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Design Stories *in the* Global South: Fabulation *as a* Means *to* Decolonize Design History

Ø Traducción al español aquí

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to discuss, through the critical fabulation of Saidiya Hartman, the use of fabulation in the field of design history as a decolonizing methodological tool, as it challenges and problematizes notions of truth and neutrality in research and the boundaries of scientific writing. Assuming that all writing, even that which claims to be committed to reality, has elements of fiction, I argue that researchers in design can engage in writing that, with historical rigor, utilizes imagination not as a means of falsification but as a materialization of what is suggested in documents but escapes the possibility of verification. I conclude that fabulation can be employed as a means to imagine alternative occurrences, as a way to speculate on what cannot be answered through archival materials, and as a tactic for democratizing academic discourse.
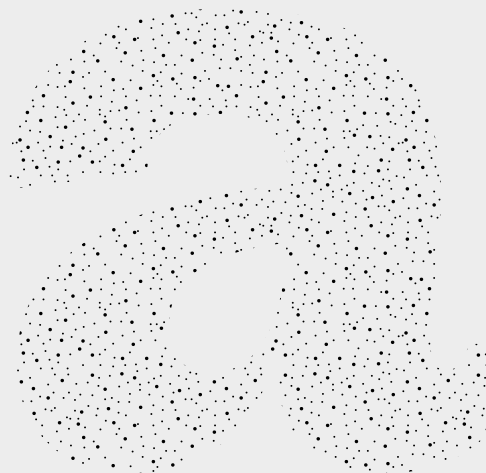
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ONCE UPON A TIME: SCIENCE AND FICTION

Disciplines such as history and anthropology, deeply committed to documenting facts and upholding notions of culture, have been discussing their forms of writing and narratives. There is a considerable group of scholars investigating the boundaries between science and fiction, such as Donna Haraway (2016), Isabelle Stengers, and Vinciane Despret (Despret, 2022; Stengers & Despret, 2014). They reclaim the return to an adventurous and experimental character of scientific writing, often associated with a commitment to reality, blurring the limits between fact and fiction.

Anthropology, a key discipline involved in the discussion of notions of real and fiction—which, in Tim Ingold's words, is a social science that "aims to take people seriously" (2019, p. 13)—, has been questioning for the past few decades the role of the researcher as an observer in the production of anthropological accounts and narratives. The crisis of structuralism, which began in the 1970s, caused anthropology to undergo an epistemological turn of self-critique, breaking with the "conception of a subject transparent to itself and the notion of representation of the modern episteme" (Chamma, 2018, p. 245). Anthropologists such as Stuart McLean (2017) and Marilyn Strathern (Strathern et al., 1987), among others, have proposed alternative writing approaches to transform research into a more open, imaginative, engaged, and creative practice. McLean (2017) argues that anthropological work, along with documentary commitment, is always also fictionalization. Based on the concept of fabulation formulated by Bergson and Deleuze, McLean suggests that anthropology should embrace the fictional character rather than deny it in the name of a supposed reality, drawing inspiration from both art and literature as well as the sciences, to "understand itself less as the study of an objectified humanity than as the open-ended, performative exploration of alternative possibilities of collective existence" (McLean, 2017, p. x).

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What we are accustomed to understand as ethnographic accounts, committed to a notion of 'reality' through a description of field research findings in a detailed context, supposedly narrated by a neutral observer is, according to anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (Strathern et al., 1987), a form of writing developed by ethnologist Bronislaw Malinowski. According to James Clifford, Malinowski aimed at demonstrating readers that his books contained "objectively acquired facts, not subjective creations" (Clifford, 2008, as cited in Chamma, 2018, p. 234). Often, the artifice of using categories from Western society to make the characteristics of the observed accessible and intelligible leads anthropologists to manipulate "concepts themselves to conceptualize those constructed as other," establishing "distances between writer, reader, and the subject of study" (Strathern et al., 1987, p. 261).

