

ESSAY

## Transacting death: José Saramago's *Death at Intervals* and the politics of the death industry

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### Abstract

With discourses of urbanization revolving around socio-economic factors of production, exchange, and consumption even an intricately personal-cum-social event such as death is now subjected to the economic gaze. The advent of industrialization, urbanization, commercialization, and specifically medicalization, has brought about a radical attitudinal change towards death and dying, in the process modifying and magnifying them into complex structures of exchange. According to Allan Kellehear urban social complexity necessitates that “dying becomes a full economic but privatized transaction.” It is in this light that I propose to analyze José Saramago’s novel *Death at Intervals* (2008). Saramago explores the conjugation of the social and the biological within the thanatological schema and diversifies it into a newer domain – the “death industry.” The literary narrativization of thanatocentric infrastructure in *Death at Intervals* adumbrates urban confrontations with death, dying and disposal. Is the “death industry” a requirement, or is it merely an emancipatory utilitarian perspective? Is it a safeguard mechanism adopted by the urban space to prevent being metamorphosed into a ‘gerontopolis’? Is the proto-industrialization of death a logical advancement required to sustain the urban socio-economic order? By historicizing the novel from these perspectives, this paper will elucidate the configuration of death within the liberalist, welfarist dispensations of urban society. The diachrony of thanatology, as seen through the novel, will divulge the blurring of the hazy delimitations between death, a personal face-off, and death, a social occurrence, thereby, responding to the call for a more outlined and examined resolution of the dying process in the garb of a good death.

**Keywords:** death industry, good death, gerontopolis

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Irrespective of the established undercurrent of trepidation linked with biological cessation, death has come to acquire an economic dimension. Radical attitudinal changes, following industrialization, urbanization, and specifically ‘medicalization,’ have modified and magnified death and dying into complex structures of exchange.<sup>1</sup> This steady penetration of commercialization is but a progressive outcome of anthropological evolution.<sup>2</sup> Death is no longer abstract. For the contemporary market-oriented society, driven by discourses of urbanization, death (or more appropriately the “event” of death) is a commodity, a viable source of revenue. Once reified, death comes to possess use- and exchange-values that enable carefully calculated economic transactions. Quite fascinatingly, the consumers (usually the survivors but at times also the dying individual) are in a way suppliers of the commodity because the entrepreneurs investing in what has come to be called the “death industry” are reliant upon them for raw material, in this case the lifeless body.<sup>3</sup> This knowledge is fundamental to the understanding of the functioning of the death industry as discussed in this paper.

It is against this backdrop that the paper examines José Saramago’s *Death at Intervals* (2008), a novel where death with a small ‘d’ is a woman whose apartment smells of

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<sup>1</sup> The medicalization of death, a universal life process, opened up several competitive avenues – discovering newer etiologies and solutions, profitability of nursing, limits and costs of medical profession, etc. The sprouting of hospitals and health-care units “silent[ly] configure[d]”, to borrow Foucault’s phrase, the eclectic discipline of death-studies. Today, the gloss of institutionalised merchandisation ensures that any noticeable, agonizing physical or mental impulse is promptly suppressed, in effect prolonging the illusion of recovery and postponing the clutches of death. Tolstoy’s Ivan Illych, for example, becomes a victim of this “falsehood and deception” (Tolstoy 1998, 51).

Barbra Mann Wall in “Healthcare as Product” observes “[a]s society became increasingly industrialized and mobile and as medical practices grew in their sophistication and complexity, the notion that responsible families and caring communities “took care of their own” became more difficult to implement. The result was a gradual shift toward the professionalization of medical practices that eventually included the development of a full and competitive commercial market for medical services” (Mann Wall 2003, 143–4).

