



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

INTRODUCTION: PLANT PERFORMANCE

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Introduction: Titan Arum Performance

On July 5, 2021, an *Amorphophallus titanum*, aka Titan arum or “corpse plant,” bloomed at The Huntington Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California. Normally, the occasion of a plant blooming is not cause for a lot of public interest. However, this plant, in this botanical garden, and perhaps especially in this COVID-19 year, was an event. The Youtube timelapse video of the plant’s 45-hour flowering recorded over 4500 views, and the “Stankosaurus Rex,” as The Huntington named them,¹ also traveled to the California Science Center later in the month to introduce further in-person audiences to the spectacle of their extraordinarily large, and fetid, flowering.

Titan arum boasts the world’s largest unbranched inflorescence. They can grow eight feet high and four feet in diameter and weigh up to 170 pounds. As their Latin name suggests, they are extraordinarily phallic in appearance, with an enormous spadix that rises from the centre of the inflorescence and that towers over the rest of the plant during their short blooming period. The spadix (which also bears the male flowers) generates a great deal of heat; the female flowers at their base provide the intoxicating stink that gives rise to the nickname “corpse plant.”² The heat helps broadcast the smell to waiting pollinators; cleverly (to avoid self-pollination), the male flowers don’t bloom until the spadix has cooled down a bit, by which time the plant is full of pollen-carriers. Overall, the flower epitomises the spectacular both because of their huge phallus and because of the fact that their bloom is dramatic, rare, singular, and short: On average, a Titan arum blooms about once every three to seven years, their inflorescence grows very fast in plant terms (six inches

a day) and, after the fact, their pollination drama is visibly over, the wilted spadix looking very much like an exhausted penis. Of course, the overwhelming smell is also part of the extreme sensorium for in-person audiences, but the online followings of the “Stankosaurus,” as well as of their kin in numerous other botanical gardens around the world (e.g., “Uncle Fester” at the Bloedel Conservatory in Vancouver, BC, “Java” at the Chicago Botanic Garden, “Titus” at the Cambridge University Botanic Garden) suggest that even in the absence of the full olfactory experience, *Titan arum* gives one helluva charismatic plant performance.³



We begin the introduction to this special “Plant Performance” issue of *Performance Philosophy* with *Titan arum* for several reasons.⁴ Perhaps most obviously, we want to emphasise that plants *perform*, and that they do so in several important ways. First, *Titan arum*’s spectacular inflorescence is an energetically, chemically, and physically intense event on their own terms. It takes several years for the plant to work up enough steam to create such a massive bloom and, when they do, this work is mostly about a performance of ready fertility to an audience of pollinators: flies, carrion beetles, and sweat bees (although one tantalising story involves elephants). As this example shows, plants *perform* in their own interests, as part of a multispecies network of performativity in which, for example, showiness, smelliness, and eventfulness combine in specific ways to bring about desired ends such as pollination. Thinking about plants as performing in these situations, rather than as simply adapting to their environmental conditions over time, emphasises their agency and responsiveness. If we understand plants as performing—in some of the same ways and for some of the same reasons that human beings perform—then we can begin to understand that plants are active, interactive, and very much tuned into the multispecies relationships in which they participate. For example, some plants only flower and fruit in specific conditions that are much more to do with what is going on around them than with their own internal energies.

Second, plants also *perform* among, and for, people. As Michael Pollan emphasises in his book *The Botany of Desire* (2001), plants call *us* into *their* webs of purpose and interest by performing in ways that are attractive to specific human desires. In his book, these performances involve their affordances of human experiences of beauty (tulips), intoxication (marijuana), sweetness (apples), and control (potatoes), although there are many others (e.g., solidity, reliability, resilience, abundance, shelter, umami). These performances enmesh people in plant agencies, and also demand that we think about performative relationships in more-than-human terms more generally: When plants perform in ways that people find interesting they are able to use *us* as vectors of their own aspirations, sometimes with world-changing results. The spread of wheat, for example, from their origins in Mesopotamia to their near-global distribution, has involved a complex dance between the spreading desires of *Triticum aestivum* (a hybrid human-plant entanglement if ever there was one) and those of people wanting a carbohydrate-rich, high-yield, storable crop (Scott, 2017). If you google “plant performance,” you will get a lot of hits involving the “performance” of plants in relation to specific agro-industrial ends (including, for example, “Performance Plants, Inc,” a biotech company promoting agricultural and biofuel technologies).⁵ Even these heavily-domesticated plants are still performing in ways that are not only and always about instrumental, human desires, but also about the ways in which we might be furthering theirs: It is hardly uncommon for cultivated plants to bust loose and establish themselves, of their own accord, in places other than the ones in which they were planted. Indeed, who knows how Titan arum might benefit from their now-global travels?⁶

Third, of course, plants *perform* specific biopolitical roles. Titan arum’s performances are, for example, part of a global web of exotic plant spectacles, and this web is a continuation of a long history of plant involvement in imperialism, colonialism, and commodity capitalism (Sandilands, 2016; Holway, 2013). In their original rainforest habitat in Sumatra, Titan arum is part of a complex ecology that includes people who harvest and cook the corm as an important source of starch (Chicago Botanic Garden, nd-a). They were first brought into the world of imperial plant and knowledge exchange by an Italian botanist, Odoardo Beccari, in 1878; he sent corms to Florence, all of which died, but a few seeds he collected (aka stole) germinated, including one in London’s Kew Gardens that became the first Titan arum to bloom in captivity, in 1889. Exotic plants like Titan arum were/are both of scientific interest and a huge status symbol (as at Kew, the two were/are tied together); collectors included royalty, members of the aristocracy and, increasingly throughout the twentieth century, members of the middle class. In botanic gardens and private collections, plants like Titan arum thus *perform* both imperial knowledge and personal prestige. There is now a thriving international trade in Titan arum corms to fuel the exotic plant collection trade, and poaching is a serious threat to their future (not to mention the destruction of their rainforest habitat [Chicago Botanic Garden, nd-b]). Sadly, the plants’ spectacular performances are now contributing to their vulnerability in their original habitats.