Strathern refers to this writing that attempts to convince the reader that the writer was there, committed to translating reality as 'persuasive fiction'. She emphasizes that one cannot choose to completely avoid fiction: when a writer opts for a style—for example, 'scientific' or 'literary'—they are specifying the type of fiction they engage in (Strathern et al., 1987, p. 257). Even the notion of translation is problematized by many other anthropologists, such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004), who understands that the encounter between two cultures cannot support the possibility of transposition or translation: for him, there will always be misunderstanding, and that equivocation can be controlled or managed (Viveiros de Castro, 2004).

DECOLONIZING ACADEMIA

Decolonial design faces the challenge of resisting within academia as a force for critical transformation that supports relationships that are less hierarchical, anti-dialogical, prescriptive, and domination-reproducing. It is necessary not only to expand the notion of design beyond the practices and histories of the Global North, but also to question the colonial logic that reproduces and perpetuates itself in academia by holding the hegemony of Eurocentric Western thought as correct, superior, universal, and natural. After the passing of the trend, those who continue discussing decolonization are precisely those who experience it firsthand—researchers discontented with being routinely subalternized, whether through imperfect language or unconventional writing. Establishing a decolonial mode of practice and research is extremely difficult because it opposes the idea of a program, an agenda, or the establishment of an objective method to call its own.

As a way to problematize hegemonic history, based on archival documentation—and all its biases and relations of power—, I suggest a tool that may be used to decolonize design history. In my doctoral research, I investigated design school projects planned but not implemented due to political and

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circumstantial reasons in Brazil during the 1960s. The country, like much of Latin America, was under military dictatorship, and the educational projects of the analyzed schools emerged as resistances to oppression, aiming to promote autonomy and problematizing the relationship between design and the idea of development.

The first initiatives to implement modern design education in Brazil occurred in the 1950s. The following decade saw the consolidation of the field. Brazilian design schools based their methodologies, tools, and epistemologies on those brought from Europe and the United States by European artists and designers, or by Brazilian designers trained abroad. With no bad intention whatsoever, they introduced references from the Global North, grounded in the values of civilization, progress, and development. At this time, the absence of institutionalized design education allowed for utopian, alternative school concepts. The projects I researched offered alternatives to what was being consolidated as a teaching model. First, I reviewed that of the School of Industrial Design and Handicrafts, planned by architect Lina Bo Bardi between 1962 and 1963 in Salvador, Bahia, as part of the Solar do Unhão renovation jointly with the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia, which intended to focus on the relationship between design and handicrafts. Second, I analyzed the Centro de Estudos do Parque Lage project by the same architect between 1964 and 1965, which aimed to emphasize humanist and intellectual training. Third, I researched the Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial (ESDI), founded in 1963 and based on the pedagogy of Ulm, which underwent a radical and ultimately frustrated collective attempt at curriculum reform in less than five years of operation. Initiated by students and professors due to a 'structural impasse', the crisis paralyzed the school for 14 months, between 1968 and 1969.

Although the first and second school cases were not implemented, they count with vast documentation, including plans, pedagogical guidelines, student profiles, the schedule of the first events, syllabi, and correspondence among the involved parties. The research methodology I implemented on all three cases was grounded in extensive documentary research across four archives, bibliographic research, and newspaper and magazine research from the time, fundamental for understanding the expectations and power struggles surrounding these projects, bringing a multiplicity of voices to the debate, including politicians, critics, students, and professors, and providing insight into the context and reasons for the lack of continuity of these pedagogical initiatives. In the case of ESDI, the only school that was actually implemented, I conducted semi-structured interviews with students from that period, adopting the 'history from below' (Hobsbawm, 2013, pp. 280-300) as my investigative method, prioritizing the voices and experiences of those students who, in 1968, rose against an authoritarian state of affairs in the design school.

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I considered these three cases as an opening, an opportunity to imagine how design education in the country could have been more connected with local cultural, social, and economic aspects. I then formulated alternative pasts that could provide clues to ponder on design education, considering a situated education that positions itself historically and acknowledges the coloniality of knowledge (Quijano, 2005) to which it has been—and is—subjected.

