

from *A Mathematics of Chaos*

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nswaters*

On August 29, I had returned to the noise and light of my Harlem apartment from three weeks of teaching in the green and quiet of Annandale-On-Hudson. I returned to an apartment where I had had my cable disconnected because I wanted to sustain the cold turkey withdrawal from tv buzz. Recalibrate my alpha brain wave patterns. Reclaim the indeterminacy and non-narrativity of thirty minutes. Reconnect with a less mediated now.

**But the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving [an idea] of everything in tact.
The disaster takes care of everything.**

The Writing of the Disaster, Maurice Blanchot

I cancelled my plans to cancel cable because the storm was barreling down on home—the home where I no longer lived, where I hadn't lived in years, the home to which future I, in old age, planned to return for good, the home I return to several times a year, saying to friends, "I'm flying home." I.

Home (noun).

1. the place where a person, family, or household lives/lived. Past is omni-present and multi-directional.
2. a family or any other group that lives together, or recollects living together, or imagines some day living again together, or buries its dead together.
3. where some body was/is born and/or raised, or feels/believes that he or she belongs.
4. the place where something is most common or indigenous, or where something had its origins—although origins have their own origins, each source its myriad sources.
5. a place where a person or animal can find refuge and safety or live in security. For several years, New Orleans was the murder capital of the country, then it was D.C. Now, I'm not sure. Because of the number of gunshot victims, NOLA was home to the second best trauma center in the nation. So it was the place to be if a body got got by a bullet.
6. an establishment where some body that is in need of care, rest, or medical attention can stay or find help. NOLA was home to Charity Hospital, the second oldest continuously run public hospital in the country. (New York's Bellevue was opened a month earlier).
7. the place where somebody is imagined to dwell after death. (literary) Her homegoing. Going home. Because of wind and water and the indifferent policing of movement and bathroom access, Cousin Butsie died along a highway as the family evacuated Houston. *I can't take this anymore*, she said and collapsed. Because of wind and water, she's buried a six to eight hour drive from the Third Street home she hadn't wanted to leave.
8. the place or point that must be hit in order to score in many games, or that must be reached in order to be safe from attack, (except by *natural* forces as landscaped, except by forces).
9. see home plate.

Home (adverb).

1. at or to the house, household, or country where somebody lives, believes they once lived, believes their progenitors live/d.
2. to the point or desired goal. And there are always counter-desires.
3. to the center or heart of something, or as far as possible into a desired position.

Home (verb).

1. to go back to the house, household, or country where somebody lives, believes s/he once lived, believes her/his progenitors live/d.
2. to return home, especially to fly home accurately (refers to animals and birds).
3. to have a home and live in it (dated).
4. to take or send somebody or something home (dated).
5. to give a home to somebody or something (dated).

The disaster has no single origin, no single moment of birth. Like the wave bruising the shore, it is an unapologetic accretion of uninterrupted motion.

Disaster breaches the lie, the prepositional, the possessive inaccuracies.

Mine? Its? Yours? Theirs?

Ours is hours before behind between beneath beyond

And home is where you are. (Is you are or is you ain't?)

And what [and where], pray tell, is "I" when it can't find you or them?

There is no reaching the disaster (Blanchot).

Homing in on what was happening to home required cable, CNN, internet. I had to see what I couldn't ask

Because all the cellular circuits to my mother were busy, Because we couldn't find my father. Because all the cellular circuits to my sisters were busy, Because all the cellular circuits to 411 were busy, Because all the cellular circuits to 911 were busy, Because all the cellular circuits to Ernest, Willie, Frank, Sterling, Caroline, Rogers, Della, Dorothea, Gwen, my uncles and aunts were busy, Because all the cellular circuits to my cousins Butsie, Olanda, Cathy, Michelle, Barbara, Burnell, Keyetta, Amber, Karen, Terrence, Gwen, Jackie, Sheryl Ann were busy. Scratch Gwen—she had already died, Because Aunt Rine was in a nursing home, and we knew that Karen and her mother hadn't left the city, Because all I knew of blood and kin and stepkin and less were busy, Because all I knew of reaching was insomnia and inundation, Because all I could know was dependent on gut and quiet, Because all I could know was dependent on cables and cords and fiber optics and electronic connections and was collated in the images and voices coming out of a 19" box, Because of the passivity that distance manufactures

(ASIDE: and each image is a calculation/construction of distance between eyes and them)

(ANOTHER ASIDE:

Mother, *you* made him small, it was you who started him;
in *your* sight he was new, over his new eyes, you arched
the friendly world and warded off the world that was alien.
Ah, where are the years when you shielded him just by placing
Your slender form between him and the surging abyss?