As a multitalented botanical performer, then, Titan arum offers an interesting introduction to the field of Critical Plant Studies (CPS), in which emerging tradition this special issue on plant performance is located. Of course, CPS is a rapidly growing, highly interdisciplinary field that not only includes multiple branches and shoots (the plant metaphor is hard to resist) but also grows

from varied starting-points and follows divergent clusters of vegetal concern, including philosophical, political, artistic, literary, scientific, historical, economic, intimate, and intersectional dimensions of plant activities in and with different human and more-than-human worlds. It would also be very difficult to draw a clear line around the places where CPS meets and converses with other traditions of plant discussion that do not necessarily identify themselves as within any such named field, including the work of Indigenous plant knowledge-keepers, plant scientists, farmers, gardeners, foresters, botanical writers and illustrators, and activists of many different stripes. Nonetheless, from where we stand as *feminist* plant scholars (meaning we seek to address all oppressions including those of women, Indigenous people, nature and plants), and keeping in mind the original seeds of our intention for this special issue to consider plant performance in artistic, theoretical, ecological, and political contexts (not to mention vegetal ones), we would like to suggest the following four clusters of concern as orienting both our understanding of the field and the place of this special issue within it. We see these four clusters as both preoccupations and provocations: places of interest that have already spurred significant CPS inquiry and that, we hope, will orient its future even more expansively. All these concerns appear in the multiple performative worlds of Titan arum, all are significant to our own work, and all are very much apparent, in different ways, in the brilliant essays that follow.

1. Colonisation and Decolonisation

Plants are not neutral: They are rich in stories of power, identity, change, economics, movement, exploitation, and care, or lack thereof. Plant colonisation refers to the human movement of plants around the world for the purposes of imperialist natural history collecting, value extraction, and nationalist/territorial economic expansion; it also refers to the ways in which plants have accompanied human movement for other reasons. Plant decolonisation refers to methods of questioning the colonial rhetoric of adventure, vanquishment and subjugation of plants and land. It replaces that rhetoric with true stories of damage and violence but also of changing human-plant relations, based on new plant science and better understanding of First Nations knowledge.

The incentives for colonial plant “discovery” (a contested term) and collecting included a striving for knowledge, power, food, medicine, agriculture and national pride (Bousfield 2020). These plant collection practices reached their zenith during colonial global conquests undertaken by major nations such as Britain, France, and Germany during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, with key collectors including London-based Sir Hans Sloane and German Alexander Van Humboldt (Schiebinger 2004).

Universal framing of settler colonialism and its practices of plant-collecting as “peaceful and brave” contradicts the violence and damage wrought on the targeted lands and to their original inhabitants (Bacon 2019). Herbaria contributed to this narrative of vegetal achievement, being archival repositories not only of the collected specimens but of the history of who collected plants (and where, how and why). The stories to be found are romanticised tales of brave men overcoming difficult new countries with challenging terrain and troublesome local people (Churchill 2007). With settler colonialism came a changed narrative (Veracini 2007) and changed

human-plant relationship whereby, to paraphrase, power and life become inseparable (Sandilands 2016). Plantation slavery, commonly associated with settler colonialism, was part of the accumulation and liberal progress of colonial expansion, as argued by Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing as the Plantationocene (2015).

Colonial plant pursuits were influenced by Judeo-Christian preoccupations and practices of dominating nature, an idea championed by such individuals as philosopher Francis Bacon 1561–1626, who bemoaned the original eviction of man from the Garden of Eden and believed mastery over nature would ensure safe passage out of the wilderness and back into safe Edenic haven (Merchant 2008). The habit of collecting and propagating plants in individual gardens was added to by the rise of botanic gardens originally intended to stave off famines. The related colonial method of cultivating and trading exotic plants created a market for the movement of plants away from their natural habitats and off on their own journeys around the world. Problems of weeds—again, a contested idea—and invasive species ensued (Webber 2014).

There had already been a purposeful move by colonisers away from close and experiential paganism and Indigenous plant relations well before that, in many instances coinciding with the burgeoning expansion of the Christian church (Gibson 2021). The mistrust of plants paralleled a mistrust of those who applied herbs as medicine or cultural knowledge such as witches, witch doctors or shamans. This shift away from plants and pagan connections with them was exacerbated by racist and chauvinistic perceptions of invasive and introduced plants species during settler colonialism (Bousfield 2020). Colonialism also brought additional issues of erasure of Indigenous plant knowledge and information, along with a subjugation of First Nations people which resulted in a loss of naming and knowledge systems. Professor Jakelin Troy, a Ngarigu woman, has advocated that Australians learn Indigenous “names and knowledge systems for trees and plants that are lost to everyday use” in order to access the deep understandings encoded within them (2021, 1).

We now have a surfeit of plant authors who start their thinking with the biology and morphology of plants, in a similar way to Theophrastus and Darwin in terms of close observations. This is a return to the materiality and ecology of the plants themselves. This biology-focused approach seeks to avoid the legacy of colonisation and its tricky politics. Emmanuelle Coccia, for instance, focuses on the relationships between the leaves of an ecology’s trees—as inverted lungs—and on the roots, flowers and networks of lichens, mosses and epiphytes relations (*The Life of Plants*, 2018). Similarly, Eduardo Kohn focused on the multitude of trees in his book *How Forests Think* (2013) in order to take a non-human approach rather than charting the story of plants “for humans” which inevitably lands on oppressions of different kinds. These books are outstanding anthropologies but tend not to acknowledge the damage of colonial epochs which curtails any chances of decolonial healing.

Under colonial regimes, native plants and Indigenous people suffer from careless extraction and exploitation. Botanists historically collected plants in huge quantities for their national collections, frequently by taking advantage of local Indigenous trackers and not remunerating them (Bacon

2019). The trade of rare and endangered plants has largely been conveniently ignored, which Londa Schiebinger refers to in her exploration of the movement of the peacock flower, as a kind of colonial agnotology or willful ignorance (2005). Zaheer Baber notes that the scientific race for botanical knowledge during colonial times of conquest was (and is) critical for the consolidation of plant information. Baber also notes that it was a new age of cultural and intellectual economy, albeit western (2016). In writing about botanical decolonisation, Tomaz Mastnek and colleagues have argued that planting and displacing the land and people became and becomes the same multispecies colonial endeavour. These scholars bring to light the problematics of language around the decolonising of plant: “there is no such thing as neutral terminology” (2014, 364).

