The Brookfields Hotel
(Freetown, Sierra Leone)

Danny Hoffman

October 31, 1992. The front facade of the Hotel Turismo in the Angolan capital Luanda is blown away by grenade and machine-gun fire in an attack on UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola) officials staying there during peace negotiations. The cease-fire is over, and the civil war resumes.

January 15, 2000. Leader of the Serbian “Tigers” paramilitary, head of the Oblic football club, and indicted war criminal Zeljko Raznatovic, aka “Arkan,” is shot in the head in the lobby of the Hotel Intercontinental in Belgrade. According to the BBC, the assassination could be “politically or gangland related.”¹

July 11, 2002. On a business trip to Tennessee, Bryan Brewer finds a surveillance camera hidden in the light fixture of the hotel bathroom. He files a $1.5 million lawsuit against the Knoxville Marriott. “In Mr. Brewer’s case,” says his lawyer, “he has become paranoid. . . . When he does travel, he spends a lot of time going over every inch of his hotel room to make sure it is safe.”²

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October 26, 2003. The U.S. administration in Baghdad is located in a compound that includes the El-Rashid Hotel. At approximately 6 a.m., six to eight rockets are fired from a makeshift launcher into the west side of the building. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, regarded as a principal architect of the U.S.-led war in Iraq, is staying on the twelfth floor of the hotel but escapes injury.

Commerce and violence converge in the figure of the modern hotel, its genealogy stretching back to the garrison and the inn. Hotels are the creations of empires: mansionis housed the military delegates of Rome as they moved about their conquered territories; the corners of the thirteenth-century Mongol kingdom were connected through a postal service whose messengers lodged at relay houses; the American railroad instituted the block hotel for masses of travelers across the expanses of the nation. Now that global capital has entered its own imperial phase, the hotel space is where contests over the monopoly on legitimate violence enter the cash nexus of globalization.

The hotel is also the domicile of the nomad. It is a concrete yurt, a space of deterritorialization—understood not as the erasure of place but as one half of the process of decoding and recoding, fixing and unfixing, by which surpluses magically appear. The hotel generates surpluses through movements of bodies, commodities, imaginings, rumors—and their endless creative couplings. A bricolage space of “indifference toward the act of producing and toward the product, toward the set of instruments to be used and toward the over-all result to be achieved.”

A space of production without limits.

Along Africa’s West Coast, that stretch of beach and forest once known as the Slave Coast and the Gold Coast, there is an ongoing revolution in the means of production that makes the hotel’s organizational logic immanent to an entire region. (This shouldn’t surprise us; like modernity before it, postmodernity is born in the [post]colony, nurtured by the violent circulation of bodies.) Here we find the generation of surpluses through production without limits, through violence and movement that renders meaningless the line between war and peace. An entrepreneur from Tajikistan hires a South African pilot to fly his Russian plane to an unmarked landing strip in Liberia carrying Ukrainian firearms left

over from the war in Bosnia and purchased in Belgium. Diamonds make their way from the surface mines of Sierra Leone to a Lebanese merchant in Abidjan who sends them to Antwerp via Dubai for processing and shipment to the United States. And in West Africa, laboring bodies and the spaces they inhabit are deconstructed and reconfigured to meet the demands of this new economy. A transcontinental rhizome, a haeccity. Haeccities, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules and particles, capacities to affect and be affected.” They are assemblages of forces, less a collection of things or subjects than a configuration of relationships and potencies working in concert. The haeccity that connects the diamond markets of Antwerp to the airport in Dubai to Victor Bout, entrepreneur, begins at the Brookfields Hotel in downtown Freetown. It all starts in a clothes closet in room 121, where the weapons are stored.

