

Turning Points: The Event, the Collective, and the Return of the Life in Parts
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Biography and the Microhistorical Approach: 'Partial' Lives and Interpretative Frameworks

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Biographers in their narratives always have focused on an essential part in the life of the biographee, but in recent years a striking amount of books have been published as 'partial biography', in which one period or even one event by which someone has become famous emphatically is presented as the torso of the biography. The other episodes of the life stick to it as swaying limbs. Is a partial biography still a biography? We are accustomed to read a biography, from cradle to grave, as an organic whole which explains why someone became president of the United States, or how a boy from the German aristocracy developed into a fanatical Nazi.

Integrating the microhistorical approach within biographies, by focusing on various or alternative turning points in a life, could be the next step. This step could add a new dimension to the concept of the critical 'interpretative biography'. By presenting an unexpected key event in a life as a point of departure, one is able to interpret Grand Narratives in a different way. The interpretation of a person then specifically serves to improve the understanding of a history beyond this life. In this case biography does not function merely as an illustration of a well-known history, but as a multiplier of interpretations of historical events and structures.

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This paper will explore the borderline between microhistorical and biographical studies. Since its rise in the 1970's, the historiographical school of microhistory has resulted in innovative studies, however without becoming a mainstream approach. It is even doubtful whether one can speak of a genuine 'school' of microhistory, and the debates concerning its methodological premises still continue to this day.

However, it is increasingly acknowledged that microhistory can serve to rethink the genre and methodology of biography. Similar to the way in which microhistorians operate, biographers are able to question the representativeness of a particular, single life and relate it to collective and societal observations and interpretations. The 'partial' approach of biographers, the theme of this conference, also corresponds significantly with the microhistorical approach. The claim to fame of microhistory exactly is its detailed and full analysis of specific events and episodes, related to circumscribed subjects like villages and individual persons. Additionally, microhistorians and biographers differ in a similar way in their use of sources compared to prevailing historiographical practices. They both turn upside down the hierarchy of sources: their investigations basically place primary sources and clues at the first level, and concludingly relate their findings to wider debates. Historians usually start their research

based on secondary literature.

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Self-Portraits: Cézanne

Developing the treatment of certain self-portrait 'interludes' in my life of Cézanne, the paper will explore the self-portrait as an event or stage or turning point in the life, in particular the self-examined life.

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Rocking the Cradle, or Finding a Better Beginning

In *Oil Men: the Twinned Lives of Arnold Wilson and Morris Young*, I chose to anchor the narrative not in narrowly-defined biographical events such as the births and childhoods of my twin subjects but in an historical one that has proven to define the modern age: the discovery of oil at Masjid-i-Suleiman in South West Iran. Wilson and Young worked for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (now BP), the company behind the strike, and so this was a pragmatic choice in one sense: without the discovery of oil, my subjects' lives would not have been bound together in the way the biography attempts to describe. More importantly however, the decision to foreground an internationally significant event like this in a work of life writing allowed me to open up the perspective and depict Wilson and Young in a social and historical context, avoiding biography's tendency to place its subjects at the centre of the universe whilst on the other hand resisting the urge to claim individuals are simply at the mercy of social forces without any kind of free (or nearly-free) will.

In his own lifetime, Arnold Wilson recognised the oil strike as a turning point. This paper examines his account of it in the memoir *South West Persia: The Letters and Diary of a Young Political Officer 1907-1914* and compares this with the off-stage treatment I give it in *Oil Men*. It considers what these contrasting depictions reveal about the relationship between early oil prospecting and British Imperialism, and questions where both authors might position themselves within this relationship.

