of the world. The initial members of Beat Generation, Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs met in the late 1940s at the Columbia University in New York and developed a long lasting friendship which was later continued in San Francisco among other Beats such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Carl Solomon, Gary Snyder and others. When it comes to the position of the Beats in the 1950s Reno explains:

After the traumas of the Great Depression and World War II, the vast majority of Americans eagerly returned to the relative stability of middle-class life, now reaching outward to the newly emerging suburbs. The Beats were the first wave of rebellion against this larger trend. They self-consciously set themselves against the postwar push

toward normalcy by surviving on odd jobs, G.I. benefits and donations from friends and family (6)

Erik R. Mortensen briefly explains that not everyone welcomed the idea of growing consumerism in America, and Jack Kerouac with his novel *On the Road* was one such voice of dissent. Kerouac's novel is among the first to question America's booming post-war economy (Mortensen 1-2).

## 2. The Life and Work of Jack Kerouac

Jack Kerouac (Jean-Louis Kerouac) was born on March 12, 1922 in Lowell, Massachusetts. His family is of Franco-American ancestry which significantly influenced Kerouac's attitude both towards his “place in America” and his search for himself through his work. Kerouac's first spoken language was French as he learned English only at the age of 6. However he later became prominent as a master of English literary word, creating experimental style he named the “spontaneous prose“. “The linguistic inventiveness and playfulness in Kerouac's books from this period were unprecedented. No prose like this had ever been written in English by a writer in America” (American writers 817). Kerouac won a football scholarship and proceeded to study in Columbia University where he met other pioneers of the Beat Movement. He was interested in writing from this young age, and after a knee injury he dropped out of college to pursue his writing career. In the meantime he joined the army and afterwards held a series of different employments. He lived with his mother Gabrielle for the larger part of his life, including the times when he travelled across the United States alone and with Neal Cassady, the famous hero of Kerouac's novel *On the Road*. Later in his life, as a famous underground hero of the Beat Movement and an inspiration behind the hopes and dreams of the new rising generation of hippies and bohemians - the fact that continued to bother Kerouac until the end of his life – he continued to drink and write with equal intensity. “Jack Kerouac

considered himself a storyteller and experimental writer in the literary tradition of Marcel Proust and James Joyce” (American writers 809). Among his most famous novels are *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, *Tristessa*, *Subterraneans*, *The Big Sur*, *Doctor Sax* etc. Topics which occupy most of Kerouac's prose are jazz, promiscuity, Buddhism, Catholicism, use of drugs and the eternal search for oneself through travel and new experiences. “The content of his work promotes the Beats’ underground lifestyle of sex and drugs, their political beliefs in changing an economically restrained America, and religious beliefs such as Buddhism and Catholicism” (Nicoletti 1).

Kerouac died on October 21, 1969 at the age of 47 from internal bleeding caused by his long-term abuse of alcohol. However, the popularity of his works and the influence they represented for the younger generations remains unprecedented. Kerouac has managed, like no other writer before the Beat Movement, to move and inspire young people in ways which later on helped to create the hippie movement of the 1960s.

## 2.1 Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*

Kerouac wrote *On the Road* in April of 1951 in legendary three weeks. He worked in his mother's house on a typewriter he modified himself to be able to place an entire roll of Teletype paper because, according to the popular belief, he found it disturbing to have to get up all the time and change the sheets of paper - as he was a very fast typist. Also, his narrative spontaneous prose required an unbroken stream of paper to accommodate the stream of words Kerouac poured over three weeks fuelled by coffee and help of his wife Joan. Although he managed to write the entire novel in such a short period of time, it is certain that Kerouac was a dedicated writer who at all times had a notebook and pen at his side and had a habit of writing down bits and pieces of his future works. It is also certain that the material for *On the Road* developed through a period of years previous to 1951, when Kerouac was traveling and experiencing life on the road with Neal Cassady. Kerouac managed to publish his novel six years after it had been