<sup>2</sup> There are definite historical and infrastructural dimensions to this argument. Sites for interment and commemoration were designed as purpose-built locations that would contribute significantly to the maintaining of a rich material and social culture. The necropolises in Ancient Egypt and Greece, for instance, were integral to the cities’ fabric. The urban town planning of these civilizations was considerably conditioned by ‘the city of the dead’. Later, with the birth and rise of Christianity, cemeteries emerged as the centre of social life. Philippe Ariès in *The Hour of Our Death* notes, “during the Middle Ages and until well into the seventeenth century, [the cemetery] corresponded as much to the idea of a public square as it did to the notion, now become exclusive, of a space reserved for the dead” (Ariès 1981, 62). The non-funerary services discharged by them included operating as a sanctuary, a forum to socialize, play games and to conduct the day-to-day business. The increasing conduct of such affairs transformed the burial grounds into bases of religious, economic and demographic transactions.

<sup>3</sup> Since the production of death, unlike most other commodities, is often unpredictable entrepreneurs need to greatly depend on the official demographic records (natality-mortality rates) to gauge their revenue-expenditure margins.

roses and chrysanthemums, who falls in love, sleeps and also ceases to kill people. In the novel, Saramago traces the literary tradition laid out by prose-fictions such as Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Illych" and "The Three Deaths", and Joyce's "The Sisters," and diversifies it into a newer domain, that of the "death industry." Originally published in Portuguese as *As Intermittências da Morte*, *Death at Intervals* (2008) is Saramago's reconstruction of an ancient, elaborate discourse. Saramago utilizes the 'Tithonus myth' and the myth of the 'Cumaean Sibyl' as his points of departure and conceives deathlessness as a collective predicament. I claim that by equating deathlessness with immortality Saramago creates a new form of thanatoscape - a land of the eternally perishing living - that challenges the viability of 'eternal life' in a social set-up whose pieces are fundamentally interconnected.

The novel opens with an alternate reality - unanticipated deathlessness in a strictly mortal world - and then briefly switches to the normal, natural order of life and death only to revert to the initial situation towards the end of the narrative. This enables the author to weigh the pros and cons of both situations. The narrative rendition is quite interesting because instead of ascribing the predicament to scientific and medical headways, Saramago describes it as the sequel to the conscious decision of death to withhold her activities. The sudden absence of death, New Year's eve onward, is met with a mixture of joy and ambivalence. Death's absence is wrongly interpreted by many as the fulfilment of "humanity's greatest dream since the beginning of time, the happy enjoyment of eternal life here on earth" (Saramago 2008, 5). There is an initial phase of surprise, doubt, and perturbation which is soon replaced by a general feeling of having "conquer[ed] death" (Saramago 2008, 5). It is not long before the inhabitants realise the severity of their circumstances. Their principal doubt is "[w]hat would happen if we all lived for ever, where would it end" (Saramago 2008, 55) to which the novel furnishes only a bleak answer: "such a future is perhaps the worst nightmare that could ever [assail] human being[s]" (Saramago 2008, 21). The absence of death triggers an exponential rise of population with a section of it (mainly the aged) on the brink of death yet not dying. The diachrony of thanatology, as seen through the novel, divulges

the blurring of the hazy delimitations between death, a personal face-off, and death, a social occurrence, thereby, responding to the call for a more outlined and examined resolution of the dying process in the garb of a good death.

The narrative simulates the persisting affiliation between the living and the dead within the liberalist, welfarist dispensations of urban society. Through the novel, Saramago satirizes the dynamics of mortality rate and its corresponding outcomes on the infrastructural facets, especially in the urban world. By historicizing this narrative, I aim to study the urban craft of commodifying death. Is the “death industry” a requirement, or is it merely an emancipatory utilitarian perspective? Is it a safeguard mechanism adopted by the urban space to prevent being metamorphosed into a ‘gerontopolis’? How has death, an intricately personal and intensely social event, surfaced as the decisive factor of urban structuring? Tracing these developments necessitates acknowledging the shift from death, the mere event of biological cessation, to the idea of a “good death”, a peaceful, dignified dying.