Language is an inextricable colonial and decolonial problem for plants. It brings with it the heavy weight of lengthy colonial heritage and its associated forms of mastery. Dan Bousfield writes that “the language of botany, zoology and history is embedded in structures that refer to natives, immigrants, colonists, hybrids and aliens alongside invasion, immigration, competition, conquest, colonisation and pioneering” (2020, 20). Julietta Singh writes of ways to disrupt mastery over land, people, women, animals, and the vegetal world and how to avoid falling back into new forms of linguistic and intellectual violence. Singh’s solution is to use language to strip away colonial and neo-colonial masteries, by unlearning and then re-learning (2018). However, she also connects with the paradox of desiring, naming and cultivating suburban gardens. As a daughter of a gardener and as an advocate of the colonial/decolonial garden writings of essayist Jamaica Kincaid, Singh bears witness to the conundrum of needing to garden, and thereby mastering the world of plants, and the need to not garden, as political activism. Singh calls Kincaid’s gardening a version of ecological sovereignty and describes it as “absolutely incongruous” (2018, 162).

The incongruity of living in a settler colonial place, practising gardening but understanding the need to change the mastery imbalances of plants and people on unceded lands is not unknown to the authors of this introduction. Kew Gardens’ Sharon Willoughby notes, a “discussion of non-mastery, whereby efforts to redress human dominion over trees or European dominion over Australian native plants, needs to avoid committing new kinds of slow violence” (EuropeNow 2021). Willoughby has undertaken some work in Australia with tri-naming—Latin, common and Indigenous names—and has witnessed the reinforced view that renders Indigenous knowledge invisible in Europeans’ eyes, or worse subjugated within dominant knowledge regimes.

We are left with a legacy of colonial violence towards plants’ habitats, a loss of cultural knowledge and little memory of original uses and significance of plants. We have a rapid movement of invasive weeds between countries which wreaks havoc on local ecologies (Kull 2015). We have a vegetal politics shift that changes human senses of belonging and connection (Head 2014). Decolonising the way we live with plants needs to attend to less separation between human and nature (Plumwood 1986), and it needs to address feelings of loss and grief that abound within plant and human relations (Ojala 2017). Decolonising plants refers to ways in which the institutions, practices and processes of human-plant interactions starts to take into account the wealth of Indigenous knowledge, property (Crabtree 2013), and a reclaiming of the renaming of plants that respects Indigenous culture (Baldy 2015).

2. Botanical Aesthetics and its Vegetal Limits

The dangers of aestheticising nature are evident through the history of art, and these pitfalls extend to human representations of plants. Think of the way a painting of a still life requires its subject's death. The cut flower becomes the object of beauty for the painter to present to the viewer. The original cabinets of curiosity or *wunderkammers* presented objects collected from strange continents and included paintings of rare flowers only seen by brave explorers in far-flung foreign places (Gibson 2010, 129). As if the exoticisation of plants weren't enough, plants have been flattened by artists and/or used as mere background to human action (Gagliano and Gibson 2017).

The vectors of these aesthetic dyads, for example between artist and the cut flower, between the canvas (or alternate medium) and the audience, create structures of experience that can be powerful, even enlightening, but at the cost of the original object. Through art's history of nature painting, the move away from art as religion, towards new forms of aesthetic idealist representations, is evident (Coomaraswamy 1934). Changed aesthetic relations with plants can be seen through the development of nature-as-construct, ranging from seventeenth century Nicolas Poussin's classical formulas of beauty and order, to examples such as Caspar David Friedrich's German Romantic and masculine gaze upon the unconquered world. There is no room, here, to chart an entire aesthetic history of plant representation, only to touch on the memory that plant aesthetics ranges from the minutiae of botanical illustrations to the aggrandisement of the vast landscape scene. Whether painting a garden or wilderness, these processes involved various aesthetic devices such as the Picturesque s-bend, where objects of interest are half-hidden, or the golden ratio where the eye is taken to the most pleasing point, or Romantic framing devices such as the fallen tree or the ancient column... all to give the effect of beauty and truth (Burke 1757).

Aesthetics carries with it the burden of these kinds of morality that have abetted the removal of the natural world to a distant and alien other. Even in Johann von Goethe's 1790 *Metamorphosis of Plants*, which covers the morphology of plant parts, the naturalist begins his book with a poem addressed to his wife (Goethe 2009). This poem was intended as an accessible way to "mansplain" the complex scientific concepts of the book to her—beyond a woman's fragile intellect. It also created a buffer between the science, the art and the natural object itself. Some find Goethe's poetry cloying and its many references to flowers and nature as "woman" uncomfortable, although in keeping with an epoch of Romantic aestheticisation of nature (Kelley 2012). Aesthetics, whether good taste or bad taste, has directly affected our human relations with plants. It has moved humans away from the material power of plants, and to the position of a distant viewer.

Aesthetics is a process of philosophising human relationships with a created object and has been hounded by the separations of those relationships. There are dyads of nature/culture division that are as damaging as the dyad of human/habitat; these cuts have contributed to a deep ontological separation of humans from their plant partners, mistaken as a freedom from nature (Miller 2002). These separations have affected the way we understand the natural world as something that needs to go in a frame on the wall, or on a page in a book. No dirty fingernails. No twigs in your hair.

Human/nature division means that previously powerful human relationships with plants for the benefit of culture have been minimised. Most artists would deny they are aestheticising plants, if/when they include vegetal elements in their work. This was evident in our own Dirt Witches project of 2021 where six collaborators built a city forest, made up of Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub, a critically endangered group of plants that grow together on Sydney's eastern seaboard (Dirt Witches 2021). An argument broke out between one of the artists and one of the authors of this paper because the installation, as an urban forest that was contained (or framed) by a rectangle of sandstone blocks, carries an association of diminishing the plants by presenting them as an artwork rather than as independent agents of food, shade and medicine... for the artists' and viewers' pleasure. This formulated and structured principle of framed pleasure is aesthetics at work.

Unfortunately, the moment you frame a plant, or place a plant in a white cube, or perform a plant by connecting sensors and emitting a software screech within an art institution, you are aestheticising those plants, and there is a risk of diminishment. This is an example of the eco-political conundrum of artistic interventions into the plant world. Not to forget that other conundrum: plants as spectacle, such as Jeff Koons 1996 *Puppy*. *Puppy* was a giant pup-shaped floral sculpture situated outside the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and soaring 12.4 metres high. Yes, it was very cute: another characteristic of aesthetic desire (Ngai 2012).