“Third Elegy” in *Duino Elegies*, Rainer Maria Rilke)

Because of the passivity that distance manufactures, I begin a letter to Oprah who is everywhere,
who is an image of an everywhere that embraces.

Dear O,

Hurricane Katrina bears down on the coast, down on the place I call home, and perhaps that's
what makes procrastination impossible at this moment. I am well aware of the possibilities, aware
of what water and wind can do. Aware of the threat that has been held at bay by prayer, by
voodoo, by gulf streams, by marshes and coastlines and wetlands, by damn luck. I have over the
past year and a half fantasized about writing to you about my mother. And now the water is rising,
and this woman who has worked so hard all of her life and has so little material comfort stands to
lose everything that she does have. There's so little rest for the weary.

I had planned on writing to you because of a daughter's obvious love and affection for her mother.
And because of what I can't do...

(ASIDE: And what does *can't* contain? Cordon off?)

Containment was/is one of my hometown's central concerns. Some of the dead, to keep them dry and from contaminating the living, were/are buried above ground in stone crypts that one as an almost native, without seeming to notice, walks easily among. (The poorer were/are buried in the too-wet dirt with the knowledge that water rises and can, over time, eat through everything. To die and then drown.) It is a complicated matter, the attempt to contain the thing that defines you. In the "Big Easy" (a name suggested by the general attitude of the city's inhabitants and the ease with which musicians could find gigs), an elaborate system of interconnected man-made levees stretch along the river and the lakefront, across the swamps and along the waterways. Canals and pumping stations like veins and hearts moved the water through. So although New Orleans was built because of its proximity to the Mississippi river, the city's survival and growth was always dependent on containing and on protecting itself against the very thing that called it into being.

(ASIDE: And what of writing? Inscribing? A similar process of construction and resistance.)

This idea of containment is essential to the broad cultural function of New Orleans in pre, during, and post Katrina America. Referred to as *Isle d'Orleans* by early French settlers, the geographic description works as a visual analog for how the site of New Orleans exists/operates (for the non-native) in relation to other U. S. cultural spaces. For many, New Orleans has long been a social fantasy embodied in what Mike Davis refers to as "tourist bubbles—historical districts, entertainment precincts, malls, and other variations on theme parks—that are partitioned off from the rest of the city" (392). It is no surprise that most tourist encounters with native inhabitants occurs through inhabitants' capacities as waiters, bus or taxi drivers, bellhops, cooks, and other tourist-industry professions. New Orleans is marketed as a cultural island where the adventurous tourist can go to get his/her urban safari on.

(ASIDE: Avoid the dangerous natives in their struggles for survival. Shoot, if in fear of death by drowning they attempt to cross into neighboring Gretna. *You're not gonna have here like you have New Orleans.* And to have *is* to hold.)

(ASIDE DEUX: Note the double-decker bus tours through Harlem. I wave. Dream of running around on random corners with a spear to make the spectacle my own. However, I suspect

that this may not be read as respectable. The unrespectable spectacle—my mother would roundly disapprove and laugh. Concern: Would my gentle play be mistaken for hostility? (Gunplay? An undignified beatdown? Memorex'd? Or Memorized?) Perhaps, if there were a group of us who registered to perform, that would alleviate fear. Spook and Word (legal-eyes'd.)

(ASIDE TROIS: Note which near New Orleans parishes pimp themselves as the *new New Orleans*. And new is still the modernist better. And pimping is still a thumping on the chest. Like ole King Kong. A self-assertion and (re)assurance.)

(ASIDE ENFANT:

Display Dis'play of bodies and bags. Display Di'splay of wasses and wills.

The native is the attraction. The native is the threat.

The thrill that goes will come again if we cordon off our little bete
noire)

