

# What Do Migration and Meteorology Have to Do with Latin American Studies?: Bridges across Disciplines at the United States Naval Academy

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This essay explores how faculty from three different disciplines (applied linguistics, history, and meteorology), all with expertise in Latin America, have promoted a multidisciplinary approach toward Latin American studies through their study of migration and climate. The essay begins by reviewing the history and significance of the U.S. Department of Defense's LREC initiative on tertiary Spanish language education at one of the three military service academies, the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis. The essay then describes one case where climate and migration interests in Latin America can be integrated into an undergraduate capstone course as a research project to leverage students' intellectual interests (in their major subject) with other academic pursuits (via a minor in Spanish). Finally, the essay discusses how demographic changes in the U.S. have impacted higher education in Spanish. The essay concludes with the argument that many of these challenges facing Latin American studies can be overcome by a multidisciplinary perspective that unites specialists in different fields through their common interest in Latin American Studies.

**Keywords:** undergraduate education; intersection of natural science, social science and pedagogy; migration and climate

## **Introduction**

Latin American studies continues to be an influential and popular field of study in the twenty-first century, despite concerns over funding and the development of alternate models in the 1990s (Hale 2014; Alvarez, Arias, and Hale 2011). Currently, there are over 100 US colleges and universities offering either an academic program or degree in Latin American studies. Students enrolled often explore and develop regional knowledge in cognate areas drawn from courses in social sciences, humanities, and increasingly, the natural sciences, even while language study (e.g., Spanish, Portuguese, Quechua, Nahuatl, and Maya, for example) remains a critical component of the curriculum. The goal is to not only gain fluency in one or more of the languages spoken in Latin America, but also to acquire content knowledge and research methods to tackle historical or contemporary problems of interest. Institutions supported by the National Resource Center (NRC), a program of the Department of Education, receive funding to strengthen foreign language and area studies at college and university campuses across the United States. Graduates from these programs often enjoy internships, fieldwork, and study abroad opportunities in Latin America, particularly where the curricular structure intersects with their personal learning goals. Furthermore, institutions often encourage the study and research of Latin America from a multidisciplinary perspective. Yet, there are hundreds of other colleges and universities without such programs or institutional structures. How, therefore, can faculty without a formal Latin American studies program provide students with a thoughtfully curated and executed curriculum that includes enrichment activities and research opportunities centered on some aspect of Latin America?

The Forum for Latin American Studies (FLAS) at the United States Naval Academy offers a practical solution to that question by focusing on multidisciplinary among faculty and in faculty-student research as the hallmark of its approach. Latin American studies faculty in FLAS have purposefully provided students opportunities to engage in inquiry-led projects on topics that span multiple disciplines and to establish research collaborations with faculty. Thus, FLAS mirrors many (but not all) aspects of larger Latin American studies academic programs, while its faculty carve out curricular activities to help students (who will be future officers in the US Navy and Marine Corps) gain greater regional expertise. Due to the heavy emphasis on science and engineering at the Naval Academy, FLAS robustly embraces multidisciplinary, including Latin Americanist faculty in STEM fields such as oceanography and climatology.

Since we situate FLAS within the larger history of Latin American studies, this essay reviews the evolution of Latin American studies beginning with the field's origins. We emphasize how the US government largely spearheaded and financed efforts at higher education institutions to give instruction in foreign language study and area studies with the goal of developing regional experts. Next, we explain the Department of Defense's renewed efforts to strengthen foreign language and area studies with the Language Skills, Regional Expertise, and Cultural Capabilities (LREC) initiative, and we highlight one effect of the initiative: the creation of FLAS at the U.S. Naval Academy. We then discuss the efforts by three FLAS faculty (in applied linguistics, history, and meteorology) to extend FLAS program activities with a collaborative project about climatic shock events and migration

that is multidisciplinary in scope. We conclude the essay with a review of language education in the US, which plays a key role in any area studies program.