In *A Social History of Dying*, Allan Kellehear defines *good death* in terms of the Graeco doctrine of *kalos thanatos*, meaning “dying beautifully or in an ideal or exemplary way” (Kellehear 2007, 90). *Good death* entailed the dying to apprehend the corollaries of biological cessation and make adequate provisions (prior to their death) to modulate the impending vacuum in both the private and the public spheres. As a result, self-awareness of encroaching death evolved as the characteristic feature of ‘good’ deaths – first, it allowed time for preparations and an opportunity to control or fleetingly ward off the end, and second, it checked the continuum of life (especially that of the survivors) from collapsing into a state of social chaos or disorder. Thus, “the dying person [became] morally obliged in his or her *living role* as a dying person” (Kellehear 2007, 88). Furthermore, pre-planning the final rites of passage as part of the good death psychologically readied an otherwise death-phobic community into accepting its own inevitable mortality. Consequently, “[d]ying became more than ever before, a prescribed role, a moral journey and an active partnership with future

survivors” (Kellehear 2007, 89), progressively steering towards a more serviced nature of death.

Availing professionals – such as medical practitioners, lawyers, religious figureheads, and members of death-care institutions – to conduct the final rites of passage soon became the urban *modus operandi*. The skilled integration of these miscellaneous services produced the “well managed death,” “[an] economic but privatized transaction” (Kellehear 2007, 151). Kellehear explains: “Dying in a well-managed way require[s]... requesting the appropriate professional staff to manage the bodily, legal, fiscal and religious functions” (Kellehear 2007, 149). The ‘death industry’ is merely the end-product of this popular trend, the header to the consolidated conveniences. As an interdependent and distributed emergent system, the ‘death industry’ thrives on the marketability of death. It comprises two sectors: the ‘death-care industry,’ companies and organizations handling funerals, cremation, burial, and memorials; and the ‘associate sector,’ enterprises that are indirectly dependent on the host product such as insurance companies, law firms, medical units, and even religious institutions. It is “an amalgam of features we have inherited from past traditions – urban, rural and prehistoric – but also the current economic, political and public health pressures exacted by our own time and societies” (Kellehear 2007, 3). Saramago’s work explores this very conjugation of the economic and the biological within the thanatological schema.

As the management of death turns redundant in Saramago’s fictional world, the death industry meets with threats of dissolution. Deathlessness diabolically agitates the country’s socio-economic and religio-political infrastructures and it is not long before the total societal set-up is enveloped with a growing sense of failure. The networked configuration of socio-economic infrastructure implies that dysfunctionality at one level subjects all the other sectors into an operational vulnerability – “Calls were made to hospitals, to the Red Cross, to the morgue, to funeral directors, to the police, yes, all of them” (Saramago 2008, 3). What Saramago initiates, therefore, is a multi-layered

breakdown of the ‘critical infrastructure.’<sup>4</sup> The ‘death-care industry’ is the first to be hard-hit. “Rudely deprived of their raw material,” they are obliged to bury or cremate “all domestic animals that die a natural or accidental death” (Saramago 2008, 14). The use of an industrial epithet - “raw material” - as a substitute for lifeless human bodies befits the essence of commodification of human existence that is dwelt upon in the novel. Besides, it interlinks commodification to the more felicitous concern of infrastructural operability, an essential for the maximum benefit of the society. If and when the physical and the organizational structures of an economy are heavily reliant on the retailability of a singular commodity, in this case death, a dearth in its yield would undoubtedly throw the complete arrangement out of gear. Thus, in the text, the adverse reverberations of death’s absence affect not just the constituent divisions of the death industry but the country at large.

Deathlessness devoid of aging discloses marked differences in the national demographic statistics. “[T]he rhomboid of the ages [was] swiftly turned on its head” (Saramago 2008, 21) with the senile gentry disquietly outnumbering the youth. This transfigures the fictional country into a ‘gerontopolis’ with unwanted and unused burial grounds. In *Death at Intervals*, therefore, Saramago re-imagines the necropolis as a ‘gerontopolis’ and unravels death as the coefficient of urban demographics. With an unabated percentage of population in a state of “suspended death” (Saramago 2008, 52), the availability of space, which is indispensable for any form of physical expansion, grows into a pressing problem. The soaring disparity between the feasible and the requisite proportions of space leaves the directors and administrators of hospitals and old age homes at a managerial loss. The hospital authorities argue

we have already started putting patients out in the corridors . . . and everything indicates that in less than a week’s time, it will not only be

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<sup>4</sup> The Council of the European Union (EU) defined ‘critical infrastructure’ as “an asset, system or part thereof located in Member States which is essential for the maintenance of vital societal functions, health, safety, security, economic or social well-being of people, and the disruption or destruction of which would have a significant impact in a Member State as a result of the failure to maintain those functions.” While their Directive is aimed at the Member States of EU, the definition, nonetheless, applies to most nations.