written, and this only after he made a number of alterations to the novel, including all of the characters' names and some of the content of the novel, as it was requested by his publishing house, the Viking Press. According to Griffey, after its final release, *On the Road* was a cultural phenomenon: "It would be impossible to calculate the total number of poets, criminals, film makers, musicians, hobos, professional outdoorsmen, social workers, painters and general readers who began their journeys with a copy of Kerouac's novel (Griffey 3)." In its basic content *On the Road* is an autobiographical novel which takes place from 1947 to 1950 and revolves around the travels that Kerouac and his friend Neal Cassady made across the United States and Mexico. Two main characters are Salvatore "Sal" Paradise, who serves as a narrator, and his friend Dean Moriarty, who represents the novel's final hero, a man of an extreme sense for adventure, a con-man with genuine American charm in eternal search for "the kicks" which the North American continent can provide in the shape of wild jazz nights out, experimentation with drugs, fleeting relationships with women and philosophical talks about the purpose of life and their time in general, all of this while hitch hiking or driving across America. Dean Moriarty is an alter-ego to Neal Cassady, Kerouac's friend at the time, who himself had aspirations towards writing and with his incredible character and life was an inspiration behind many works of the Beats. *On the Road* is divided into five parts, three of which describe travels of Sal and Dean, which can be regarded as not only physical travels and adventures but also as spiritual travels through the long journey of discovering their own destiny and place in the world. Major themes and ideas, such as the pursuit of happiness and freedom occur throughout the novel along with a subtle yet existent criticism of the contemporary American society, politics, economy and the way of life media advertised as desirable. Kerouac describes his own reasons for traveling in the novel: "I was a young writer and I wanted to take off. Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me" (Kerouac 7). As we have mentioned earlier, the novel had a major impact upon American youth



at the time and soon it reached the status of a classic: “When his books were first published, they were so compelling that their description of an alternative lifestyle contributed to the cultural revolution that swept across America and Europe in the late 1960s” (American writers 809).”On the other hand, not everybody in the 1950s America was delighted by Kerouac's adventure novel, as soon it became obvious that although Kerouac himself was apolitical his entire life, his novel still contained the rebellious spirit of hobos, bohemians, Beats. “Taking place in the late 1940s, these various journeys and the characters’ actions during them were, on the novel’s publication in 1957, read by many as direct attacks on the values and morals of post-war America” (Haslam 4).

### 3. The 40's and 50's in the USA – the General State of American Society

As we have mentioned earlier, life in America in the 1940s and 1950s entered a new phase after World War II, a period of time that brought a lot of concerns to American people. After World War II was over, American government emphasized the importance of further industrial growth, which on the other hand resulted in development of the consumer society. With the beginnings of the Cold War the general atmosphere in America was of a conservative nature, and citizens of America were put under double pressure – to fear communism, which brought trouble to many innocent Americans due to false accusations, or to spend their money as much as possible in order to live a pretended happy life under this threat. It is obvious that people of America were encouraged to follow the growing fashion of consumerism as a sort of a surrogate to leading a happy life under a real threat created by the tight relations between the USA and Soviet Russia. Spangler argues that “increased governmental control, a turn toward mass over individual welfare, and the growth model of capitalism as the antidote for hardship inform the dominant sociopolitical philosophy” (2). At that time, the Beats were opposing this general state of things in America though, it is important to notice, not in a political way. According to Reno:

The Beats were quintessential bohemians who felt the plain-Jane expectations of middle-class American life as an infecting, constraining force. Wife, career, mortgage, children, savings accounts, and quiet suburban streets: these were realities overlaid by the deadening expectations of conventional morality. Escape was essential, and, although Kerouac and the other Beats lacked Rousseau's clarity about the constant impulse of human nature to accept and submit to social authority, they intuitively recognized the need for dramatic acts and symbols of transgression (2)

The Beats were “optimists, risk-takers, seekers - young people with a desperate craving for belief.” (Menand 1). They incorporated their beliefs in their literature and although Ginsberg can be considered as the politically most active member of the Beats, not all of them expressed their beliefs through politics. Kerouac was apolitical his entire life. Nevertheless, the opinion the Beats held against the consumerist, conservative way of life in America in the 1950s is present throughout Kerouac's works.