## **Latin American Studies: The Evolution of a Field of Study**

While some have viewed the birth of Latin American studies as a failed US response to Latin American revolutionary ferment in the 1960s, its origins are more distant (Ratliff 1990). After the victorious military campaigns of the Mexican-American War of 1847 and the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898, Spanish as a foreign language proliferated alongside a growing number of courses on Latin America in US colleges and universities throughout the First World War (Hoffnung-Garsok 2012; Berger 1995). That interest in the region, however, did not translate into a professional discourse from regional experts until the interwar years. From 1919 to 1939, several presidential administrations called for inter-American economic cooperation, collective security, and cultural engagement as their foreign policy toward Latin America (Salvatore 2016; Hanke 1947). This Pan-Americanism became the hallmark of the Good Neighbor Policy, where Franklin D. Roosevelt encouraged mutually beneficial programs with Latin American partners. Under this policy, American artists, intellectuals, and scholars engaged in projects in Latin America, with perhaps the most famous example being Walt Disney's films such as *The Three Caballeros*. Latin American intelligentsia studied and even worked in the United States, such as Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre at Indiana University (Hanke 1947).

After the Second World War, US interests in Latin America exploded. Public and private funds supported scholarly projects on Latin America, including institutional support of the study of Latin America at the Library of Congress and publications such as *Handbook of Latin American Studies* (Hanke 1947). By 1950, the United States already had a small but growing number of professors offering courses mostly on Latin American history, geography, sociology, and literature. This cadre of Latin Americanist professionals offered conferences to discuss problems of social inequality and political stability. Their fieldwork, books, and reports helped to orient US entrepreneurs interested in capital ventures in the region. Thus, the expansion of regional knowledge about Latin America paralleled US direct foreign investment and political influence in the region, which undergirded the development of the field (Salvatore 2016; Berger 1995).

Latin American studies gained a boost during the Cold War years. With the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik in 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower implemented several initiatives to increase the technological and cultural knowledge of the United States in its feud with the USSR. A year later, the National Defense Education Act in its Title VI extended funds to support foreign language and area studies, particularly Latin American and African studies. By 1965, the National Resource Center, under the auspices of the Department of Education, oversaw and dispensed competitive Title VI grants to large research universities, which used the funds to open and run academic centers offering an array of programs to support foreign language study and develop regional expertise. These institutions included the University of Texas at Austin, University of Michigan, and

Cornell University, which formed a part of the 100 colleges and universities with a full-scale Latin American studies department or program by 1968 (Berger 1995, 92). The expansion of academic programs and departments also translated into the creation of new professional journals to publish faculty research, such as the *Journal of Latin American Studies* in 1969 and *Latin American Research Review* in 1965. A year later, the Ford Foundation extended funds to establish the Latin American Studies Association, the largest multidisciplinary professional association of Latin Americanists (Berger 1995, 93).

Latin American Studies has also evolved as a field of study. While the disciplines of history, followed by literature, had dominated much of the scholarship on Latin America prior to 1945, the Cold War sparked greater interest in the social sciences. Although Latin American scholars debated the benefits of modernization or offered criticisms using dependency theory or Marxism, US-based scholars tried to understand and even shape US foreign policy toward Latin America, policy that was increasingly fixated on communist infiltration and containment in the 1970s. As the Cold War ended, Latin Americanists embraced new paradigms that eliminated distinctions between First and Third World countries, such as world systems theory and analysis of transnational migration flows (Poblete 2018, 6). By the 1990s, cultural and linguistic studies reshaped the field of Latin American studies as scholars challenged traditional notions of the nation-state and power by closely examining culture in its symbolic and discursive expressions that can shape power relations among people, societies, and even nations (Alvarez, Arias, and Hale 2011, 278). This theoretical frame has even made multidisciplinary more practical, as scholars trained in one discipline use these theoretical frameworks to integrate the methodologies or approaches from another discipline into their research. More recently, Latin Americanist anthropologist Charles Hale cautioned us to embrace multidisciplinary to work on global processes affecting the region without sacrificing the existing strengths of Latin American studies as a field: “These new efforts are strengthened when we ground them in the particulars of language, culture, and history” (Hale 2014, 83).

Latin American studies has grown by leaps and bounds from its infancy at the start of the twentieth century. While it still strongly encourages students to gain proficiency in an area language and take courses from cognate fields such as history, political science, anthropology, and geography, Latin American studies faculty are also trying to keep the field vibrant and relevant to a generation of new students by exploring new topics, including social media, climate change, and migration. Some university-level degree programs offer interdisciplinary courses in Latin American studies that draw on multiple methodologies and theoretical frameworks. Others require students to submit a final thesis with outside readers from multiple disciplines. These programs benefit from financial support, often from the US Department of Education or another government agency, alongside private donations.