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The Crimes Club: a Collective Approach

The structure of a club presents a suitable foundation for collective biographical study. By discussing the relationships within a group linked by shared interests and friendship, it is possible to both focus on and compare specific details of individual lives within a common socio-historical context. But writing a collective life presents many challenges and an author has to make measured choices regarding which individuals deserve the most space within a narrative that must be strong enough to contain multitudes. I will be discussing the advantages and challenges of group biography with regards to my own work in progress, a project which has led me to negotiate the lives and times of several large personalities. Founded in 1903, the enigmatically-named Our Society is a private dining club with a particular purpose. Popularly referred to as 'the Crimes Club,' it was formed by a distinguished male membership who met to discuss infamous cases both contemporary and historical. In doing so, they had to consider new ways of thinking about criminality and the evolving discipline of forensic science. They were

equally intent in their support for victims of injustice, such as George Edalji and Adolf Beck. The elite gathering included writers, actors, doctors, lawyers and nobility, among them Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, H.B. Irving, Lord Northcliffe and Sir Bernard Spilsbury. In their individual ways, many of the members were outsiders, and their unconventional life experiences heightened their curiosity about the darker side of humanity.

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Helen Foster Snow and Isabel Brown Crook: Revolutionaries in the Making of the People's Republic of China

Contributions made by women to the revolution that culminated in the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 are garnering fresh attention. In *Choosing Revolution: Chinese Women Soldiers on the Long March* (2001), Helen Praeger Young chronicles the lives of twenty-two of the two thousand women who embarked on the 6,000-mile trek. There is also renewed interest in the role of Western women who joined the revolution such as Agnes Smedley, Anna Louise Strong, Helen Foster Snow, and Isabel Brown Crook. My examination of the revolutionary part of the lives of Snow, an American, and Crook, a Canadian, increases our understanding of the collective and the series of events that constituted a major turning point not only in their lives but in the lives of millions. Whether concentrating solely on the revolutionary part of their lives in this period renders a true portrait of either Snow or Crook, however, is open to question. The answer appears to be yes, to judge from Helen Foster Snow's autobiography, *My China Years*, and the biography about her by Kelly Ann Long entitled, *Helen Foster Snow: An American Woman in Revolutionary China*. As the biographer of Isabel Brown Crook, I believe a true portrait requires the totality of the life in *Making Revolution: Isabel Brown Crook and the Rise of Modern China*, a work in progress. Although Crook's participation in the Chinese Revolution may be said to represent the trajectory of her entire life, limiting her narrative to a single cluster of events diminishes rather than enriches it if other transforming events such as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution are excluded from the account. The decision to take a sweeping, panoramic shot of the life of my biographical subject instead of using a zoom lens can be attributed to several factors, including the life-long commitment of Isabel Brown Crook to revolution, my aims as her biographer, and my assumptions about the level of interest among potential readers.

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Winifred Lamb: Travels in Greece

Dr Winifred Lamb (1894-1963) was the Honorary Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge from the end of the First World War until the late 1920s. She was also one of the new generation of women archaeologists to excavate in Greece during the 1920s. She first visited the British School at Athens' excavations at Mycenae in the spring of 1920, and then became assistant director of the project under Alan J.B. Wace (later Keeper of Textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum). She subsequently excavated in Macedonia before starting work on a major project at Thermi on Lesbos. Lamb's correspondence, diaries, notebooks and published works have provided information about her family background (as the daughter of a Liberal MP whose fortunes came from Northumbrian coal and Manchester cotton-mills), her studies at Newnham College, as well as her time working for Naval Intelligence (Room 40) in the First World War and the Near Eastern desk of the BBC in the Second World War. Lamb's archaeological work in the Aegean helped to create fresh museum displays

in Cambridge that were informed by the latest fieldwork.