As a way to imagine how these schools could have functioned in everyday life and at the same time discuss the coloniality of archives, I implemented fabulation as a methodological tool. Consequently, I developed tactics to materialize some gaps in documentary research that remained unanswered, surpassing the limits of what may be suggested in the context or documentary information but cannot be verified. Some of the tactics used included imagining the physical spaces of schools and how students and teachers could occupy them, creating feasible character profiles through oral history accounts or newspaper information, articulating the doubts and questions arising from research through character subjectivities, evoking images by describing scenes and situations and performing bodies (including the researcher's body) affected by the archive. I also utilized what-if questions, not to contemplate future scenarios, but to imagine possibilities that could have occurred in the past. Lastly, I employed visualization tools commonly used in design fiction and speculative design practices, such as the development of props and models and the creation of realistic images of places or documents, to form a coherent and plausible set of information that helped imagine these alternative pasts.

It is not my objective to detail the fabulations developed in the research in this article. Throughout my study, I felt the need for a concise theory on fabulation, and I intend to discuss the foundations that supported my work. I defend this type of practice as a decolonial resistance to the limitations of both archives and conventional academic writing. In advancing efforts to decolonize academia, there exists a fine line between playing by the rules and attempting to break them. There is a desire to experiment with strange, non-traditional narratives, but these attempts still need to be recognized as academic writing. It is essential to create a network of protection and citation for those who have come before us, mainly through the work of authors who have pushed the boundaries between science and fiction, such as the aforementioned Haraway, Stengers, and Despret, as well as historian Saidiya Hartman (2007, 2008, 2021; Hartman & Siemsen, 2018) and anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (Strathern et al., 1987).

CRITICAL FABULATION

American historian Saidiya Hartman (2007, 2008, 2021; Hartman & Siemsen, 2018) utilizes fabulation as a methodological instrument to address erasures in historiog-

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1 For a broader understanding of fabulation, check *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), by American biologist and philosopher Donna Haraway, who employs speculative fabulation to raise questions about the present by envisioning alternative futures. Her practice linked speculative fabulation to a family of concepts that use the same acronym SF: science fiction, science fact, speculative feminism, string figures.

raphy and to fill in the missing details pertaining to subjects such as slavery[1]. When researching the African diaspora, Hartman (2007) encountered a lack of information about enslaved people in official archives. Attempting to piece together small elements of history gleaned from dry and bureaucratic readings of documents such as legal proceedings, she states that she was forced to use imagination (Hartman, 2022). Having access to only a few words describing a trial, she pushed the limits of the document by recreating the material conditions and imagining the physical conditions of those involved (Hartman, 2007). She experimented with the embodiment of lived situations, such as imagining the 28-day hunger strike of a newly enslaved black girl aboard a ship, bound for her new life of torture in an unknown place (Hartman, 2007). Hartman (2007) names 'critical fabulation' the exercise of writing that, with historical rigor, imagines the silences of the patchwork of collected facts. By seeking the subjectivities of the characters, of the situations, the historian dedicates herself to retelling stories in order to repair the violence suffered by silenced lives, the violences contained in these archives. Understanding that reproducing these violences is an unbearable act, Hartman (2021) proposes strategies for staging and critically reinventing these archives. Some of her narrative strategies include: evoking images through the description of scenes and situations; using orality; performing bodies—materializing imaginative thoughts through gestures, rhythms, movement, sweat, and breathing; and the use of 'what-if' questions that help imagine possibilities that could have existed. And so, Hartman was able to offer us an embodied history of bodies that were dematerialized by and in the archives. "By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view", Hartman "attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" (2008, p. 11).