## **National Defense Strategy: The Language Skills, Regional Expertise, and Cultural Capabilities (LREC) Initiative at the United States Naval Academy**

In 2005, the Department of Defense determined that twenty-first century warfare provided new challenges and therefore required all areas and ranks of the United States military to acquire a combination of language skills, regional expertise, and cultural capabilities to meet current and future conflicts. As President Barack Obama noted in his remarks to Veterans of Foreign Wars: “In the 21st century, military strength will be measured not only by weapons our troops carry, but by the languages they speak and the cultures they understand” (US Department of Defense 2016). One key aspect of the 2011–2016 strategic plan was building the appropriate foreign language skills, regional expertise, and cultural capabilities into the training of forces to meet current and future conflicts. The LREC initiative extended funding to support such an endeavor in various areas of the military, including its service academies such as the United States Naval Academy.

Unlike students at the Air Force Academy and West Point, Naval Academy midshipmen can neither major nor minor in Latin American studies. The institution educates roughly 4,500 students yearly in twenty-five majors and mandates that 65% of its student body graduate in one of the STEM fields. Midshipmen with an undergraduate major in humanities or social sciences must demonstrate proficiency at the level of two years in a foreign language and are encouraged to take two additional humanities and social sciences courses. However, without the institutional structure of a Latin American or even International Studies program, interested Naval Academy midshipmen find it difficult to enroll in courses related to Latin America beyond the language minor. The LREC initiative is one way to provide additional enrichment activities outside the classroom setting. Although it initially was an ad hoc forum of faculty specialists in Africa, Asia, Eurasia, Latin America, and the Middle East who met to schedule a calendar of guest speakers on topics ranging from contemporary politics to popular culture, it has now formalized into the Center for Regional Studies (CRS). The CRS is currently composed of five forums that encompass faculty from various disciplines who arrange guest lectures, field trips, and cultural immersion trips. FLAS has served as a loose institutional structure where faculty from history, languages and cultures, political science, and oceanography meet several times a year to exchange ideas and identify extracurricular activities that promote the study of Latin America and its languages. It is often a forum to develop multidisciplinary faculty research projects.

## **Multidisciplinary Student Project Connects Latin American Studies with Climate Science**

Springing from the intellectual exchanges among colleagues within FLAS, the authors of this essay developed a collaborative research and teaching project related to the themes of climate and migration. Since the 2016 election, there has been tremendous attention on US domestic policy on

immigration and climate. Undocumented immigration to the United States from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean continues to be a fiercely debated and polarizing domestic issue. Much of the academic literature on migration draws largely from the disciplines of humanities and the social sciences (Durand, Massey and Pren 2016; Young 2015; Rumbaut and Portes 2001). There is also an increasing interest from climatologists and atmospheric scientists to understand the role of climate on migration (Nawrotzki and DeWaard 2016; Feng, Krueger, and Oppenheimer 2010). Given the human dimensions to this issue as it relates to the social, political, economic, and historical factors of migration, our project investigates one line of inquiry: the role of climatic shock events and human migration from Mexico to the United States. We set out to analyze the problem from a multidisciplinary perspective, with particular emphasis on integrating climate science and linguistics with a more traditional analysis of migration. We were motivated by several recent studies that found greater student retention (Barrett, Moran, and Woods 2014) and deeper learning (Park and Son 2010) from projects that cross disciplines.

As in many undergraduate degree programs in the US, graduating students from the Naval Academy complete a senior capstone project. In the Oceanography Department, these projects tend to focus on extreme weather events (hurricanes, tornadoes, floods) or current topics (e.g., sea ice and sea level changes associated with climate change). Students work individually or in small teams to analyze a data set of observations they either collect themselves or download from the many public repositories of meteorological and oceanographic data. They often choose a particular case (for example, they might focus on a three-day snowstorm that affected their hometown) or region (such as Annapolis and sea level rise). They then download data (or install basic instruments) and analyze those observations, looking for patterns and anomalies from a long-term mean.