#### 4. Kerouac's Impressions on American Society in *On the Road*

Throughout *On the Road* as the travels of Sal and Dean unfold, we stumble upon different references to contemporary American society of the 1950s. It is clear that Kerouac intended to describe not only American country but also its people who played a very important part in his travels: “He looks from the outside-in at Americans of all forms and from right across the country. The book unfolds as a poem in prose to the cowboys of the West and the intellectuals of the East and, of course, to the romance of the road in between” (Skinazi 7). In their travels Sal and Dean experienced the heart of America, exploring not only surrounding landscapes and the never ending horizon, but also people of different classes and status along with American food and music. “Sal makes his journey halfway across his country by following the routes of pioneers, eating apple pie, finding the smell of the ‘raw body of America itself’ in Mississippi

and meeting the human matter of America—mothers and truck drivers, students and hobos, ranchers and cowboys” (Skinazi 9). While traveling, Sal and Dean get the opportunity to experience not only the hospitable and gentle side of America but also the less attractive side of a country that has just entered a dark phase of its history in which suspicion and fear play an enormous role in everyday life. For example, after meeting the police in Sabinal, where he was working at one point, Sal states that “the American police are involved in a psychological warfare against those Americans who don't frighten them with imposing papers and threats. It's a Victorian police force, it peers out of musty windows and wants to inquire about everything, and can make crimes if the crimes don't exist to its satisfaction” (Kerouac 127). Commenting on this observation, Spangler states that Kerouac brings out the “portrayal of the forces of control—the police, highway troopers, and other authorities who interact with the hoboes, migrants, and other ‘undesirables’ whose societal place lay outside of the mainstream” ( Spangler 7). At that particular time in the history of the USA these problems occurred often, and as a matter of fact, throughout their visit to Mexico, Sal and Dean never start wondering at the relaxed approach and kindness of Mexican police. However, in America things are much different as “ in periods of crisis, an atmosphere of fear and suspicion creates unique problems and opportunities for the hegemonic forces that patrol the boundaries of citizenship and the implied agency such a term carries” (Spangler 7).

Furthermore, Kerouac brings his observations on the current position of American people through the words of Old Bull Lee, an alter-ego to William Burroughs, who claims that the heads of America “prefer making cheap goods so's everybody'll have to go on working and punching timeclocks and organizing themselves in sullen unions and floundering around while the big grab goes on in Washington and Moscow” (Kerouac 139). Also, we can discover Kerouac's stand on relations between American people in Sal's observation that “boys and girls in America have

such a sad time together; sophistication demands that they submit to sex immediately without proper preliminary talk. Not courting talk – real straight talk about souls, for life is holy and every moment is precious” (Kerouac 52). It is clear that Kerouac considers the modern relations between Americans too cold and distant, perhaps even due to the state of suspicion and fear which was omnipresent in America at the time. This is why he encourages closer relationships between people. Throughout his travels Kerouac observed not only hobos of America but also its workers, and although he is reluctant to become one of them – which is especially shown in the first part of the novel when he and Remi work as guards in workers collection of shacks - he is still very respectful of American worker, even though he believes that such people are mistreated in American society. “Portraying the lifestyle of the itinerant worker as a desirable mode of survival for any segment of the American population in the 1950s can only be read as ironic commentary on the postwar boom” (Spangler 7). He puts little emphasis on the differences between African-Americans and their position in the society and the position of other Americans:

Mill City, where Remi lived, with a collection of shacks in a valley, housing-project shacks built for Navy Yard workers during the war; it was in a canyon, and a deep one, treed profusely on all slopes. There were special stores and barber shops and tailor shops for the people of the project. It was, so they say, the only community in America where whites and Negroes lived together voluntarily; and that was so, and so wild and joyous a place I've never seen since. (Kerouac 55)

Kerouac realizes that the greater part of America can be described as hardworking and also “hard-spending”, living their lives as they are suggested by the media, and all this for the benefit of the great rolling machine that is American economy: “All the men were driving home from work, wearing railroad hats, baseball hats, all kinds of hats, just like after work in any town anywhere” (Kerouac 12). Through Kerouac's observations of American working class we notice