The emergence of critical fabulation as a tool of history is possible because the relationship between history and fiction is under debate in contemporary historiography (Burke, 1992). The past is not given: it is constructed and also nourished by the historical imagination of the subjects who produce it (Mauad & Grinberg, 2010). Fabulation arises as a political act from a movement claiming the construction of new worlds, based on what was buried, unregistered and absent, especially in colonized countries, valuing marginalized subjects and bringing subalternized practices to light.

History, based on evidence—whether testimonies, archives, or traces—interprets the past by inquiring and raising issues. Without ignoring that historical accounts make use of narrative elements, historians discuss and diverge on the notion of constructing reality. Ana Maria Mauad and Lucia Grinberg point out that

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History, unlike fiction, has a commitment to the pursuit of coherence in the narrative contained in direct and indirect testimonies. Stylistic resources in the production of historical texts must consider that at the foundation of the discipline are two basic principles: the ethical responsibility of producing a truthful account, and reliance on evidence with which its assertions can be tested. (2010, p. 122)

The modern understanding of historical thought developed during the late 19th century. Historical writing is a way of creating an interpreted continuity from the then to the now, to make sense of the present based on the progression of past narratives. Historical fiction appears as a literary genre that brings together historical chronicles—facts and discoveries—with stories, interwoven by language resources and richness of details that materialize history. The past is told and retold, never directly experienced.

Also, the status of archives as spaces of regimes of truth has been debated for several decades within the domains of history and philosophy. Philosophers such as Michel Foucault (2012), Jacques Derrida (2001), and Giorgio Agamben (2008) have dedicated themselves to understanding archives through discontinuities, traces, and gaps, avoiding the pursuit of a singular truth and denying the idea of historical linearity. More recently, Black historians like Hartman (2007, 2008, 2021) and Achille Mbembe (2002) have pointed out these absences from the perspective of power relations. Hartman seeks to recover the voices of the oppressed and subalternized, and "grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known" (2021, p. xv), while Mbembe (2002) explores power-related issues linked with authority, status, and the very constructive materiality of the archive. Gaps, inconsistencies, and silences in the archives are as crucial as the documents stored in them. Operating within these voids is to confront the power and authority of the archives themselves and the limits they establish regarding what can be known. Hartman (Hartman & Siemsen, 2018), attempting to trace the experiences of enslaved individuals centuries ago, wondered what forms of narrative would be suitable to try and tell an impossible story, and she has been developing historical narratives with collective voices. Through "unknown persons, nameless figures, ensembles, collectives, multitudes, the chorus," Hartman (Hartman & Siemsen, 2018) then creates a powerful voice, made up of many others, in response to the oppressive structure of power and authority within archives.

The gaps in archives are opportunities. Unofficial handwritten notes, the reverse side of the document, the time stain on the paper showing how it was stored, the contingencies of its recording and archiving open windows for imagination: a missing page in the middle of the document, an indecipherable letter, the choice to store this and not another piece of paper.

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FICTIONAL EXERCISES IN DESIGN HISTORY

In my research, which navigates between design history and design anthropology, I realized that scientific writing could undermine imaginative capacity. A question I would like to pose is: how can research and writing processes that are deeply committed to documenting reality, take on a political commitment to enter the literary field and defend their fictional and fabulatory character? I assumed that all writing, even that which aims to commit to reality, has something fictional. To imagine possibilities within the gaps found in the visited archives, I proposed the exercise of an implicated, open, ambiguous writing that takes risks, engages with the dead, but also lets the dead speak "and do solicit the absent into vivid copresence (…) in many kinds of temporality and materiality" (Haraway, 2016, p. 132).

When thinking with Saidiya Hartman, I wondered who can fabulate. The historian uses fabulation to create stories of invisibilized, vulnerable people, who appear in accounts that "are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses" (Hartman, 2008, p. 2); marginalized groups that suffered extreme violence such as slavery or the Holocaust. One question must be posed: should fabulation be used when we have concrete data, confirmed facts, records of names? Every institutional archive has gaps, silences, and silencings, whether due to power and oppression relationships arising from the archive itself or the circumstances of the lived time. In my particular research, a military dictatorship, where censorship, imprisonment, and torture were applied to opponents who resisted. Who would fabricate evidence against themselves by recording acts of disobedience? The lack of data in documents such as date, authorship, etc., is a subject of doubt and may deserve exercises of speculation. The fact that my research object is schools that remained as projects (schools whose educational projects were never implemented) implies a great gap, open to the possibility of imagination. Fabulation can be activated as a way of imagining possibilities for what has not happened, creating a story in the future past, a kind of fold in time.