In recent years, CPS has impacted the contemporary art world, not in small part due to the work of writer and curator Giovanni Aloi whose editing of *Antennae* Journal includes and comments on many artists working with plants, their philosophy, intelligence, movement and subjugation (*Antennae* 2020–21). In one of our own books, *The Plant Contract* (2018), by investigating the areas of wastelands, wildlings, human-plant hybrids, bio-rights, ecofeminism, rhizomes and death, a critical plant lens was applied to major artists' works where the division between artist and plant was less of a deep cut. Instead, the artists in *The Plant Contract* were all grappling with an aesthetic way to soften or blur the line between human and nature, between person and plant. The book argued that the aesthetic act—visual and performance art—could mediate difficult post-Edenic relations with plants, could ease viewers into a more humble relationship with the vegetal, and could change our perceptions of plants as “other” and instead return humans to the vegetal world (Gibson 2018).

For CPS aesthetics, the trend of plants as art mediation and curation, greatly evident over the last decade, suggests that artists are positioning plants as the intellectual drivers of critical thinking and art-making, rather than as the inert subject of an artist's creativity. CPS aesthetics, then, is more concerned with performative co-collaboration with plants and for plants. In terms of recent productions of performative plant art, there are too many to mention here.⁷ However, a current and highly effective model for developing the collaborative nature of plant and art is the 100s and 1000s performance, a work created for Performance Space, Sydney, by artists Daniel Kok and Luke George. This involved the artists making a performative film, travelling this performative work, and then creating an interactive engagement with large audiences (all plant lovers) through

conversation, mail drops to make artworks that connect to one's plant, and live discussions and poetry sessions (Kok 2021).

Other notable work includes visual art, performance art and design writers who focus on the vegetal such as author of *Gum* and contributor to exhibition texts, Ashley Hay (2020), editor of *Planthunter*, Georgina Reid (2020–21) and the experimental art and writing hub, *Herbaria 3.0*. An influential and influential plant exhibition and catalogue was *Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant world* which was curated by Stephen Goddard and exhibited at the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas (2018). The catalogue, which covered themes of seeds, plant-banks, plant lore, botanophilia and wild plants, included essays by Daniel Chamovitz, the esteemed plant intelligence scholar (2014). Joela Jacobs is a key figure in CPS, known for managing the Literary and Cultural Plant Studies Network and whose own phytopoetics and phytotaxis work informs her work on the biopolitics of gardening (2019). Jacobs' work sits alongside that of Marianna Szczygielska, whose special "Plantarium" issue of the journal *Catalyst* is a response to the intimate relationship between humans and their houseplants and hipster-succulents, with the history of their domestication and the associated consumerism (2019).

The recent efflorescence of plant curation has included an exhibition at Rønnebaeksholm Museum in Næstved, Denmark that attended to the movement of plants and included artists such as Koichi Watanabe and Janet Laurence, with a resultant book, *Moving Plants* (2017), that included theorists Anna Tsing, Natasha Myers and Bruno Latour. This exhibition and book interrogated aesthetics by connecting not with the representation of plants but with a (re)presentation of ecological issues. Another example, *Imperceptibly and Slowly Opening*, included art curatorial documentation by Caroline Picard whose exhibition launched the concept for the wider book, that includes several extracts from philosopher Karen Houle's important work. Houle's writing premise was to describe plants' activities and "styles of thinking" as performing operations (2016, 4).

A deep question emerges from this spate of curatorial, literary and artistic endeavours: how can artists create dynamic plant engagement that does not reduce or minimise or instrumentalise the plant? How can we create aesthetic responses to plant life without killing them or destroying our relations with them? Transgenic plant art is performative in the sense of its duration, endurance and bodily ritual. It is explained in *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond* (Kac 2009) as the merging of human and plant biomatter and can be seen in the Perth artist/curator Oran Catt's ongoing Symbiotica exhibitions. But these puzzling experiments require death to the plant. As plant theorist Jeffrey Nealon says, "death is not what it used to be" (2016, 122).

A leading artist who aestheticises, problematises and decolonises human relations with plants in ways that both confound and problematise plants is Australian Jonathan Jones whose work "Dharramalin" is in the 2021 *Eucalytusdom* exhibition at Sydney's Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. Jones, a Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi artist, collaborated with Wiradjuri Dr Uncle Stan Grant, to create this work which includes drawings, a wood installation and a thunderous sound component. On the walls hang eight ink drawings that are like ceremonial smoking smudges and are explained as sentinels. In the centre of the room is a wood pile, more like a pyre, made from

mandang (wood) and gum leaves. The wood pyre is bleached and pale and connects to the guardian ancestor Dharramalin who is central to men's business. The soundscape presents as the ancestor voice, a roar of thunder and gum tree aggression. It sounds an angry reminder of the past and it also bellows a plant warning to all, for the future.

3. From Instrumentality to Respect

If one critical, global history of plants and performance concerns their aestheticisation, a second, entwined one concerns their ongoing instrumentalisation and commodification: an issue that is, of course, also very much tied to colonialism. Plants have, at least in Eurowestern history, generally been understood more as bearers of use (for people) than as lives in their own right. As Richard Mabey notes (2015), plants entered into ancient art and literature only once they had become elements in economies of cultivation. They may have been beautiful once they made it into the spotlight, but their primary reason for being there in the first place was because they were *useful*. It is not surprising, then, that the Greek philosophers on whose work CPS histories of plant-thought often rest (see Marder 2014) were mostly thinking about, and with, domesticated and other useful plants; even as Theophrastus was sincerely interested in plants for their own sakes (Hall 2011), the plants on which he mostly focused were there, for study, because they were already, or potentially, part of his sphere of concern for their capacities to be his food and medicine.⁸

Relations of use have thus swirled around plants and human understandings of them for millennia. However, there is a large difference between *use* and *instrumentality*. Where using a plant may involve a respectful and generous understanding of, and relation to, their life and gifts (Kimmerer 2013), a relationship of instrumentality *reduces* the life of the plant to the uses they provide to particular people in a particular time and place: trees become *timber*, grain grasses become *yield*, vegetables become *crop* (Martin Heidegger referred to this process as the creation of "standing reserve"). Further, with the advent of capitalism, these instrumental uses have often been intensified into the status of *commodities*: little pieces of fetishised plant capacity that can be bought and sold for a profit and that become more important, in relations of global exchange, than the actual lives that gave rise to these capacities in the first place, including that of the plants. Tomatoes (*Solanum lycopersicum*), for example, have been *used* by people for millennia and selectively bred and/or hybridised for almost all that history (starting with the Aztecs and other Indigenous Mesoamerican peoples), resulting in thousands of edible varieties with a stunning array of qualities and capacities. Their mass, industrial success, however, rests on a very few traits, e.g., slow ripening, which allows them to be trucked long distances and sit on supermarket shelves without spoiling; the tomato bred, or genetically modified, to display this trait comes to market stripped of almost all other kinds of value and relationship (Barndt 2007).