that although Beats respect the working class of America, they fear of joining them as this would mean bowing to the requests of American new way of living which contradicts everything the Beats and Kerouac believe in. Mortensen connects this reluctance for working with the meaning of time in *On the Road* : “The first step involves exposing clock time for what it really is – a means of controlling the worker. Only after this oppressive system is abandoned can a quest for an “authentic” way of experiencing time be undertaken. Sal and Dean have certainly left the work-a-day world behind them” (Mortensen 6). Through his autobiographical character Sal, Kerouac expresses his own thoughts on American working class and working system which does not relate to his ideas of life. However, through his travels, Kerouac puts great emphasis on American music of the 1950's – jazz. He uses jazz not only to outline the wild temperament of this era but also to depict the nature of American underground society which listened to jazz and partied wildly through warm nights in New York, San Francisco and other American cities. Kerouac's friends were among these people and as he travels through America he meets many different jazz musicians and jazz lovers who present the other – not so conservative – side of American society. It is obvious that Kerouac prefers this kind of free, open-minded people who “live in the moment“, which he considers himself to be a part of - to more conservative classes. In the numerous descriptions of wild jazz nights found in the novel Kerouac states that “At this time, 1947, bop was going like mad all over America. The fellows at the Loop blew, but with a tired air, because bop was somewhere between Charlie Parker Ornithology period and another period that began with Miles Davis (11)”. Although Kerouac seldom makes deliberate comments on American government, this too occurs at the time such as when they were driving through Mexico and he states that “they didn't know that a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges and roads and reduce them to jumbles, and we would be as poor as they someday, and stretching out our hands in the same, same way” (Kerouac 298). Furthermore, Old Bull Lee at one point bitterly observes that “the bastards right now are only interested in seeing if they can

blow up the world” (Kerouac 143)” which is a sad commentary on the current state in the Cold War as the two opposite sides were competing in the process of creating nuclear weapons. Sal and Dean travel through Washington in the most significant time: “We arrived in Washington at dawn. It was the day of Harry Truman's inauguration for his second term. Great displays of war might were lined up along Pennsylvania Avenue as we rolled by in our battered boat. There were B-29s, PT boats, artillery, all kinds of war material that looked murderous in the snowy grass” (Kerouac 126). In this part of the novel, like nowhere else in the book, we can observe the clash between the bohemian, Beat way of life and the current state of America as the protagonists drive by the President's inauguration in their old battered car. The significance of the “displays of War” is immense because it shows the state of fear in which America was in that era. We can observe that throughout *On the Road* Sal and Dean meet both parts of American society, the one limited with working hours, suspicious police officers, scared of communist attack and the other which maintained its carefree nature, driven wild by jazz and rock music, unwilling to bow down to constraints of American politics in the 1950s. Sal and Dean intend to observe and “dig“ both of these faces of American society in an attempt to connect themselves to their own country: “Sal and Dean do, indeed, cross the ‘paths of the most varied people’ and attempt to ‘collapse’ the ‘social distances’ wrought by, among other things, class, age, and geography” (Haslam 6). In the end Sal “realizes that the material and social glories of the world are nothing but obstructions to viewing life” (Mortensen 7).

#### 4.1 Kerouac's Ideas about Policies of Consumerism and Conformity in the USA in the 1950s

Throughout the novel Kerouac states at different times his discontent with the current fashion of consumerism in America and at more than one occasion he emphasizes the importance of simple life, search for one's soul instead of wealth. Dean especially fears the kind

of boring life that “average American” leads. This attitude can especially be seen when the two are driving in the same car with a couple of tourists and Dean observes their characters:

Now you just dig them in front. They have worries, they're counting the miles, they're thinking about where to sleep tonight, how much money for gas, the weather, how they'll get there – and all the time they'll get there anyway, you see. But they need to worry and betray time with urgencies false and otherwise, purely anxious and whiny, their souls really won't be at peace unless they can latch on to an established and proven worry (Kerouac 197)

Sal and Dean are not travelling to gain any kind of material wealth, but spiritual growth and experience. Kerouac's position on consumerist life is at times very critical in the novel; he believes in earning enough money to survive, nothing more. This attitude is especially shown when he lives with Terry for a while and gets up every morning to pick cotton and bring home the salary of that day – which was often barely enough to live by. In spite of this, he seems to be perfectly happy living such a life among people who work in the fields. Throughout the entire book there is no evidence of Sal being materialistic in any way. “Everyday I earned approximately a dollar and a half. It was just enough to buy groceries in the evening on the bicycle. The days rolled by. I forgot all about the East all about Dean and Carlo and the bloody road...I was a man of the earth, precisely as I had dreamed I would be, in Paterson” (Kerouac 90). Dean is very similar to Sal when it comes to consumerism; he buys a car and then completely wrecks it while travelling, he does not care about his belongings at all, and what he often emphasizes throughout the book is that he is simply “searching for kicks“, which leaves out any kind of suspicion in his list of priorities. Actually, in the entire novel and among all present characters, there is hardly a character that emphasizes the value of money. What Dean considers for American wealth is the unique bond that both he and Sal feel while driving across the country. He often considers time more important to money and the material world because he