In 2017, two students motivated by their interest in the Spanish language and Latin America decided to explore a question that crossed multiple disciplines. Guided by the authors as their faculty research mentors, they set out to study the meteorology, history, and geography of human migration from Mexico to the US. One of the students was a heritage language learner (HLL), growing up speaking Spanish in the home. The other student was a second language learner (L2) who participated in an LREC cultural immersion trip to Latin America and completed a minor in Spanish. Both were pursuing the Bachelor of Science degree in oceanography. They studied how climate shock events affected Mexican migration to the United States, which combined their scholarly interests. Shamoun-Baranes, Bouten, and van Loon (2010) took a similar approach, leveraging their understanding of meteorology into their ecosystem work on insect migration, to reach conclusions they would not have been able to draw with only a focus on ecosystems. The approach in this current study is similar: we leverage our unique disciplinary knowledge in applied linguistics, meteorology, and history to better understand the intersections of the complex relationships between climate and migration.

The multidisciplinary student researchers found that climate shock events are unexpected, large, damaging (particularly to persons with low resilience and high vulnerability), atypical to the region, and result in physical or psychological stress (Sinha and Lipton 1999). The human impacts dimension was one of the sociological motivations for the students to choose this project for their

capstone research. Some types of climate shock events include extreme precipitation and flooding, heat waves, strong and slow-moving tropical cyclones, and drought (Arnell 2004; Coumou and Rahmstorf 2012; Pfahl, O’Gorman, and Fischer 2017), and the students noted evidence that the severity and frequency of climate shock events is increasing due to climate change, as reported by Diffenbaugh et al. (2017). The two student researchers gained an understanding of the traditional analysis of migration, which centers on the political, economic, and social factors that compel Mexicans to migrate to the United States, and a review of the scholarly literature on climate shock-driven migration, as well as social science and historical scholarship on Mexican migration to the United States.

After reviewing the literature, the research the students decided to pursue involved pairing two observational datasets. The first is the Mexican Migration Project (MMP), which is a collaboration between Princeton University and the University of Guadalajara. It is freely available online at <https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/>. The second is the new, high-resolution precipitation dataset of the geography department of the University of California Santa Barbara, also freely available at <http://chg.geog.ucsb.edu/data/chirps/>. Both the MMP and UCSB datasets are geospatial and thus combine geography with meteorology and history to give the project its multidisciplinary character. Additionally, the students met regularly with the authors for guidance on interpreting the statistical relationships between precipitation and Mexican migration to the US. The authors particularly provided important contextual information on the history of this migration, including insight into the Bracero Program. Students were then able to explore the network of human connections between Mexico and specific localities in the US. Our students found that as migrants make the decision to move, they rely heavily on transnational human connections, which in the case of Mexican migration, extend well into the past, including before the Mexican American War of 1847.

If migration occurs because of shock events, and migration is viewed as a destabilizing force in a society, then those shock events can indirectly affect US national security. That connection to national security was the final motivation for the Naval Academy students. They were eager to study a multidisciplinary topic that connected the information they learned in their disciplinary field with not only content learned in their Spanish language minor and LREC experiences, but also material they learned in leadership and security courses. Additionally, it is also worth noting that this type of project leverages HLL background so that such students can apply their heritage linguistic and cultural knowledge in professional settings. This powerful experience can provide students with a level of motivation and personal investment that is often difficult to achieve within the classroom alone. Additionally, participation in these types of projects for both L2 and HLL learners provides the opportunity for students to operate independently, taking agency on specific issues that relate to their personal and professional experiences, developing at the same time positive learner identities and linguistic self-esteem. Thus, our student-faculty research collaboration has shown how the integration of language study in a multidisciplinary project can be quite impactful on student learning.