In 1998, the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) government fused the deterritorial architecture of the modern hotel to the deterritorializing architectonics of postmodern globalization. When it was first elected to power in 1996, the SLPP largely ceded its security function to irregular militias, especially the Mende Kamajors. The Kamajors claimed to descend from solitary hunters who used occult powers to procure meat and protect the village from the threats of the forest. Hunting magic became war magic, and the ability to move invisibly through the bush became an ability to repel enemy bullets. Marginalized, the armed forces of the state staged a coup in May 1997. The Kamajors joined other militias and Nigerian peacekeepers in restoring the SLPP in March 1998 and were barracked at the Brookfields Hotel. For residents of the city, for observers of the conflict, and for the Kamajors themselves, the hotel became synonymous with the militia and its increasingly complex relation to the city and to the state. The hotel fortified them, literally; they hardwired its organization of commerce and violence, converted its spaces of pleasure and profit into new pleasures and new profits. Modernism’s submersion of the commerce/violence nexus brought to the surface of the postmodern present. The text and images collected here chart a process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, of decoding and recoding. The swimming pool made football pitch. The parking lot made public square.

Danny Hoffman

The Brookfields front gate on Jomo Kenyatta Avenue, 2001
I’m in Freetown. Bob and I came here for a vacation and our yearly medical exams. Bob and I are staying at the Brookfields Hotel. We see it differently than the new agriculture trainees who just arrived in the country and have been plopped at the Brookfields for a week. We see luxury in the running water and flushable toilet just ten steps from the bed whereas the trainees notice that the toilet doesn’t always flush, the water pressure is quite low, and their dribbling showers are often cold. We appreciate the sunlight that the many windows in the room let in and the smooth tile floor that allows us to walk about in our bare feet. They see rooms that are bare and shabby.5

The parking area is the Brookfields Hotel’s public square. Blocks A and B border the pockmarked asphalt on two sides. Jomo Kenyatta Avenue runs along the third side, and on the fourth there’s a low wall where a group of boys sit and wait, day after day. Once, the lot hosted the Mercedes and BMWs of Freetown’s elite. Once, the Brookfields bar and restaurant were among the finest in town. Once, its rooms were occupied by moneyed foreigners and the local trysting class. Now this quintessential modernist nonspace has become a postmodern town hall: part kangaroo courthouse, part theater of the absurd.

On the night that Colonel Brima’s nineteen-year-old son was accused of raping a thirteen-year-old resident of Block K, we gathered in the parking lot to debate the merits of the case. When Joseph Koroma died unexpectedly in his room in Block A, mourners gathered before the ruins of the reception area where guests used to unload their bags. Somewhere in the lot, there is usually someone fighting. From the balconies or the waiting wall, someone else watches.

The Brookfields Hotel is now a barracks. The paying guests have gone. Their rooms are occupied by the Kamajor militia, hundreds of young men who live there with their wives, girlfriends, children, parents, and friends. Officially, the war is now over. No one is quite sure whether it is the government’s continued wariness of its own armed forces or the fear of what the boys might do if evicted that keeps the Kamajors there still. Perhaps a little of both. In any case, the Kamajors are there now, and the place offers all the rowdy hospitality of a heavily armed fraternity house.

A body magically rising from the car park would see the city falling away below in concentric circles. First is the Brookfields neighborhood and downtown; the only visible evidence here of Sierra Leone’s ten-year civil war is the crush

of displaced persons who have fled the countryside for this once sleepy capital. To the west lie the wealthy suburbs of Aberdeen and Spur Road, jammed with the air-conditioned cocoons of white Toyota Land Cruisers ferrying the international nomads of the United Nations and the nongovernmental organizations from one restaurant meeting to the next, where they debate what it will take to bring stability to this West African nation (often, this involves removing the Kamajors from the Brookfields Hotel). To the east lies Kissy, where the history of coups, invasions, and insurrections is most evident in the burned hulls of buildings and the Kalashnikov scars on overcrowded homes. The backdrop to this cityscape is the monochrome expanse of the Atlantic to one side and forested hills to the other. From most of the balconies of the hotel complex, one can see what attracted tourists in the past: the city, the beaches, the mountains, the high perch just above but not wholly removed from the fray. The same qualities make the hotel an ideal base of military operation.

For those remaining on the ground in the hotel parking lot, every weekday afternoon offers a surreal parade. A troupe of prettily uniformed young women marches across the pavement past the lounging Kamajors and out the front gate to the taxis on Jomo Kenyatta Avenue. Notwithstanding the Kamajors, the destruction of the hotel, and the damage to the nation’s economy and international reputation that a decade of civil war has wreaked, the government of Sierra Leone continues to operate the Hotel and Tourism Training Center on the grounds of the Brookfields Hotel. Preparing, maybe, for the day when paying guests will again request a room with a view of the sea.