It is, unfortunately, this latter, instrumental/commodity relationship that has dominated plant-human interactions throughout modern, colonial-capitalist history. European botanists accompanying colonial voyages to other parts of the world were not just looking for interesting or beautiful specimens, they were also looking for plants with capacities that could be bought and sold to make a profit. This extractive relationship continues in more recent practices of

bioprospecting, aka biopiracy (Shiva 2016), that mine both native plants and Indigenous knowledges of them for their potential applications in, for example, the pharmaceutical industry. Further, histories of genocide of Indigenous peoples to create space for white settler agriculture, and of the enslavement of African peoples to participate in plantation economies, are also about the extraction and abstraction of value from particular plants (see Sandilands 2020). Settler-colonial agricultural endeavours in North America, for example—although it is a story that has played out in many parts of the world—dispossessed both Indigenous peoples and the plants and relationships that nourished them, in favor of *crops* that could be transported and marketed on a large scale. Along with generating violent and exploitive labour relationships on a massive scale, most obviously but not only slavery (Tsing 2015), plantations and industrial farms also created monocultures of sugar, cotton, tobacco, wheat, corn, soy—and rice, fruit, tree nuts, oil crops (canola in Canada), pulses, and commercial vegetables—that could not possibly be further removed from Kimmerer’s emphasis on respect, gratitude, and reciprocity, even if some of the very same plants might be involved. Ancient temperate rainforests that include thousand-year-old cedars are clearcut and the spindly Douglas-firs planted in their wake become “fibre farms;” most of the corn plants grown in North America are not eaten directly as food, they are used as livestock feed, for biofuel, and as a starch or sugar additive to processed food; millions of acres of forest that have sustained complex ecologies and Indigenous peoples for generations are burned down to make way for one of the world’s most useful plant commodities: palm oil.

Scholarship and creative practice in (and beyond) CPS, including the work of several authors in this special issue, has importantly challenged the instrumentalisation and commodification of plants in many ways. First, of course, are Indigenous plant practitioners and educators who, like Kimmerer (2017, 2013), Mary Siisip Geniusz (2015), and many others (e.g., in Turner 2020) are determined not only to restore indigenous plants to the land, but also to re-plant Indigenous values and laws of reciprocity, humility, and respect to people’s relationships with plants, even in colonised and industrialised lands. Indigenous and allied artists such as Ayelen Liberona and Natasha Myers (2019) and T’uy’t’Tanat-Cease Wyss (Rajme 2020) have significantly contributed to this project, not least by developing art/performance practices with plants that are also based on these relationships. Others are also working to think with, and work toward, less instrumental relationships with plants in works of plant-centric theory and philosophy (Hall 2011; Marder 2013), literature (Powers 2018; Roy 2017), literary criticism (Ryan 2018; Adamson 2016), anthropology (Archambault 2016), and many other fields. One recent Belgian show and accompanying book *Plant Fever: Toward a Phyto-centred Design* (2020), curated by Laura Drouet, tackled the issue as one that speaks directly to the heart of artistic practice: in the realm of design, for example, considering “the health and needs of the vegetal realm beside ours [...] can help us identify and rethink damaging practices such as monocultural production processes and the patenting of ancestral knowledge and nature” (15). Another show in Utrecht curated by Laurie Cluitmans (also with an accompanying book), specifically considered gardens as spaces, and gardening as a practice, with which to think and make against relations of utility and exploitation: gardens “bring together thinking, feeling, making, performing” to “teach [...] respect for the soil and for ecosystems with their non-human beings, who are our fellow citizens” (2021, 11). Political performances against commodification are also, of course, involved in activist struggles against industrial logging, monocultural plantation

economies, and the global trade in rare and endangered plants. To use Natasha Myers' term (2021), these and other performances all begin to stage the *Planthropocene*, an "aspirational episteme" of human-plant mutuality and respect, within the current conditions of the Plantationocene.

4. Phytopolitics and Plant Liveliness

Colonisation, aestheticisation, and commodification all come to bear on the pressing question of which plants, and plant relationships, are allowed or encouraged to live, and which are allowed or forced to die. The question of plant living/dying is enacted, in miniature, in the act of weeding a vegetable bed: Gardens involve biopolitical choices. However, in the current colonial-capitalist milieu, these micropolitical choices are magnified and globalised. Some plants are valued and encouraged to flourish—or forced to live—even amid ecological and social conditions that are unsustainable and exploitive; others wither or are allowed/made to go extinct despite their environmental or cultural importance; and yet others might be flourishing but, because they are deemed “invasive” or otherwise undesirable, are considered entirely killable in the service of economic or ecological understandings of “worthy” liveliness that exclude them. Although people are not entirely in control of these biopolitical relations (e.g., the unwanted spread of insects, bacteria, and fungi sometimes threatens to kill “desirable” plants, and “invasion” usually refers to plants that simply succeed in ways that people do not want them to), questions of plant life and death, and of the relationships in which plant lives and deaths occur, are very much at the centre of this special issue.

One of the places where these questions of life and death are most visible concerns plant endangerment and extinction. Although plants don't usually get as much public attention in public conversation about endangered species as, say, charismatic mammals—Titan arum is a very rare exception—according to one widely-cited study based on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List, nearly 20 percent of the world's plant species are threatened with extinction (Brummitt et al. 2015). Although climate change is clearly an important factor, the study singles out habitat loss in tropical rainforests—the places in the world with the greatest botanical diversity—as the greatest cause of global plant endangerment, and also singles out conversion of the land to agriculture (both plant and animal) as the greatest cause of this habitat loss (it can be seen from space, as can forest clearcutting in other parts of the world). The relationship couldn't be clearer: some plants, especially the ones that are considered top commodities, are made to live in the places where others are made to die.