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Universalism via Particularism: Biography and the History of Human Rights

This paper considers biography as a methodology for the study of human rights that negotiates, but does not resolve, the tension between universality and particularity inherent in the discourse. The role of both fictional and non-fictional life-writing has been highlighted in recent human rights scholarship by Lynn Hunt, Joseph Slaughter, and Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith. Whether in the form of 18th century epistolary novels or contemporary autobiographical accounts of traumatic injury, we now recognize the importance of “narrated lives” to the development and diffusion of human rights principles. This paper shifts biography from an *object* of study in the human rights field to a *method* of study, arguing that biography offer an opportunity to chart the relationship between human rights as a universal ethico-political discourse dedicated to protecting the individual dignity of specific human beings. In this paper, I consider biographies of five individuals—Thomas Paine, Sojourner Truth, Mohandas Ghandi, Rigoberta Menchu, and Ishmael Beah—assessing how each life story describes not only the role each of these individual played in the evolution of the human rights discourse, but also how each is depicted as both exceptional and/or typical in their role of human rights defender or victim (or both). In their typicality, such individuals become representatives of collective identities—often demarcated along racial, gender, religious, and cultural lines—from which human rights have historically been denied. In their exceptionality, such figures demonstrate the irreducible individuality of each human person—the foundation and telos of human rights principles.

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Henry James Revisited: Highlights of a Traumatic Life Story in Colm Tóibín’s *The Master*

Colm Tóibín’s *The Master* (2004) is part of a process of revision of things Victorian and more concretely of Jamesiana. David Lodge’s *Author, Author* and Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty*, also published in 2004, focused their attention on Henry James. This unremitting interest in the late-Victorian writer’s persona — Michael Gorra’s *Portrait of a Novel* (2012) being the latest biography to date — responds to a number of aspects that different critics have addressed; particularly his sexual orientation and the ambiguous gender discourse of his novels. With all this in mind, it is my main concern to analyse the biographic discourse in Tóibín’s text.

Unlike classic cradle-to-grave biographies, event-based narratives like *The Master* focus on some pivotal moments in the biographee’s existence. As I will show, this approach is particularly useful to represent the unspeakable sexual otherness, as is the case of Henry James. Moreover, being a biofictional novel, *The Master* defies the limits between so-called reality and fiction (Lusin 2010, Angsar 2005). Its event-based narrative and its resolute hybridity do not imply lack of rigor, though. On the contrary, as we will see, this type of text bears witness to life writing and its limitations more accurately than classic biographies do. Instead of James’s whole life, *The Master* covers a mere five years, namely those when he failed as a playwright while unwittingly witnessing Oscar Wilde’s downfall. By selecting both episodes Tóibín grants a partial (albeit valuable) approach to James. The novel enters his mind to unveil how he must have suffered as a privileged closeted gay, the insecurities and the hardships he surely had to cope with, and the role his fiction plays in the process. All in all, what my analysis ultimately shows is that concepts like wholeness and truth are sacrificed or, at least re-

defined, to represent what in classic biographies results unrepresentable.

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Between microhistory and biography: 'Ordinary lives' in mid-19th century Finland

The growing interest in Northern Europe in the study of peasant writings - autobiographies, diaries, letters - has produced multidisciplinary studies of the literacy, mentality, cultural and religious practices, and social networks of members of agrarian society. In my on-going study of the mid-19th century private correspondence of the family of a Finnish merchant shipper Simon Jansson I have explored the delicate line between microhistory and biography. The significant expansion in the range of biographical subjects and the study of the lives of the 'ordinary people' has brought new insight into many social phenomena connected with modernization in the Nordic countries in the 19th century, such as the acquisition and use of the skill of writing and mechanisms of social mobility. In this interdisciplinary field of research historians have emphasized the paramount importance of contextualization. The study of the egodocuments of an individual, when studied against the background of their social and cultural context casts light not only to the individual him/herself but also to wider patterns of the society. In the case of 19th century rural Finns, however, writing a complete biography is seldom, if ever, possible because of the scarcity of source material. In my own study, a correspondence of nearly one hundred letters of a rural family covering two decades is an unusually rich source material. Although it does not cover the entire life of the subjects, it provides ample material for an in-depth study of family life and of social relationships during a certain period.