*The parking lot from a third-floor balcony, Block A, 2001*

A general atmosphere of lawlessness has prevailed over Freetown during the last four days as uncontrolled gunmen have continued to harass, rob, and murder civilians with impunity. The situation is exacerbated because the RUF [Revolutionary United Front] component of the People’s Army, the new regime’s military force, are not paid a regular salary and fla-
Playing soccer in the swimming pool, 2001
grantly abuse their power. The RUF have moved artillery and ammuni-
tion to Fourah Bay College, which is located in a very strategic position
on a hill overlooking Freetown and are using the Brookfields hotel as
their base.6

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The pro-government Kamajor militia, a rag-tag army carrying American
MI6 assault rifles and adorned with traditional charms, are once again
out in force.

Several hundred Kamajors, who made a name for themselves for being
supposedly immune to bullets in the fighting before the peace accord,
have gathered at the Brookfields hotel in central Freetown.

“We are looking for those devils, we are the Kamajors. We fear noth-
ing . . . mystical powers, yeah,” said one unidentified fighter before chas-
ing off curious journalists.7

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There were also reports of freshly severed heads being displayed near a
CDF [Civil Defense Forces]-Kamajor base in the Brookfields neigh-
borhood.

Local social workers also expressed concern about the periodic deten-
tion of children and adults by the Kamajor Civil Defense Forces. The
Kamajors don’t have an official barracks or military headquarters, and
have adopted a local hotel as their base, the Brookfields Hotel in central
Freetown. It is within this hotel that several witnesses reported to Human
Rights Watch seeing detainees held by the Kamajors. As the detentions
are not officially acknowledged, they are not subject to governmental
regulations and monitoring. They are also illegal.8

In a city of rolling blackouts, the electricity at Brookfields is remarkably reliable.
The occupants of the handful of rooms with a working television or stereo can
generally run them when they wish. The wall-mounted air conditioners in the
elite block hum and drip more or less on command. And in those rooms occupied
by a loose collection of relations whose comings and goings preclude the easy

.dawn.com/2000/05/10/int5.htm.
8. Human Rights Watch, “Sierra Leone: Getting Away with Murder, Mutilation, Rape: New Test-
Struggle at twelve hours old, with Adama, Block C, 2002
division of the day into periods of rest and activity (and most rooms are of exactly this sort), the lights tend to stay on throughout the night.

From the third-floor balcony of room 312, Block A, one cannot escape the reggae pumping from Abdullah’s stereo on the first floor. If Abdullah is awake at 4 a.m., so are his speakers. The music is loud enough to be heard in Block C two buildings away—and no one tells him to turn it down. Abdullah plays his stereo loud because he can. It marks him as a Big Man, indeed makes him a Big Man. Diagonally across the car park one can see, virtually every evening, the shifting tableau of Senasay’s big-screen TV, tuned to whatever American sitcom or film is being broadcast by the British Forces Broadcasting Service. And in about half the rooms visible on this side of Block B, the balconies—even when empty—are continually illuminated by an overhead bulb.

These uses of the government’s largesse (no one pays an electric bill at Brookfields, just as no one pays rent) serve as landmarks on the social landscape of the hotel. After a few minutes of watching the silent picture through Senasay’s open door, Ernest declares that Senasay is a criminal. His television is stolen, which would be less of a crime were he more willing to let others watch it. On another occasion, Mohammed Koroma divides the population of the hotel into combatants and civilians by their porch lights. Those who fought to take and keep the hotel have removed the bulbs from their verandahs—the lights made them easy targets for rebels positioned in the hills across the street. Only opportunistic civilians, those who found a way to profit from the movement without putting themselves at risk, who moved into the hotel when the hard work was done, burn lights outside their doors.