Further, the plants that are made to live in former rainforest lands, including both oil palms and soy, may be plentiful in number, but it might be harder to describe them as thriving. Of course, we are treading on difficult, potentially anthropomorphic ground, here—perhaps oil palm as a species are “thriving” simply because their range has expanded into Malaysian rainforests to which they would never have travelled without slash-and-burn deforestation—but there is clear evidence that, at the very least, large, monocultural plantations are risky places to be a plant. Although burning down the rainforest produces a layer of nutrient-rich matter that can sustain a plantation for a

couple of years, the thin and often acidic soil underneath it requires the large-scale input of chemical fertiliser for the longer term. Further, densely-planted monocultures—not just in former rainforests—are highly susceptible to pests, diseases, and adverse weather; they are also, especially when they require anthropogenic inputs (fertiliser and water), almost entirely dependent on the aspirations of their human keepers, who are, in turn, almost entirely dependent on the plant-product's price on the global market, not to mention local political and environmental conditions.

Even the life-status of an individual species, or individual plant, can change depending on their economic value. For example, where the bark of cork oak (*Quercus suber*) was once widely used for wine corks and other materials, to the point that conservationists worried about their future, it is the *decline* in cork use caused by the advent of plastic and other cheaper alternatives that is, ironically, contributing most strongly to their endangerment. With a dramatic fall in the market for the bark, there is less institutional incentive to care for the trees and their Mediterranean and North African habitats.⁹ Almond trees in California are suffering an even worse fate. Because they are particularly thirsty, recent severe droughts and water regulations in the region have forced farmers to bulldoze healthy, mature trees and either leave the land to lie fallow (which may not be a bad thing in itself), replant with other species, or put in younger almonds that do not require as much water.

Finally, plant biopolitics are very obviously at work in the constellation of issues surrounding so-called invasive species (which are often, but not always, also “exotic,” meaning from somewhere else). There is not space even to scratch the surface of the many debates involved in CPS discussions of this topic (Sandilands 2022). Invasive species eradication is a multibillion dollar industry for companies like Bayer;¹⁰ weeding out space-taking plants by hand can also be an attentive practice of care in a vulnerable ecosystem. Indigenous plant advocates have a range of opinions about both native plant (and relationship) endangerment (Kimmerer 2013) and problematic, colonial discourses around invasive species management (Reo and Ogden 2018). Some species are considered invasive because they are an agricultural nuisance; common milkweed, *Asclepias syriaca*, was once such a “pest” even as they are now a cherished pollinator plant for monarch butterflies. Others, like edible garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*), achieve the designation because their spreading behaviour in the landscape has outpaced their usefulness. However, the one thing that is important to say in this context is that the appellation “invasive” almost immediately renders a plant *killable*, at least in Eurowestern plant conversations: they become a not-quite-life—perhaps *bare life* (Agamben 1998)—that needs to be sacrificed for a greater socio-ecological good. (The designation “weed” performs similar work, but perhaps without such clear overtones of crisis.) Although this bio/phyto/necropolitical movement is clearly related to use and commodity value, what counts as an “invasive” plant at a given moment, and in a given place, is a wider and more complex issue, having to do as much with which plants and relationships are currently valued as with the plants' own capacities and behaviours (Mabey 2010).

Within these economised and politicised relations of plant life and death, CPS literatures and artworks that explore plant *liveliness*—e.g., sentience, intelligence, communication—come to

matter a great deal. As we are now beginning to understand from this important research, plants see and hear, taste and smell, process information and respond, communicate and act, remember and adapt in real time (e.g., Chamovitz 2012; Gagliano 2018; Mancuso and Viola 2015; Simard 2021; Trewavas 2003). Although recognition of an organism's liveliness in this way does not prevent their instrumentalisation and commodification (think about rats, who are bought and sold for scientific research at least partly *because of* their ability to respond and learn), this research—and the many other works in CPS that start from and extend it in rich and important ways into philosophy, literature, and art (e.g., Vieira 2015)—represents a turning-point in Eurowestern thinking about plants.¹¹ If plants are conceived as fully alive, aware, and participating actively in the multispecies worlds they share with people (or not), then it becomes even more important to consider the ways in which *their* agencies and desires are involved in our relations with them. Further, plant liveliness also unfolds in ways that are not fully intelligible in a mammalian register, and recognition of collective or distributed intelligence, complex plant temporalities, and even vegetal perspectives on the relationship between life and death, can and should cause us to think more carefully about what is happening when we think about performative and other relationships with plants.

In This Issue

On the one hand, then, this issue of *Performance Philosophy* highlights the many ways in which plants are active subjects who, in complex and intriguing ways, enact change in the world in specifically vegetal—or species or even individual plant—performative registers. On the other hand, it also foregrounds the *politico-aesthetic* conditions in which these performances cannot help but occur. Within and across these multiagential, bio/phytopolitical relations, these essays consider how specific artists' and others' performances in, with, and for plants intervene to create conditions for a more contextual, critical, reflexive, nuanced, and/or urgent understanding of plant-human relationships, both historically and in the current moment. We are, then, delighted to include the following nine essays.

Ashley Howard's "Lettuce Entertain You: Floral Agency in Ralph Knevet's *Rhodon and Iris*" analyses Ralph Knevet's 1631 play within the context of ancient Greek allegories, historical theatre critique, playwriting and critical plant studies discourse. It celebrates florally-named allegorical characters, whom Howard interprets as performing and embodying the qualities of plants. Howard critiques the staging of a form of floral agency. The vegetal characters also use plants as ingredients in cosmetics, poisons, and antidotes, which Howard interprets as an assertion of affective agency. Here, Howard's work ties into the current issue's inquiry into the aestheticisation of plants and the ways plant liveliness works within and transforms it. Floral agency collaborates with literary narratives when beings perform *for* plants, *as* plants, and *with* plants, says Howard. She inquires into how theatre, affected by vegetal life, in turn affects the vegetal world; in particular, she takes Marder's concept of affective power to investigate "performing with plants" as extending to both performing actors on the stage and to potions to be imbibed. She explores two directions of affect and mutual influence between humans and plants and proposes that when the floral characters

use plants as vegetable ingredients in their plots, these two experiences can be experienced simultaneously.