In language In landscape Inscape In language In landscape Inscape
In

Only after taking in my mother landscape (along with the voices of that place)—
a girl who looks like her father is born for luck, alcohol, Algiers, alligator, Amazing Grace, Amelia, Angola, Atchafalaya, Aunt Noni, Aunt Sister, Azerine, back a town, bayou, because her daddy died or left, because the first-born baby died, beignets, bitch, Butsie, café au lait, Calliope projects, Canal St., Cardella, cast iron, catching coconuts, catching sense, cayenne, Clio St., cockroaches, “comb them kitchens,” Congo Square, cornbread, courtyard, cousins, CPT, crawfish, creole, dark-skinned, daughters, dead-end, Desire projects, desire unmet is desire multiplied, dirty rice, Dorothy, Elysian Fields, Erato, etouffe, Euterpe, Ezekiel, Father John’s, file, first-born, first-born done died, fleur de lys, flood, flood, flood, “for true?” front porch, Galvez, Gerttown, “gimme some,” “girl, gimme got shot,” “git up in here,” “God don’t like ugly,” good hair, gran’ma, grandpa done lost his mind, grief grown rooted and wild, hard-headed, her mouth don’t know no Sunday, high yellow, holy ghost, hoodoo, “how sweet the sound,” “how ya’ll doin’?” “how ya mama and ‘nem?” “I ain’t playin’ wit chou no,” jambalaya, jazz, jumpback, jumprope, Katie, kickback, kick your ass, kitchens, kitchens on your neck, knick-knacks, kool-aid, lagniappe, lakefront, levee, light-skinned, lighter than a paper bag, Louis, St. Louis, Louis XIV, Ma Belle, ma dere, magnolias, make groceries, Martin Luther King Blvd., Melpomene projects, memory, mental ward, Mississippi, Mississippi bridge, Mississippi river, Miss Myrtle, Miss Tit, Moreal, morning, mosquitoes, mourning, mudbugs, muffleletta, nappy-headed, neckbone, neutral ground, nutria rats, “nobody likes a bone but a dog,” NOPD, not luck enough to keep a body strong, okra gumbo, out front of town, oysters, pecans, pickled pigs’ lips, piss po’, po’ boys, porch monkeys, potholes, quadroons, quarter, quiet, rain, rain through the living room windows, red beans, red bone, Rev. Profit, rice, river, river, river, roux, rue, Saints, sady, sassafras, Satchmo, screendoor, semen, seventh ward, snowballs, “speak the word to me,” spit on the broom to stay out of jail, St. Charles Ave., Stronger Hope Baptist Church, superdome, swamp, tambourine, Tchopitoulas, tender-headed, tender-hearted, Terpsichore, thought, “throw me somethin’ Mister,” Tippitina’s, “trouble don’t last always,” uppity, vagina, Virginia, voodoo, wade in the water, water, wishes go the way of sweepstakes, “where y’at?” “where you from?” woman, wrought iron, “yo maw, yo paw, yo greasy, greasy gran’ma,” “you ain’t nothin’,” “you thought like Aunt Hannah who thought shit was a banana,” Xavier, Zataran’s, Zulu, zydeco, Amen

—was speech possible.

Only after taking in my mother landscape was speech possible.

At first there was/is mimicry. Language as mirror and echo.

In Tongues

(for Auntie Jeanette)

1.

Because you haven't spoken
in so long, the tongue stumbles and stutters,
sticks to the roof and floor as if the mouth were just
a house in which it could stagger like a body unto itself.

You once loved a man so tall
sometimes you stood on a chair to kiss him.

2.

What to say when one says,
"You're sooo musical," takes your stuttering for scattling,
takes your stagger for strutting,
takes your try and tried again for willful/playful deviation?

It makes you wanna not holla
silence to miss perception's face.

3.

It ain't even morning or early,
though the sun-up says "day," and you been
staggering lange Zeit gegen a certain
breathless stillness that we can't but call death.

Though stillness suggests a possibility
of less than dead, of move, of still be.

4.

How that one calling your tryin'
music, calling you sayin' entertaining, thinks
there's no then that we, (who den dat we?), remember/
trace in our permutations of say?

What mastadonic presumptions precede and
follow each word, each be, each bitter being?

5.

These yawns into which we enter as into a harbor—
Come. Go. Don't. say the vocal oceans which usher
each us, so unlike any ship steered or steering into.
This is a habit of place and of placing a body.

Which choruses of limbs and wanting, of limp
linger in each syllabic foot tapping its chronic codes.

from *Monkey Talk*

This transcription is a portion of the first phone conversation between poet Queen Kong and her white benefactor, Carl Denham, an important philanthropist who made his money in film stock and technology and was committed to supporting a black writer from the South, committed to presenting one to a wider poetry world. We have records of this conversation because of F.B.I wiretaps and the Freedom of Information Act. Included here are commentaries and notes by Agent Jack Driscoll, who was responsible for keeping an eye on Denham and who wrote the national bestseller, *Treachery at Home: a Woman Named Kong*, and by Sojourner Williams, the young scholar, who acquired the transcriptions and notes for her as yet unfinished dissertation on Kong's evolving poetics.

Carl Denham

. . . I knew it. Such a bald-faced lie. There's no south in your talk. There's no way that you're . . .

Queen Kong

But I *am* from New....

Carl Denham

Please. How much of a fool do you take me for? Quit monkeying around. I heard someone there call you Yankee.¹ How could you have lied to *me*? I knew that the way you talk would be a problem. But *Yankee* no less? I knew it.