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the lack of beds we have to deal with, for with every corridor and every ward full, and given the lack of space and the difficulties of manoeuvring, we will have to face the fact that we have no idea where to put any beds that are available. (Saramago 2008, 17)

Similarly, the administration of old age homes realize that “if death is not there to cut short any ambitions” of unimaginably long life they would soon be overcrowded with the continuous arrival of inmates.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, suspended life reduces insurance companies into a superfluity by dismissing the fear of death (either natural or accidental) and flooding their offices with letters demanding immediate cancellation of all policies. The sole survival alternative before the federation of insurance companies then is to “set eighty as the age of obligatory death” (Saramago 2008, 22) when the happy policyholder would be declared “virtually” dead. An analogous dilemma baffles the department of disability pensions; given the one option of financing a “death-strike” afflicted multitude whose count increased in arithmetic as well as in geometric progressions, they anxiously await a fiscal catastrophe.<sup>6</sup> Together, the deathlessness-generated standstills confronted by these independent bodies disrupt the aggregate monetary circulation. “Various important professions, seriously concerned about the situation, had already started to inform those in power about their discontent” (Saramago 2008, 14). Death, or to be precise its absence, then mirrors “the taken-for-granted ‘business as usual’ attitude in which one exists in everyday life” (Berger 2011, 43). Epithets such as “funeral trade,” “financial investment,” “utility,” “subsidized loans,” “human resources,” “customers,”

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<sup>5</sup> Their anxiety is augmented by the possibility of them being unable to claim a shelter under the self-same conditions. Saramago’s use of “dead-weights” to refer to the infinitely aging populace further reflects the waning respect and concern that the young extend for the old. He is satirizing the ageist approach that contemporary societies harbour and propagate. In *Religion and Social Theory*, Turner (1999) observes “[i]n a society dominated by the values of youthfulness and vitality, death has become an embarrassment rather than an ever present facet of daily existence”.

<sup>6</sup> Ramifications are felt by the Church as well. Deathlessness with its promise of “eternity” destabilizes the foundations of Christianity (the religious backdrop of the novel) by defying its central belief, that of the resurrection of Christ. The actuality of death is that which gives meaning to the idea of “resurrection”. Since one does not hold true, the other invariably ceases to be. Likewise, most religious faiths deem the knowledge of death cardinal. They view it as liberation and a passage to a life beyond. Therefore, death’s termination, if in truth achieved, would endanger the validity of these much-affirmed belief-systems.

“merchandise,” “business,” and “prices” that are littered across the narrative further corroborate that attitude.

Once the elaborate economic order as engendered by the narrative is unsettled by a want of death, it actuates a “quadruple crisis, demographic, social, political and economic” (Saramago 2008, 54). The holistic functioning of an economy, as the author points out, is rooted in the cycle of life and death. The disappearance of one among the two variables from that equation would naturally foster unpropitious ramifications. Saramago’s skill lies in his ability to demonstrate in reverse the intra- as well as the inter-structural symbiosis of the death-centric society. His artistic decision to open the novel on a climacteric note aids in providing a comprehensive picture of the urban infrastructure. Therefore, the plot set by the absence of death in *Death at Intervals* extends a multi-disciplinary problem which could well be extended to most urban locales where the death industry has emerged into a flourishing business.