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Discovering Kate Annie

This paper discusses the development of a memoir *Kate Annie* within the context of writing a partial life. Kate lived in South London from 1893 to 1965. The known facts of her life are few; in 1919 at age thirty-six she gave birth an illegitimate daughter and subsequently refused to marry the father or subsequently to divulge his name. Kate's daughter, who is my mother, said, 'She was never there.' If these words encapsulated the daughter's view of Kate, how, did her family, friends and community see her and how might her story be written?

Contemporary research emphasizes the 'elusive line' between fact and fiction (Kim Chernin 2008). Alfred Emily (2008) and Poppy (1990) by Doris Lessing and Drusilla Modjeska respectively use imaginative writing within, or sequential to, a biographical narrative to create unknowable components of family history. Fictional chapters in *Kate Annie* illuminate the shadowy or unknown parts of my grandmother's life and historical research, anecdotal evidence and archival material provide an underpinning for her story. This paper will consider the complex ethical dimensions of writing family memoir by reflecting on P J Eakins' view of life writing as a moral enquiry.

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The Taung Child: A Fossil's Life

The stories of famous fossils are told almost exclusively through specific narrative tropes, illustrating the life history of these fossils through the lens of their discovery, the scientific controversies that they spark and contribute toward, or even a means of lending scientific legitimacy to their discoverer.

While event-based narrative such as discovery could be considered necessary for an object like a fossil, what is less clear is how to find a more “whole” biographic narrative for the object drawing upon these event “parts” from the life of the scientific fossil. (How does a fossil contribute toward national identity and history? Is it “only” scientific object or could it be something more – e.g. objet d’art?) Within the history of science, these questions can be methodologically addressed through biographical analysis of that scientific object.

This paper explores one famous fossil: the Taung Child, found in South Africa (1924) and published in *Nature* by Dr. Raymond Dart. As the paleo- and anatomical intelligentsia of the early twentieth-century stood staunchly in favor of an evolutionary model not supported by the Taung fossil, the fossil and Dart were relegated to fifty years of scientific ridicule and scorn. However, this paper explores how a biographical treatment of the Taung Child fossil, as a scientific object, allows for a richer engagement with the fossil’s life without only writing to its commonly associated tropes of discovery and scientific controversy.

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Probing Spaces: Life Writing’s Invisible Knowledge

Hours before he died in 2001, my father, Australian writer Burton Graham, whispered: “Marg, you must write.” His words are crucial to my broader PhD research that examines how women writers (re)construct their relationships with their complex, unpredictable author fathers.

To examine these often difficult family connections, this paper addresses the question: “How do we find a sense of the wholeness in parts.” Taking a lead from Hélène Cixous, I listen, read-against-the-grain and write with “pointy, pricked-up ears” to explore strategies through which women writers layer their texts. Susan Cheever lobs a snowball at her father John Cheever’s grave. Mary Gordon imagines shadows and ghosts, and re-inters her father David. Charlotte Gainsbourg memorialises a leather briefcase. And the massive graffiti covering the wall of the Gainsbourg residence, as a continual text, articulates Charlotte’s inextricable connection to her late father, singer and songwriter, Serge Gainsbourg. Alexandra Styron draws on war metaphors to describe her complicated relationship with her father William. I strip knowledge from Burton’s olive green suitcase that once held his writing, and scrape the dust and grit in his derelict portable typewriter to probe and extract fragments of his life and my own.

I reflect on the above objects and activities that can reveal knowledge of these family links inviting us to decipher tensions, and themes and concepts in the women’s narratives.