## **Creating New Bridges: Multidisciplinary Projects and Language Education**

Beyond historical, geographical, and meteorological perspectives, migration has also affected the teaching of Spanish in higher education. The number of Spanish speakers in the United States grew steadily in the last few decades of the twentieth century, in part as the result of migration of Spanish speakers from Latin America. The 2010 US Census reports that 19% of all college students are Hispanic/Latino. According to recent reports, about 55 million Hispanics currently live in the United States (Torres, Pascual, and Beusterien 2018). This number does not include the numerous undocumented immigrants, which in 2016 was approximately 10.7 million, according to the Pew Research Center (Krogstad, Passel, and Cohn 2016). Additionally, studies predict that Latinos will make up the majority of school-aged children in the United States by 2020 (Roberts 2008). These demographic trends are having, and will have, effects at all levels of America's educational system, particularly regarding the teaching of both Spanish and English. The Naval Academy has an increased number of HLLs who usually place into the upper level courses of the Spanish minor. These students usually seek to enrich and professionalize the linguistic abilities that they already possess. A multidisciplinary project like the one described in the previous section offers Naval Academy students the opportunity to apply and expand their linguistic skills, thus fostering an inclusive environment where both HLL and advanced L2 learners can work together and learn from each other.

Although the demographic trend shows an increasing diversification in the US population, universities do not report an increasing interest in world language studies. At the same time, children who grow up exposed to Spanish within their homes or communities have difficulties maintaining their heritage language (Snow 2017). When HLLs pursue Spanish at the college level, their cultural and linguistic patrimony is not used as a powerful resource. On the contrary, it is mostly ignored or presented as a linguistic variety that is not worth learning. A multidisciplinary project focused on immigration can bring attention to the Spanish spoken in the US, its historical presence, relevance, current impact, and the relationship between this linguistic variety and the linguistic variations spoken in Latin America. HLL students could also explore their family history, and better understand their own bilingualism. Moreover, it can also bring empathy to L2 learners about the cultural diversity and contributions of Spanish-speaking migrant communities in the United States.

The latest 2016 MLA report reveals a decrease of 9.8% in foreign language enrollments, after a decline of 8.3% in 2013 (Looney and Lusin 2018). In our case, the Languages and Cultures Department at the Naval Academy lost eight tenure-track lines in the last four years due to faculty retirement, which has significantly reduced the number of course offerings and the possibility to work with students in specific content-based projects that include other disciplines such as history or the sciences.

The MLA report also underscores that for every five students in lower-level courses, there is only one taking advanced classes (Looney and Lusin 2018), which means that learners who enroll in a foreign language course in the US will likely only achieve a minimal communicative proficiency in the

target language. This year, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that from 2013 to 2016, 651 foreign language programs were closed across the United States (Johnson 2019). Furthermore, Dennis Looney, director of programs at the MLA, indicated that the future is not showing much change. On the contrary, he foresees that by 2020, when the MLA conducts its next survey, the number of closings will probably be higher (Johnson 2019). Of those closings, French programs suffered the most, with 129 programs cut, and although Spanish still accounts for about half of enrollments in languages other than English, a total of 118 Spanish programs were closed.

Some of the reasons given for the program closings include the lingering effects of the 2008 recession and prioritization of STEM programs, combined with colleges reducing foreign language requirements for graduation, including at the Naval Academy, where some programs eliminated their language requirement. This action had a negative impact on the number of students taking lower- and upper-level foreign language courses. Furthermore, no students in those programs have pursued a multidisciplinary capstone course since the language requirement was eliminated.

Language departments are not the only ones who have been the target of cuts and closures. The humanities have also suffered a similar fate. More universities have cut costs and focused on the areas that produce more revenue (both in tuition dollars and extramural research funds), which tend to be in the sciences and engineering. In 2012, Florida Governor Rick Scott proposed a controversial recommendation to make STEM degrees more affordable than liberal arts degrees. His Blue Ribbon Task Force on the State of Higher Education recommended, as some have described it, a differential tuition scale punitive toward humanities programs (Flaherty 2012).

The decline in foreign language enrollments at the university level starts before students arrive on campus, and is, in part, an effect of the lack of foreign language programs at K-12 level. According to the National K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey, only one in five students from kindergarten to high school is taught a foreign language. Furthermore, only eleven states have foreign language graduation requirements; sixteen states do not have it; and twenty-four states have graduation requirements that may be fulfilled by a number of subjects—one of which is foreign languages.