feels as if he has everything except time, which is lacking in every person's life. Dean takes possession of America through his language and actions. This is why neither of the two characters is concerned with materialism and in fact they despise such an image of the consumer lifestyle. "He says, 'we know America, we're at home; I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it's the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do' (120)". He steals cars, not as a criminal, but to exercise his right of the pursuit of happiness. Sal views the country as Dean's, too" (Skinazi 10). It is important to notice that the characters' opinion on materialism is exactly what enables them to travel in a way they travelled, often without money for food or gas, hitch-hiking, petty stealing, not worrying about tomorrow in their wanderings.

#### 4.2 Beat Movement's Attitudes towards the 1950's American Society

Kerouac can be compared to the Beats attitude towards contemporary American society in a way that he subtly criticizes and comments on the general state of the country. Although Kerouac himself confirms the attitude of his Beat friends towards American society, he again prefers to express his beliefs in a less direct way; he on the surface cares perhaps more for his personal growth than the current state of the country:

Besides all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons, but Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love; he didn't care one way or the other, "so long's I can get that lil ole gal with that little sumpin down there tween her legs, boy" and „ so long's we can eat, son, y'ear me? I'm hungry, I'm starving, let's eat right now!" (Kerouac 7)

Although they intend to have as much fun as possible, which is why Dean "simply seeks "kicks", not land or money" (Skinazi 4), they cannot part their ways with the state of the country they live



in, which is why their simple intention to run away and throw away the norms has many important side effects. According to Spangler: “Even though Sal and Dean are fleeing from Cold War paranoia, racial unrest, and the demand to adapt to a disturbing status quo, they are also repeating the psychological journey that millions of Americans made in the 1930s—the attempt to come to terms with the disturbing anomalies of a capitalist system” (14) Through his own subtle commentaries about the current state of the country, Kerouac takes part in the Beat Movement's critique of American society:

Initially, the Beat Generation was strictly meant to be a literary movement; however, with Allen Ginsberg's poem “Howl” (dramatized in *The Dharma Bums*) and Bohemians' popularization, their gatherings became political. Kerouac had vocally expressed his disdain for this evolution, yet he could not deny his own involvement—specifically, the American themes within his own breakthrough novel, *On the Road*, and his support for 1960s youth counterculture groups such as the hippie movements.

(Nicoletti 2)

Furthermore, Spangler notices that:

The mass media and a majority of the populace were in agreement that happy days had returned and things were better than they had ever been. Yet the Beats were struggling to show Americans that the nation was in a cultural lockdown. The dangers were no longer obvious and economic but subtle and ideological. For Kerouac and the Beats, the highway is an escape route from repressive cultural conditions

(*Spangler 13*)

It is true that Kerouac considered the road as something much more than a means to travel, the experiences he gained on the road have provided him with a unique insight on what American society really consisted of, and it would not be wrong to consider that Sal's and Dean's travels have had enormous influence on the people of America through the later popularity of Kerouac's

novel, as “Sal and Dean wish to embrace their fellow-Americans and convince them that conformity and its ironic corollary, isolation, is not the answer” (Spangler 10).

##### 5. Kerouac's Message to American Society in *On the Road*

We can consider Kerouac's novel as not only an observation and a critique of American society but also as an attempt to make a certain impact upon American people to embrace a different kind of life, one which is not bound by political fear and consumer lifestyle, but presents an attempt to consider one's own position in the world and search for a deeper meaning in life: “Part of what *On the Road* does as a social text is remind the mainstream that the hoboes, Okies, migrants – the Joads of America – still exist on the borders of a society committed to a belief that the fallout from the Great Depression has long since dissipated” (Spangler 7). Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* has certainly made an enormous influence on American society, especially the younger generations, which is why we can state that Kerouac's critical observations of American society had certainly made an impact on the opinions and thoughts of younger generations about the questions of consumerism, conformity and public obedience.

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