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Radical Connections: Writing a Life of William Johnson Fox

William Johnson Fox (1786–1864) is currently little-known, except as an early champion of the poetry of Robert Browning. Fox deserves attention from historians as a key figure in nineteenth-century radicalism. He worked tirelessly to promote political, religious, and social reform, was a rare link

between middle- and working-class cultures in the years following the 1832 Reform Act, and was an early champion of women's rights. But rather than pushing a 'neglected great man' thesis, I am interested in presenting Fox as a collaborator, as a node in a number of radical networks. The circle that gathered round him as editor of the *Monthly Repository* in the 1830s prefigures that surrounding John Chapman, editor of the *Westminster Review*, in the 1840s and '50s. Rosemary Ashton's book on the latter group, *142 Strand: A Radical Address in Victorian London* (London, 2006), demonstrates how successful this kind of group-biography might be for a subject of this type. On the other hand, I am reluctant to forego the benefits a cradle-to-grave approach would bring to this project. Fox is a useful human yardstick for the radical tradition during his lifetime, a period of historic change. For example, his childhood as the son of a Norwich weaver, in particular his intense friendship with a boy whose father was arrested for treason in 1794, are important factors in forming his mature political position. This paper will consider the benefits and problems of trying to combine the inclusivity of a group-study with the focus on a single life.

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Censoring Lives: A Comparative Approach

Queen Victoria's journals were expurgated—quietly. Friends burned Byron's memoirs although his reputation for being "bad, mad, and dangerous to know" was already set. Henry James's bonfires sought to ensure his privacy forever. Men who loved men (or women too often) and women who loved women (such as Jane Addams) had to keep their sexual secrets or face social and legal sanctions. For a multitude of reasons, letters, diaries, and manuscripts—the raw materials of life writing—have been trashed, burned, and excised for centuries. Such censorship involves emotion and ideology, affirmation and renunciation. It's cued to grief, jealousy and possessiveness, fear, love, anger, idealization, family pride, and privacy issues. Ideology has a significant influence because perpetrators are trying to control their own or others' legacies and align them with prevalent or personal worldviews: the censors are trying to protect themselves, their loved ones, or the establishment, class structure, nationalism, heroes and moral exemplars; perpetuate masculine and feminine roles and control sexuality; and marginalize antithetical ethnic, class, and gender groups. Biographers, on the other hand, seek to rescue memory and legitimize previously unacceptable identities. This talk, based on research for an upcoming book, is about my approach to depth and breadth, which is comparative and interdisciplinary. The focus is not on a pivotal event or age, but on a phenomenon—censorship.

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'A Failure of Hope: The Unwritten Lives and Archives of Jane Harrison and Hope Mirrlees'

Much has been written about the life of Classics scholar Jane Harrison, who was, by some accounts, the first professional female academic in Britain—in 1898 she became the first woman to give university lectures at Cambridge—and her theories on the function of ritual in ancient societies shaped early twentieth-century anthropology. The modernist poet Hope Mirrlees was Harrison's pupil at Newnham College from 1910 to 1913, and by 1914 Mirrlees' 'close friendship' with Harrison had evolved—they lived together from 1916 until the end of Jane's life in 1928. We know far more about Jane Harrison than we do about Mirrlees: there have been numerous studies of Harrison's work and four biographies were published in the past fifty years. Over the past few years at Newnham College, I have been

researching the archives of Jane Harrison and Hope Mirrlees towards a biography of Mirrlees. My paper will examine the writing of the lives of ‘lesser figures’ amid larger, more widely known life histories. All of Harrison’s biographers exhibit an animosity towards Mirrlees—who herself tried and failed to write the first biography of Jane Harrison in the 1930s—and some of this distrust of Mirrlees springs from the figure of the ‘failed biographer’ and of the possessive archivist. To some extent Mirrlees did control the posthumous image of Harrison, and with Mirrlees’ death in 1978, the archives that expose (and conversely obscure) the parallel life histories of these two women are now side-by-side, offering different and unsanctioned readings of their lives. My paper will explore the implications of the archives’ present state in how we approach the lives of these two women and how this affects our view of their collaborative writings, their possible romantic relationship, and the controversy that surrounds the involvement of Mirrlees in Harrison’s posthumous ‘life’. Inevitably, the question of how famous lives influence the biographies of marginal ones will be the focus of my presentation.

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‘Clive Entwistle: In Short, In Theory and with a bit of Luck’.