Budget cuts to foreign language programs come at the same time as transnational companies, educational institutions, and organizations demand skilled workers who possess “global competencies” (e.g., Brown 2014; Grandin and Berka 2014). Institutions of higher education and a variety of professional organizations have developed frameworks that outline such competencies, but the definitions are not unanimous, and they do not always involve language proficiency. For example, Damari et al. (2017) underscore that the US Department of Education’s definition of global competencies (2012) deemphasizes language proficiency in its descriptions of what students can do as a results of being globally competent. Additionally, Damari and her colleagues, point out that the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR 2012)—a federal interagency organization focused on foreign languages—recently developed a set of proficiency guidelines for competence in intercultural communication that do not include language proficiency requirements. This is particularly important because both the ILR and the US Department of Education seem to indicate that intercultural and global competencies could be achieved without or separately from linguistic proficiency. This point

of view, coupled with foreign language and library budget cuts and the growth of digital repositories developed in English, supports the widespread assumption that English is spoken and studied widely throughout the world. However, we believe that this point of view is deeply problematic, for a number of reasons. First, because it misses the fact that language and culture are intertwined and can hardly be separated from each other. Second, digital repositories serve as a pragmatic solution to library budget cuts but they cannot be an equal substitute for relevant material collected on site (Hale 2014). Third and finally, understanding an area of study such as Latin America without linguist proficiency will only exacerbate colonial and Eurocentric perspectives of the region.

In terms of foreign language budget cuts, one manner to keep language learning thriving is to attract more HLLs, who, according to the data cited at the beginning of this section, are growing in number. Although HLLs present a wide range of linguistic proficiencies in the target language, with a variety of sociolinguistic profiles, it is possible to integrate them into a single advanced course where the main topic of discussion is, for example, immigration. Both, L2 learners and HLLs bring to the course a variety of skills that complement each other. Heritage language programs are expanding in the US, but not all universities have the budget to create or sustain such programs.

Like many institutions in the US, the Naval Academy does not have a Heritage Language Program. Therefore, most of the upper level courses within the Spanish minor are mixed classes with both HLL and L2 students. In mixed classes, both the HLLs and the L2 students can help each other. For example, L2 students can achieve higher proficiency in the target language and apply their linguistics skills in a professional setting, relating their learning process to their career path as future naval officers. In the case of HLLs, they can leverage their cultural background and access their own personal experiences, becoming a “live resource” in the classroom. We saw that partnership in the multidisciplinary capstone project to study climate and migration. Thus, here we argue that many of these challenges outlined above (declining enrollments, reduced funding, lack of interest in foreign language education) can be overcome by a multidisciplinary perspective that brings together specialists in different fields who can congregate under a common interest in Latin American Studies.

In the future, we envision developing more opportunities to unite professors from a variety of disciplines and students from diverse backgrounds, with the support of the Naval Academy’s Forum for Latin American Studies, to conduct innovative research that is both multidisciplinary and culturally relevant. As students participate in these multidisciplinary activities, they will be able to explore migration from multiple perspectives, while simultaneously they apply their Spanish skills to an increasing developing area of research. Ultimately, we believe that this new inclusive approach to joint faculty-student research can bring a new life to language departments and Latin American Studies, while at the same time we create bridges to solidify joint approaches with STEM fields.

## Conclusion

This essay reviewed the evolution of Latin American studies in several ways. The essay began by discussing the field's origins, emphasizing the US government's role in foreign language and area studies. Then, the Language, Regional Expertise, and Cultural Capabilities (LREC) initiative was linked to the creation of the Forum for Latin American Studies (FLAS) at the Naval Academy. FLAS offered context for a multidisciplinary research project to connect migration with climate shock events. The essay concluded with a short review of how language education in the US can be strengthened by these kinds of multidisciplinary projects that welcome both HLL and L2 students, where learners can explore their relationship with a wide range of Spanish linguistic varieties.

Latin American studies is thriving, in part, because of its multidisciplinary approaches. By exploring immigration, a topic that brings together humanities and the sciences, we are at the center of one of the most pressing issues of the twenty-first century. Dehistoricized and decontextualized discussions flood our news and social media, where fear is a frequent response. As educators who are shaping the leaders of our nation, we have the responsibility to respond with academic tools, but also with ethical ones that attempt to answer difficult questions. Despite a lack of formal institutional support to offer a streamline curriculum in Latin American studies, Naval Academy faculty continue to work creatively toward developing and deepening knowledge of Latin America in our classrooms and enrichment activities across disciplines.

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