It seems to be extremely important to establish parameters to distinguish critical fabulation from other types of writing based on documentary research, such as historical fiction. Therefore, from my perspective, fabulation is not an exercise in free speculation: it is a negotiation between the probable and the possible. Fabulation is not a lying fiction; it is based on traces of possibility. In the research context, there are determining facts between the probable and the possible that cannot be ignored. And for fabulation to be credible/believable, it needs to be intimately linked to the context of the events recorded in the research.

In the introduction to the book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman (2021) writes a note about her method. The historian makes use

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of a wide range of archival material to represent or recreate situations or periods, and strives to use words spoken by real people with profiles similar to her characters, through recorded accounts. To do this, she seeks diverse sources, conventional or not—rent collectors' records, research and monographs by sociologists, trial transcripts, police records, inquiries, periodicals, interviews with psychiatrists and psychologists, and advertisements. Hartman emphasizes that she recreates the voices and uses "the words of these young women when possible and inhabit the intimate dimensions of their lives" (2021, p. xiv), asserting that "all the characters and events found in the book are real; none are invented" (2021, p. xvi). Fabulation establishes a commitment to facts and stems from archival research.

In the schools that remained as projects, it is not possible to narrate real events, thus I used fabulation precisely to imagine these schools in operation. However, events external to the schools, related to the country's history and its socio-political issues, were described with historical rigor. However, there is a gray area: a relative, parallel time, which is the possible reaction and relationship of the external world—real events and characters—with the internal world of fabulation—fictional events and characters. I asked myself several questions about these limits: can I imagine fictional speeches from real characters? Can I invent facts external to the schools? Can I ignore real events? Should I imagine them in operation until today? How to make convincing fabulatory writing, but at the same time, not confuse the reader about what is fact and what is speculation?

Regarding invented facts, external to the actual operation of the schools, I needed to imagine circumstances that would allow their implementation. Architect Lina Bo Bardi, who was in charge of two of the analyzed cases, resigned from both educational projects to be implemented by the governments of Bahia and Rio de Janeiro. The governors of both states requested at the time that she reconsidered the decision, and she refused. In the fabulations she had to say yes but not without negotiating her conditions first. One unalterable fact in the fabulations was the existence of the repressive situation of the military dictatorship. Pretending that the dictatorship did not exist or that it was less enduring would be a historical change that would eliminate a determining variable for the non-implementation of the analyzed educational projects. Considering that these projects were radical, experimental, and somehow subversive for the context, I was inspired by the reports of the book *Radical Pedagogies*, by Beatriz Colomina et al. (2022), which collects cases of radical architecture and design schools from the 20th century. The authors assess that radical experiments often have a short life because they test the limits of the discipline (Colomina et al., 2022). They are often implemented in precarious conditions, and end up with significant financial and political restrictions, being dissolved by their members or even incorporated by the institutions they challenged (Colomina et al., 2022, p. 11).

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Due to the aforementioned observation, I delimited that the fabulated stories would have had a short duration, not lasting until today. There is doubt as to whether these schools would have even survived until the end of the dictatorship—it was 20 long years, and other political changes could have ended the initiatives, such as the simple change of governors. So, I chose to circumscribe their writing to a period of time close to the beginning of their implementations, when many of the decisions would still be being made and their structures would still be being tested (and not consolidated).

To bring to light the divergences and struggles of design, development, and coloniality during the analyzed period, it was necessary to raise the debates and forces at play. For this, it was necessary to assume the creation of characters. And just like Hartman (2021), to think about their individualities, feelings, and sensations, avoiding creating personas that could be easily stereotyped and simplified into archetypes.