Today, particularly in the Western World funeral industry is a booming business. John C Gebhart accredited this dramatic rise (especially towards the beginning of the twentieth century) to the following factors:

(1) The public has no sense of values and is not trained to shop, so that price is not an important consideration. (2) Because of insurance and other savings, all but the most destitute or improvident families have ample funds with which to defray burial expenses. (3) To a certain extent, however, it is doubtless true that the demand for more elaborate and expensive caskets and funeral services has accompanied the general demand for more expensive goods of all kinds. (quoted in Laderman 2003, 58)

In fact, the death industry heavily draws on the constructivist axioms of behavioural economics to sustain its recent financial success.<sup>7</sup> The funeral director-survivor

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<sup>7</sup> Behavioural economists, Colin F. Camerer and George Loewenstein (2004), believe that the analysis of “marriage, educational decisions, and saving for retirement, or the purchase of large durables like houses, sailboats, and cars, which happen just a few times in a person’s life” does not “warrant” a focus exclusively on “post-convergence” behaviour (“the same task is repeated over and over, with fresh endowments in each period [and data] from the last few periods of the experiment are typically used to draw conclusions about equilibrium behavior outside the lab”) because although

relationship parallels the doctor-patient analogy put forth by Richard G. Frank in “Behavioral Economics and Health Economics.”<sup>8</sup> Scanning the parameters of decision-making in either case will reveal several overlaps. To elucidate this claim, I refer to Jacob Glazer’s response to Frank’s arguments. In Glazer’s opinion “consumers in the health-care market make decisions with respect to their health insurance coverage, whether or not to seek care, which provider to go to, what to tell the provider, whether or not to comply with the provider’s recommendations, whether or not to seek a second opinion.” In the death industry, the survivors of the deceased are faced with similar doubts – whether or not to seek the services offered by the death-care industry, which funeral director to approach, whether or not to comply with the recommendations extended by the director, etc. – which only catalyzes their decision-making.

However, in Saramago’s experimental world, once the families decided to “[free] themselves” of their dying relatives by crossing over to the neighbouring country, an act that was deemed inhuman and decadent, they were exempted from making any such choice – “[t]here was no coffin and no shroud, the bodies would rest on the bare earth” (Saramago 2008, 33). These circumstances promptly alter once the funeral industry is back in business after coalescing with the maphia – “[the maphia would] supply the dead, and the undertakers [would] contribute the means and the technical expertise for burying them” (Saramago 2008, 60). Consequently, “there would be a death certificate, there would be plaques in the cemeteries engraved with names and surnames” (Saramago 2008, 62) connoting that the survivors would once again have to indulge in funerary decision-making and purchases. In *The American Way of Death Revisited*, Jessica Mitford quotes Mr. Leon S. Utter, a former dean of the San Francisco College of Mortuary Science – “Never preconceive as to what any family will purchase. You

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“examining behavior after it has converged is of great interest, it is also obvious that many important aspects of economic life are like the first few periods of an experiment rather than the last.” Similar is the case with funerary purchases as well.

<sup>8</sup> The “context of limited information . . . anxiety, insurance coverage, and trust” offered by the funeral director-survivor alliance “is well suited to the concerns of behavioural economics” (Diamond and Vartiainen 2007, 218). For further reference see the chapter on “Behavioral Economics and Health Economics” in Diamond and Vartiainen, eds. (2007).

cannot possibly measure the intensity of their emotions, undisclosed insurance, or funds that may have been set aside for funeral expenses” (Mitford 2000, 21). For those in this trade “the most important element of funeral salesmanship is the proper arrangement of caskets in the selection room... The sales talk, while preferably dignified and restraint, must be designed to take maximum advantage of this arrangement” (Mitford 2000, 21). The selection-room arrangements, traders believe, markedly affects the sale. The buyer should be exposed to contrasts in the price range in a rebounding manner, such that the context of presentation determines their choice – behavioral economists term this the “framing effect”<sup>9</sup> – because although the buyers are literally investors in loss, their investments serve as socio-cultural markers since deferential disposal of the dead constitutes a moral duty, a communal performance.<sup>10</sup>

According to the Federal Trade Commission of USA funerals are one of the most expensive purchases that a consumer ever makes. Since very little experience on the part of the consumer is actually involved it is usually the funeral director who makes the final decision as to the conduct of the final rites of passage. “Their increasing authority over the corpse, and the simultaneous rise to dominance of the funeral home – a confusing space of business, religious activity, corpse-preparation, and family living – forever changed the social and cultural landscape of death in the United States” (Laderman 2003, 8). The National Directory of Morticians Redbook mentions the number of funeral homes in the United States in the year 2019 to be 19,136. The statistics of the National Funeral Directors Association as available on their website

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<sup>9</sup> The framing effect describes “the fact that people’s valuation of an item changes with the context that frames the choice (e.g., a person’s opinion of the value of a good differs depending on whether other people have expressed desire for or aversion to the item)” (Altman 2006, 88).