If the current at Brookfields is remarkably reliable, it is nevertheless not guaranteed. There are evenings when here, too, the lights begin to dim, the television flickers, and the stereo warbles before the compound plunges into dark silence. From the various buildings there is a collective groan as everyone searches for matches and candles, and the evening continues on a softer, candlelit note. If it stays off a few hours and returns only late at night, then a few souls will sit up and smoke cigarettes and marijuana and chat and wait for the air conditioner to kick back on, while others catch what rest they can—until 4 a.m., when Abdullah decides it’s time for a little reggae.

Don’t be surprised if you hear this name as you move around the city. When you use Jomo Kenyatta Road up to Brookfields Hotel, just greet them, KAMABOYZ; you are sure to receive a friendly welcome. The heavy rains had just subsided during that night when residents
A family meal beneath the water tank, Block A, 2002
of Jomo Kenyatta Road, Brookfields and New England and passers-by were rudely awoken by heavy gun-fire.

I went around Brookfields Hotel, the headquarters of the Kamaboys, to try to know why there was firing from that end, if they were the ones that were engaged in that act. I got two stories. One Kamaboys told me that a rebel opened fire at their colleague and so they responded adequately.

The other story (which I bought) was that during the day, some of the Kamaboys went to a neighboring house and asked that they be allowed to get in to watch the football match between Sierra Leone and Nigeria that was shown on satellite in that house. The tenant refused to let them in. They went out of that compound disappointed but with grudge in their minds for this defenceless guy.

They wanted the guy. Some of them lay along Jomo Kenyatta Road in ambush while the others went into the house, firing rapidly and shouting that whoever came out would have his or her mother wearing black and green.

One small boy (about 13 years) who lives in that house narrowly escaped death when he was jumping over the wall to save his life.

He said another luck was on their side. By the time they got to the house, UNAMSIL [United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone] was there promptly and the Kamaboys ran away.

When the UNAMSIL soldier shouted, “who goes there,” the reply was KAMABOYZ.

If you die, e don [it is over]. My advice is that we need to be very very careful. There are plenty guns around town. Those guns are not meant for Sankoh’s rebels alone; you and I can fall by them. But may I ask, why is it that the government is still keeping those Kamajors (who have self-styled themselves as KAMABOYZ) in that hotel?

I find it strangely thrilling to announce to the driver of the crowded station wagon taxi that I want to get off at the Brookfields Hotel. Very few of the very few whites living in Freetown speak more than rudimentary Krio, so the other passengers rarely feel the need to lower their voices when they question one another about what a stranger would want at the Brookfields Hotel. If he doesn’t know it’s dangerous there, he is a fool. If he does, then he is a bigger fool still. United Nations peacekeepers sometimes go to the hotel, but they are mostly Nigerians looking for their girlfriends or drugs or stolen goods. British military advisers sometimes go to the hotel, but they always go in armed packs and never stay long, just a

Fighting over the winnings of a soccer match, 2002
quick visit to consult with CDF commanders on some detail of the disarmament. Otherwise, there is no one there but Kamajors. When the taxi pulls over on Jomo Kenyatta Avenue, I climb back over the legs of my fellow travelers and disappear through the gate of the hotel.

**PROPERTY DETAILS**

*hotel name: BROOKFIELDS HOTEL*

*address: Jomo Kenyatta, Freetown, Sierra Leone*

*IDD: 232*

**ROOM FACILITIES**

*Fastnet does not currently hold a list of room facilities for this property.*

**PROPERTY FACILITIES**

*Fastnet does not currently hold a list of facilities for this property.*

**CARD FACILITIES**

*Fastnet does not currently hold a list of credit card facilities for this property.*

Rambo lay on the floor and whined. Patricia, his girlfriend, was sprawled next to him on the woven straw mat, bumming one cigarette after another.

“Daniel, *nya go a cigarette.*” She made a V with her fingers at her lips in a mock smoke that seemed vaguely obscene. Perhaps concerned that my sign language might be as shaky as my Mende, she repeated herself in Krio.

“Daniel, gimme 55.” I was smoking 555s, which for some reason are always referred to simply as “55.”

“Daniel, I want to meditate,” Rambo said, rolling around on the mat like a toddler. It was an odd sight. I stand six feet tall, and Rambo is a full head taller.