In Camille Roulière's essay "Herbaceous Traces: A History of Agri/Cultural Sinuosities," the author experiences yam daisies and native millet grasses using a theoretical framework indebted to Édouard Glissant's concept of *trace*, which she uses to explore her own clay moulds and plaster reliefs. As both artist and performative writer, Roulière defines herbaceous traces as voices of plants that leave absences. As such, she attends to the work of decolonising daisies and millet grasses, while also performing a walking aesthetic. She analyses the legacy of colonial and post-colonial farming as an agricultural process that tugs away the traces of pre-colonial connections with the land. Her first-person narration witnesses her struggles to re-connect paper and clay works with the earth; she interrogates agricultural praxes such as fire stick farming while making her bas reliefs. Colonisation of language interrupts earthly work, just as grazing cattle erode soil and flatten native grasses. This essay is a working-through of the risks of performing the grasses and daisies as an aesthetic and biopolitical act.

In Lesley Instone and Rhett D'Costa's essay "Becoming Entangled: Queer Attachments with Hemiparasites," the reader is transported to Dja Dja Wurrung country, where the authors focus on emergent nature/culture artforms and personal relationships to plants in postcolonial, recuperating lands. They ask how, as artists informed by Latour, they learned to be affected by plants as a generative interaction, while also referring to the decolonial demands of engaging with plants. They disrupt the division between parasite and host; by turning to Haraway's queer worlding they inquire into how the local plants drew them into their queer relations. The artists' meeting with a local hemiparasite, the *snotty gobble* or *Dodder-laurel* (and their smothering and forceful habits) via the art project *Becoming Differently*, triggered a tracing of how plant parasites came to be an important theme, an affective enticement and a collaborative quality in their art. They meet a dodder, after initial feelings of mild fear about parasitic beings. The essay considers overlaps among hospitality, hostility and host in dodder laurel relations, and notes that "the performative quality of 'queer' is useful also in understanding human-nature interactions as embodied articulations."

In her essay "Plant Art from the Amazon: Tree Performance in the Work of Frans Krajcberg," Patrícia Vieira discusses artist Frans Krajcberg's burnt tree sculptures. Through a reading of Karen Barad's intra-action and human-nonhuman co-production, and through scientific evidence of plant behaviour, Vieira argues that trees are entwined with activism. This concern connects with the issue's performative curiosity about the instrumentalisation (and extinction) of trees; it also charts the context of the Amazon from which the trees came, and the Indigenous knowledge of that region, to advocate for the artwork as a work of environmental activism that involves the material agency of the plants themselves. In keeping with the issue's grappling with liveliness and biopolitics, Krajcberg's dead trees are articulate; they can be organised to do political work either symbolically or materially (or both); and they are agential even when they fall, rot or burn.

Chantelle Mitchell and Jaxon Waterhouse's essay "Pine-ing for a Voice: Vegetal Agencies, New Materialism and State Control through the Wollemi Pine" considers the politicisation and weaponisation of plants in a colonial and imperial context, emphasising the performative power of plant agency. They draw on varied discussions of New Materialism and plant intelligence to consider the prehistoric and significant tree, the Wollemi Pine. The Wollemi survived Australia's colonial genocide and ecocide, narrowly, and their performed act of survival is almost legendary; ironically, they are now an element in nationalist rhetorics of "Australian-ness." Yet how does this legendary survival/endangerment story speak to agency and how does it slip into new forms of biopolitics? Where Michael Marder warns of the limits of imposing language on the vegetal, these authors recognise more-than-human forces of co-constitutive relations to interrogate the colonial history of language and the biopolitics (biopower) of the plants.

In Sarah Blissett's essay "Algae Symptoiesis in Performance: Rendering-with Nonhuman Ecologies," the author uses her own performance practice and Haraway's concepts of symptoiesis and multi-species kinship as a framing device for plant discourse and performance, or what she calls *rendering*. Her algae renderings are connected to Derrida's *pharmakon*: cooking as rendering; encounters with algae rendering as art; rendering with algae via dance performances; and algae symptoiesis. Discussions of other performative plant artists provide a benchmark for how art/photography/performance can work alongside algal forms, rather than with dominion over them; these more collaborative and respectful practices work as a template for the author's own algal rendering. The complexities of creating artworks that do not subjugate plants sits well with the themes of this issue. Blissett says she has proposed "an embodied ecodramaturgy that connects ecological ways in which algae are performative of changing ecologies with the mediums of movement and painting as principles of 'rendering-with algae.'"

Chris Bell's essay "Collaborating With(in) the Garden: Stewardship, Performance, and Thinking Beyond the Spatio-temporal Formations of Institutional Legacies" considers his work with the Native American Medicine Garden (NAMG) on the campus of the University of Minnesota, USA. Finding alternatives to the commodification and instrumentalisation of plants sits at the heart of this essay: for Bell, stewardship is a central principle in a critical, multispecies practice that attends, respectfully, to Indigenous teachings against the industrial agriculture—and "land-grab" history—that surrounds and situates the garden. The garden's caretaker Cânté Sütá Francis Bettelyoun (Oglala Lakota) worked at the NAMG from 2007 to 2020 and taught students and colleagues how to engage with erasures of plants and relations caused by colonial white settlement, and with the silences that inhabit the legacy of Land-Grant/Land-Grab institutes. Bell draws on his rich Dakota and Lakota intellectual traditions to address relations to the land, and argues that the version of stewardship so carefully performed in the garden contests the spatio-temporal boundaries of the University. In particular, he relies on Cânté Sütá's teachings on milkweed to consider the multispecies webs of mutuality and meaning in which the plant is located: milkweed is both an element in, and a metaphor for, more respectful plant relations.

In "Ash Stories: A Spell Against Forgetting" Madeleine Collie analyses *The Ash Project*, which she curated in Kent UK, along the Pilgrim's Way. The curated project, which included the work of major

plant artists Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey, had over sixty walking programs, involved the planting of over 1000 ash trees, and included curating a memorial and exhibitions. Collie engages with the complexities of colonialism and plant movement across the world, and also considers the capitalist entanglements that emerged during recovery plans for ash dieback disease. The essay describes the walking and talking connected to the Ash Project, as a curatorial strategy or process, which is an innovation in curatorial methodology, one that is finding purchase beyond the limits of the world of art. It also charts the author's move back to Australia, where the ash trees she finds on her return are a reminder of accelerated global travel of vegetal diseases. It is also an effort to locate the story of the ash tree's decline in terms of genetic potentials for the future.