<sup>10</sup> Mitford (2000) points to a specific design adopted by the funeral directors: “[t]he diagram of the selection room in [the Comprehensive Sales Program Successful Mortuary Operation] manual resembles one of those mazes set up for experiments designed to muddle rats. It is here that we are introduced to the Triangle Plan, under which the buyer is led around in a triangle, or rather in a series of triangles. He is started off at position A, a casket costing \$587, which he is told is ‘in the \$500 range’ . . . He is informed that the average family buys in the \$500 range – a statement designed to reassure him, explain the authors, because ‘most of the people believe themselves to be above average.’ Suppose the client does not react either way to the \$587 casket. He is now led to position B on the diagram – a better casket priced at \$647. However, this price is not to be mentioned. Rather, the words “sixty dollars additional” are to be used. Should the prospect still remain silent, this is the cue to continue upward to the most expensive unit.

Conversely, should the client demur at the price of \$587, he is to be taken to position C— and told that ‘he can save a hundred dollars by choosing this one.’ Again, the figure of \$487 is not to be mentioned” (Mitford 2000, 24).

(www.nfda.org) reveal that the total revenue generated in 2012 from crematories and funeral homes and services put together stood at \$16,323 million. The statistics also show that the national median cost of a funeral for the calendar year 2017 was \$ 7,360 excluding the purchase of vaults. If a vault were to be included the median would steeply shoot up to \$ 8,755.

Due to the heavy costs charged by the funeral directors, the American funeral industry has been widely castigated. Mitford criticizes the industry for incurring huge profits by selling services and goods at unnecessarily exorbitant rates to those in mourning. “Funeral directors feel that by steering the customer to the higher-priced caskets, they are administering the first dose of grief therapy” (Mitford 2000, 20). The highly commercialized outlook of the funeral directors is occasionally substantiated by consumer demands. Buyers opting for personalized funerals over and above solemn inhumation contribute to the popularity of crazy coffins or on-demand caskets which come in various shapes and forms. For instance Crazy Coffins, a UK based company manufactures caskets in the shape of cars, guitars, phones, etc. each of which comes with extravagant price tags. Their website proudly declares “[w]e do not carry a range since we respond to rather than dictate our customers’ tastes: our Crazy Coffins are entirely bespoke and the only limit is your imagination.” One can safely infer that considerably conditioned by the choice and nature of investments made by the buyer as well as the seller, this widespread economic sector has defined and distributed the corporal space in innovative ways, integrating the understanding of death at the organizational and the cultural levels.<sup>11</sup>

By portraying the collapse of that new-found space in *Death at Intervals*, Saramago stresses that it is but a pattern of structural-cum-economic adaptation. He presents the rapid commoditization as a necessary and logical outgrowth of urban proliferation that can override the tumultuous upsurge of human senility thereby safeguarding the urban

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<sup>11</sup> Kane Kwei, a specialty coffin maker in Ghana, transformed the art of coffin-making in ways that would reflect the personality or wishes of the deceased. It is locally believed that the coffins will please the departed and aid them in their passage to the afterlife (Benjamin 2013, 100).

space from transforming into a demo-dystopia. The novel serves as the litmus paper against which one can test the credibility of socio-cultural developments. With modern scientific innovations being directed towards improved, healthy, living conditions and longevity, the world might soon be faced with abnormal demographic and financial demands. As burial grounds turn redundant, the urban space gradually transforms into a ‘vast boneyard’. If “normality, needless to say, mean[ing], purely and simply, dying when our time comes” freezes without any halt on aging the world will contain “cemeteries of the living where fatal and irrenunciabile old age will be cared for as god would have wanted until, since their days will have no end” (Saramago 2008, 20). The re-imagining of the necropolis as a ‘gerontopolis’, hence, unravels the contradictions that lie at the heart of utilitarian, urban societies.

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