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and built like a power forward. The home-made tattoo on his right biceps makes him an unconvincing whiner. He is twenty-five years old.

“I want to meditate on God. I want to talk to Jah.”

I fished two one-hundred leone coins from my pocket.

“When you talk to Him,” I said as I handed over the coins, “tell Him to send blessings for me.”

It was four o’clock in the afternoon, though it could easily have been 10 a.m. or midnight. Adama stood cooking on the verandah, and every ten minutes or so there were a few sharp cracks as she broke more of the long pieces of baseboard she had somehow acquired to feed the cooking fire. It is hard to imagine they came from inside the hotel. After three years of Kamajor occupation, the baseboards that remain can only be those unfit for fire. Struggle slept inside his makeshift fly cover, a lacy curtain scrap and some bent clothes hangers, lying on his back on the straw mattress. At six weeks old, Adama’s child does little else.

I spoke with Adama while Rambo scampered to the first floor to buy a joint’s worth of marijuana from Barrie, the Fula man who lives in the storeroom beneath the stairs.

The one chair in the place stands on the verandah, but it has no seat, so I leaned over the railings and rested my arms on the drying clothes. I wondered yet again if I would ever leave Mohammed and Adama’s room with dry elbows.

This is, without question, Mohammed and Adama’s room. They ended up here on the second floor of Block C when someone slapped Adama during a fight at Jah Kingdom, the bar/dormitory in the toilets and changing rooms beneath the empty swimming pool. Adama was eight months pregnant at the time. Fortunately, this happened after the exodus from the hotel had begun and there was a room empty, so Mohammed packed up their things and they left the shower stalls. I say the room was empty—Mohammed had to break off a padlock on the door to get in, but I assume that since the previous occupants left only a few scraps of cloth and
If Mohammed and Adama were alone that first night, by the second they had roommates, refugees from the Jah Kingdom squabble or friends needing a change of scene. Someone is always asleep when I enter the room, regardless of the time, and toward evening there are a half-dozen regulars who may or may not stay the night. Duffel bags and plastic shopping bags line the walls, and somewhere there is a small white puppy that sleeps even more than Struggle. I know it is not dead only because every day it lies in a different place in the room.

My conversation with Adama was brief as always. “Adama, how did you meet Mohammed?” This was my second personal question for her in the four months we have known each other. It is two more questions than she has ever asked me.

She was clearly embarrassed but smiling. I tacked toward a question she could answer with a yes or no if she chose.

“Was it in the hotel?”

“I’ve been here two years,” she mumbled and with a bare foot cracked another length of board. “Yes, it was in the hotel.”

“Did you come here alone?”

“No, I came with my auntie.” Though she continued to smile I left the conversation, feeling lucky to have gotten as much as I did.

Rambo skipped back into the room and threw the small brown roll of marijuana at Patricia.

“Roll ’em.” He beamed at her, and as she scavenged through the bags against the wall for the dropped weed, she grinned back at him. While she rolled the joint, Rambo asked if I had read The Merchant of Venice. He picked up Struggle and swung him around while he quizzed me on Shakespeare titles.

“Julius Caesar?”

“Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears,” I said.

“I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones,” said Rambo. He laid the baby on his chest, where it promptly fell asleep. Rambo and Patricia passed the joint a few times as they pinched each other and giggled and eventually drifted off themselves.

**Gibril Foday Musa, New Tablet Attacked.** Musa, editor of the Freetown-based independent New Tablet, was detained for several hours and assaulted by members of the Kamajor civil militia. Two Kamajor militiamen came to the offices of the New Sierra Leonean newspaper, which
Petty trader selling rum, cigarettes, marijuana, aspirin, bubblegum, and razor blades, Block A, 2001
shares premises with the New Tablet in central Freetown, searching for editor George Khoryama.

The Kamajors were concerned about an article in the June 10 edition of the New Sierra Leonean entitled “Kamajors Vow to Overthrow Kabbah.” The article alleged that the Kamajor militia intended to topple President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah if his government agreed to share power with the rebel Revolutionary United Front. Khoryama was not in the office, so the Kamajors began questioning Musa and an unidentified caretaker.