The gaps in the archives have generated opportunities for imagination, and "it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none" (Hartman, 2008, p. 8). Fabulation should not aim to fill all the voids. Trying to account for the entirety of history is a mistake that puts the narrative at risk. Attempting to provide coordinated answers to all open questions eliminates the complexity of the context and circumstances. A resource that helped me contextualize some fabulations was imagining the discovery of these schools through their own possible archives, as was done in part of the historical research. This resource allowed choosing parts of the history to be revealed and developed, leaving other questions open.

CONSIDERATIONS

We have made here a reflexive critical narrative about the use of fabulation in the field of design history. Although it was used as a methodological tool, it was not the aim of this paper to provide a step-by-step guide on how to implement fabulation as a method. Fictional exercises in design research can serve different purposes, and I propose some possibilities here. The first one, as a critical-creative counter-narrative, allows for the narration of a more realistic scene, aiding in visualizing the forces at play, the negotiations, and the emotions of the characters in the scene, always in dialogue with the archival material. Another way to use fictional narratives would be to practice researching with, rather than researching about, attempting to establish dialogues with people, objects, or places in order to raise questions from affectation (Favret-Saada, 1990). To the people I could not interview because they were no longer alive, I exercised writing fictional letters in an attempt to establish another type of contact. I experimented with narrating how the research process affected me as a researcher, both emotionally and bodily when

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visiting the archives, in a sort of autoethnography. Inspired by critical speculation and design fiction, the what-if questions can be a way of fabulating to think not (necessarily) about future scenarios, but about possibilities that could have occurred in the past. I also envision that fabulation and fiction can be used as a tactic to bring the researcher closer to an audience not accustomed to academic writing. By allowing itself to be more experimental, this type of writing can depart from the writing codes that precisely alienate lay readers and favor the democratization of research and knowledge. Finally, fabulation is a way to bring to discussion subjects absent from historiography, which would be unavailable for analysis and investigation if only traditional, supposedly reliable, and verifiable methods were used. It is a way to negotiate and extend the limits of archives, inserting into historical research what Hartman (2008, p. 11) called the capacities of the subjunctive—the expression of doubts, desires, and possibilities, making design history research more adventurous, and admitting fiction as a constituent part of history. It is a way to locate marginalized stories within colonial archives, and give voice and agency to other narratives.

The three cases I analyzed aimed to create alternative systems and incorporate elements that were denied by modern design. The modernization project represented a new form of colonization for countries subjected to European and American domination (Escobar, 1995). While not aiming to break with the hegemonic colonial order, these cases, through critical and resistant gestures, sought to formulate a design concept that valued and incorporated local knowledge, promoting some autonomy and emancipation from imposed developmental models. In Bahia, the valorization of local craftsmanship and the de-hierarchization between design students and execution students would foster a dialogical relationship (Freire, 1987) in pursuit of genuinely Brazilian industrial products. At Parque Lage, the field of design, closely tied to formal practice, would be considered as a theoretical framework for discussion among the country's intellectuals, essential for fostering a new humanism. At ESDI, the crisis leading to the school's shutdown cast doubt on how the country's industrial reality could align with a curriculum based on Ulmian principles.

As a researcher confronting colonization and daily engaged in decolonizing my own thinking (see the interview with Viveiros de Castro in Barcellos & Lambert, 2012, p. 256), I negotiate a new relationship with the past by reimagining the stories of these schools. Imagining and fabulating these schools in operation is a way to reveal the conflicts between divergent views on design education, power dynamics, and how a colonized country mediates cultural influences from abroad with its own sociocultural base. Narrating and recalling what never came to fruition is to resist what has been consolidated and pacified. It offers a response to what has been established and standardized. It focuses on

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the process rather than the finished product. It embraces the 'what-if', the doubt, the possibility. **D**

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ARTICLE.3

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