Finally, Thomas Pausz's essay—or, rather, theory-fiction—"Making New Land: An Intertidal Aesthetics," involves a future story focused on astro-botanical explorations of intertidal Icelandic locations and places further afield. Pausz's narrator interprets the findings of a Sea for Space expedition to Mars to study an intertidal plant, *Salicornia*, which gathers other biotic matter or detritus to create firmer soil. The narrator's job was to investigate the Sea for Space divers who disappeared, except for *Frustula*, a poet who survived to tell the tale. Her version of events is that the Sea for Space divers had started to merge with space coral hybrids in a joyfully multiple way. Pausz's intertidal aesthetic presents the dunes to us as objects of mystery and reminders of far-flung places like the Mars of our imaginations and other sci-fi productions. The character of *Frustula* connects the past with the future, the real with the imagined. This cli-fi fictional account of co-survival, threat of extinction and pioneer failures connect with this issue's speculations about the legacy of colonisation for plants, biopolitics and future human-plant relationships, and serves as a fitting, speculative conclusion for the overall conversation.

For the Future

The trajectories of research, creative practice, and activism begun (and continued) by the contributors to this volume are ongoing, and we look forward with anticipation to their future research and creation. However, we are also aware that there are voices missing from, or at least not as central as they might be in, this issue. As neither Indigenous people nor people of colour, we are aware of the call to step aside and listen to those who know these stories. This act is part of decolonising ourselves, so that we can work toward decolonising plants and relationships. It is also part of developing a more genuinely global and multiply-situated network of critical plant knowledges, relations, and practices, one that is as sensitive, for example, to racialised and racist histories of plant relationships as it is, for example, to the gendered relationships on which we have often focused our own work in the field.

Cutchá Risling Baldy notes a problem with decolonising language that allows white settler colonialism a chance to become innocent again, and thus to repeat colonial perpetrations (2015); this idea is echoed in Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang's understanding of "settler moves to innocence" (2020). One risk in CPS is that a focus on restoring dignity and pride of place to indigenous plants will detract attention from Indigenous *peoples'* demands for territory and sovereignty. We hope we have been clear that we believe meaningful decolonisation must include both, together, but we

would also like to emphasise that perhaps CPS as a whole needs to step back and develop a better ability to hear and follow the voices of Indigenous plant knowers, practitioners, and activists. For example, Indigenous scholar John Waight writes about his childhood garden life in Darwin, where exotics and scavenged plants were naturalised; he theorises that Australia has moved through a full Edenic narrative circle and that now is the time to return to decolonise the garden: not to create a new, untouched “Eden” but rather to be a miniature ecology that fits into wider ecological circles. Waight draws on the writing of Caribbean artist and gardener Ernesto Pujol. Both Waight and Pujol watched colonists pull out native, endemic and naturalised plants and replace them with lawn. Both are also extremely suspicious of settler re-wilding projects that dishonour the original occupants’ idea of wildness (Pujol 2021), and of the line that divides “good” from “bad” plants in the name of indigeneity (see also Reo and Ogden 2018).

Further, it is imperative to think about plants and plant performances as inextricably bound up in *racialised* histories of slavery and other forms of forced labour, imperialism, extractivism, property relations, and other racist institutions. Katherine Yusuff’s (2019) argument about the essential connection between extractive global industries and slavery can easily be expanded to include plants, especially given the non-coincidental relationship between the labour of enslaved peoples and the labour-intensiveness of sugar and other monocultural plantations. Plants, however, accompanied and sustained enslaved peoples in other ways (Carney 2001); they have also played important roles in the politics of apartheid in South Africa (Foster 2017); and they have been, and continue to be, actors in both racist violences and resistant relations in many parts of the world (e.g., MIFTAH 2012). The works of POC plant scholars, activists and artists such as Lauren Craig (2014), Christopher Griffin (Sprayregen 2020), and Ron Finley (Weston 2020) should thus, we think, be as central to the unfolding work of CPS and plant performance studies as the ones that are the most prevalent interlocutors in the conversation so far.

Given that the field of plant performance studies highlights the multivalent performative capacities of plants, it is our collective responsibility to make sure their diverse collaborators are just as well recognised. There is work to do.

Notes

We would like to thank the editors of Performance Philosophy for their enthusiasm and support for this special issue, especially Will Daddario and Theron Schmidt, and Will again for his excellent copyediting.

¹ In this introduction we refer to plants as “they/them” even in the singular because of their ontological multiplicity and often-complex sex and gender presentations, and also because, following Robin Kimmerer (2017), we would like to get away from the objectifying “it” that removes plants from the realm of sensuous personhood.

² One of the primary chemical compounds involved in their putrid smell is dimethyl trisulfide, which is a product of bacterial decomposition, including the decomposition of humans, so the plant’s nickname is accurate.

³ A list of live-feed and time-lapse videos from around the world is available on the plant’s Wikipedia site.

⁴ Throughout this introduction, when we use the pronoun “we,” we mean ourselves, Prue and Cate. We do not speak on behalf of the contributors.

⁵ See <http://www.performanceplants.com/>

⁶ Titan arum seedlings and corms are available for sale to private growers. One shudders to think about it.

⁷ The authors have compiled a spreadsheet of many artists currently and recently working with plants, including the 50+ performance artists and theorists who submitted abstracts for this journal. However, there are too many to mention in this introduction. We also apologise to any other CPS scholars or practitioners who do not see their work recognised here. The field is now so large we cannot hope to cover it all.

⁸ His ten-volume *Historia Plantarum* is considered one of the world's first herbals, a genre of plant writing devoted to understanding plants' medicinal uses to people.

⁹ The tree is still heavily protected in Portugal, where it is a legal offense to cut one down unless it is diseased. See APCOR, nd.

¹⁰ Bayer purchased Monsanto in 2018 despite thousands of lawsuits against the latter in multiple countries (including both Canada and Australia). Many of these lawsuits involve Roundup, the glyphosate herbicide most commonly used in invasive species eradication.

¹¹ Of course, many Indigenous and other traditions recognise and respect the fact that plants are lives in their own right and have desires that are not reducible to people's desires for them.

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