After several more Kamajors arrived, the militiamen drove Musa and the caretaker to the Brookfields Hotel, their Freetown headquarters. Musa later reported that he and the caretaker were stripped down to their underwear, beaten, and locked in a small generator room, which the attackers filled with water so that the men were unable to sit down. The Kamajors released them that evening.\footnote{Committee to Protect Journalists, “Africa: Country Report, Sierra Leone 1999,” www.cpj.org/attacks99/africa99/Sierra.html.}

Someone has branded the ceiling of one stairwell in Block A with letters a foot and a half tall: CDF. Someone took the time to hold an open flame—a lighter or a candle—close enough to scar the plaster black, move down an inch, and do it again, until the succession of dots formed letters. Time-consuming work, this CDF has neither the artistry of the street graffiti elsewhere in the city nor the urgency of a militant faction marking its territory. The handiwork of this anonymous artist suggests nothing so much as a relentless boredom.

Spokesman: UNAMSIL’s intensive patrols and other activities for the last 24 hours have yielded good results.

As a result of discussions which were part of our effort to make Freetown a weapons-free zone, about 100 Civil Defense Force (CDF) combatants occupying Brookfields Hotel will be returning to their home regions—Bo, Kenema and Pujehun—after handing over their weapons into the custody of UNAMSIL. Another approximately 50 CDF combatants will remain in Freetown, but their arms will be held under UNAMSIL’s control.

Q: Are you reacting to the excessive number of armed robberies in Freetown by sending the Kamajors back to their former regions?

A: Lt. Commander Patrick Coker: This is not a reaction to any excesses. This is part of the ongoing move to make Freetown a weapons-free zone. We are neither for nor against the Kamajors.
However, their return home is a result of consultations between the CDF and UNAMSIL.

Q: You said that 100 CDF are going back to their regions and about 50 remaining. Does that mean that there are only 150 CDF in Freetown?
A: We are not in a position to provide accurate numbers of Kamajors currently in Freetown. However, as I explained, after a meeting between UNAMSIL and CDF authorities, some 100 will be leaving Freetown and returning to their homes, and we have been told that about 50 will remain in Freetown.12

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brookfields . . . well, the boys are out. last saturday the GOSL [Government of Sierra Leone] sent down many buses to take people back home. there was a bit of trouble but not too much.13

Postscript

Writing in the Atlantic Monthly in 1994, journalist Robert Kaplan described youth in Sierra Leone as violent “loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid.” Kaplan made a splash. In compelling prose he pronounced the plagues that a wrathful God had visited on West Africa: “Disease, overpopulation, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, refugee migrations, the increasing erosion of nation-states and international borders, and the empowerment of private armies, security firms, and international drug cartels.”14 Kaplan seemed to be stating the obvious: West Africa is in a state of anarchy. The Clinton administration certainly thought so and faxed the article to each of its embassies in Africa in case they didn’t know.15

For a decade now, scholars of West Africa have been chasing that fax. The particulars of the New Barbarism theses are not difficult to refute (their pervasiveness is a far greater challenge than their empiricism or intellectual acumen.)16 But

13. E-mail from human rights monitor, Freetown, August 12, 2002.
16. “New Barbarism” is Paul Richards’s term for such primitivizing accounts of contemporary violence. For critiques of “the coming anarchy” focused on West Africa, see Richards, Fighting for
still we are left with the problem of life in the hotel-made-barracks and the texture of violent lives in contemporary West Africa. How far should we take the representation and interpretation of violence when even the haecities of Deleuze and Guattari, with their molecules in “relations of movement and rest,” are echoed uncomfortably in Kaplan’s violent youth as “loose molecules”?

The text and images here do not untangle the circuits of interpolation through which youth combatants in Sierra Leone are made (as important as that is to do). They do a different work. What they offer, in the end, is a way of “knowing,” as Michael Taussig once wrote, “[as] giving oneself over to a phenomenon rather than thinking about it from above.”17 They offer a view of the world from the parking lot of the Brookfields Hotel.

Danny Hoffman teaches in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Washington. His current research is on the Kamajor militia movement and its involvement in the civil war in Sierra Leone.