Repeatedly positioned to fulfill what Le Corbusier described as, ‘*casting a great light as from an unlimited flash of lightening*’, Clive Entwistle (1916-1976) had few of his ambitious architectural proposals built. Different strategies explored in the construction of his biographical portrait, ‘*Clive Entwistle: In Short, in Theory and with a bit of Luck*’, due for publication with the Architectural Association, will be presented in this paper. The book explores the narrative absence of fruitful turning points within a life that traditionally guides the biographer. The structural form of the book, minimal chapters and no narrative text, alludes to this absence and further dismantles the continuum of chronological events. Working exclusively with source material and employing formal interventions, such as collaging, and cutting of this material the book collates, restructures and articulates the vast archive of drawings, photographs, and the subjects on writing, into a highly subjective assembly. The resulting visual portrait presents a diary of sorts, creating a visceral transmission rather than reflective analysis of the subjects’ complex and ambiguous self-perception. Such a non-historical, non-scholarly structure gives the reader a more immediate encounter with the subject akin to the biographer’s experience of researching a life. No singular truth is revealed about the subjects’ life, but rather a curiosity might be initiated into his presence in the footnotes of history. In conclusion the book questions the absolute authority of the Biographer as an expert, and instead proposes that a work of biography can be ambiguous, unconscious, and incomplete.

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The Life Less Known

I am writing what amounts to a traditional ‘cradle to grave’ biography of the lutenist and musicologist Diana Poulton (1903-1995), who left few traces of her personal feelings and opinions – although she could not have failed to be influenced by the cultural and political issues of the 20th century. A seminal figure in her own field, a follower of Arnold Dolmetsch and in the forefront of the revival of the ‘old music’ Diana was also a talented artist, a graduate of the Slade and a committed Communist; she lived through 2 world wars and the Great Depression. From 1945, after the end of her marriage to the artist

and illustrator Tom Poulton, she shared her life for almost 20 years with a traumatised refugee from the Spanish Civil War, and later with the Shakespearian actor/director Robert Atkins.

Using my experience of researching and writing Diana Poulton's life story I propose to discuss how, in even a conventional biography, the biographer must examine the critical turning points which formed the society in which her subject lived. For those events will necessarily be interwoven within the narrative of the achievements and failures of her subject's life. While it will be necessary to draw on a wide range of material which is related to the period, though not directly to her subject, the challenge for the writer is to create a psychologically truthful picture, without swamping the individual under the huge weight of well recorded facts and opinions recorded by her subject's better known contemporaries.

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Does evolution run in the family? Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck and the Darwin-Galton dynasty

This is biographical study of Mary Anne-Schimmelpenninck (nee Galton), (1778-1856), a member of the Darwin-Galton dynasty, almost totally forgotten since her death in 1856. An aunt of Charles Darwin and Francis Galton, she wrote on history, religion, science, aesthetics, and left a remarkable, unfinished autobiography. Yet she was cast out by her family, and her work received little or no mention from the Darwins or Galtons during her life or afterwards.

The paper explores how this came to be. *Pace* the conference theme of the collective factor in biography, the paper proposes that Schimmelpenninck's social networks had contradictory and disruptive effects, rather than supportive ones, on her literary development and social relations. Her collective influences included: her Quaker family; the Lunar Society, a freethinking, literary-scientific group in Birmingham to which her father belonged; and non-Quaker religious groups she cultivated all her life. These influences produced in her an endless search for "truth", that resulted in periods of passionate commitment to causes and people, followed by withdrawal and, sometimes, what was seen as malice or defection. It was a mysterious incident of this sort that made her family refuse all contact with her shortly after her marriage.

The paper finishes by suggesting that Schimmelpenninck's marginalisation after her death may also have been due to the fact that some of her literary interests had been similar to those of Charles Darwin and Francis Galton. Resurrecting her life might have diminished the originality of men who were imperial, super heroes in late Victorian Britain.