Queen Kong

I wouldn't. I didn't. Look, that happens sometimes on holidays. After lots of food and talk, my relatives taunt me with Yankee. Cause of how I talk. Despite the failure of my tongue to strictly follow certain Southern codes of speech, I am a Southerner, Carl.²

Carl Denham

Are you even black?³ [He seems to be eating as he's talking.]

Queen Kong

Well, of course. Look, what do I have to do to convince you? I am a prod. . .

Carl Denham

I read what you wrote: "a product of the flatland of N'Awlins⁴—that dike enclosed fabrication that's caught between the Mississippi River, the Gulf of Mexico and Lake Pontchartrain—three

¹ Williams: An odd but not uncommon joke among black Southerners who never refer to themselves or to each other as Confederates. They identify themselves with the place but not with the place's agenda.

² Driscoll: Kong readily lies in order to achieve her goals. She neglects to mention that she was born in Bloomington, Illinois.

Williams: Kong lived in Bloomington for approximately 3 months. What of that time could she possibly have remembered/known? Certainly her family may have told her something about those first months. About the small family's train ride to New Orleans. Weather records for the time indicate that a major blizzard occurred right around the time of her birth. It seems to me that both sets of information would have had similar, rather fuzzy origins for her.

³ Driscoll: Subject *is* articulate and soft-spoken.

Williams: What did he expect? "In what place and by what means does blackness achieve its substance?" (Baker 77)

⁴ Driscoll: New Orleans, Louisiana.

Williams: The Big Easy; the Crescent City

tongues which dictate the wills and ways of the city.”⁵ You’re going to have to give me something more than that. Authenticity’s real important here. I’m going out on a limb. It’s has to be for something real.⁶

Queen Kong
You can ask my mother.

Carl Denham
Like she’s going to tell...

Background voices:

Female one: So now you want me to talk to white folks after demanding quiet?

Female two (probably Kong), voice muffled: Shh, shh. He doesn’t believe I’m a black Southerner.

Female one: humph.

Queen Kong
Look, she doesn’t want to talk to you. She’s somewhat hostile. Doesn’t that tell you something?

Carl Denham
Well I can understand her position. But tell her that I’m trying to *help* you.

Queen Kong
I can tell you a few stories about growing up po’ in this city. Too po’ to afford the o and the r. About all the codes of behavior, dress, address, and desire that I learned. As a child: speak when spoken to; Yes ma’am, No, sir. No white after Labor Day. As an adolescent: Boys who go to private Catholic schools are desirable⁷ and from good families. If you’re light, you’re all right; if you’re brown stick around; if you’re black step back.

◊ Driscoll: In conversation after conversation, and in poem after poem, Kong expresses a rather deviant interest in tongues. The bureau’s psychological profile suggests that this interest is related to the subject’s general paranoia about what others are saying about her and doing to her behind her back and about who or what is keeping an eye on her. Her frequent, somewhat mystifying tendency of telling callers “watch your mouth” suggests an inordinate level of suspicion. Her paranoia concerns the bureau. Her paranoia is also a reflection of repressed homoerotic tendencies.

◊ Williams: Paranoia: A mental disorder characterized by systematized delusions and the projection of personal conflicts, which are ascribed to the supposed hostility of others, sometimes progressing to disturbances of consciousness and aggressive acts believed to be performed in self-defense or as a mission. Baseless or excessive suspicion of the motives of others. Who’s paranoid here? Per Richard Rorty: “Most reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it.” Yet we put our faith in our descriptions.

Kong does seem to have been obsessed with “tongues”: talking in tongues, tasting beef tongues, tongues tattling, tongue depressors. In the transcripts of several conversations, we learn of Kong’s suspicion that someone is eavesdropping. In the fifty-two conversations I reviewed, she says “watch your mouth” at least two hundred and four times. I interviewed Kong’s Cousin B., who talks of preparing beef-tongue stew each time Kong visited home so that Kong could stare at “the pot of tongues floating in brown broth.” According to B., a first cousin twice removed, Kong never “ate the stuff as far as I know.” In one essay, Kong describes being frightened by her ordinarily composed Aunt D.’s transformation into a talking-in-tongues diva. She also discusses her peculiar attachment to Mama H., one of the designated translators of *tongues*. In that essay, “To Taste and to Tell,” Kong writes, “Although we may not find truth in Mama H.’s translations, we do find certainty. And more often than not, certainty matters even more than truth” (27).

◊ Driscoll: Denham’s parents were founding members of New York’s Progressive Labor Party. Although as an adult Denham has at no time been an active member of the party, he has maintained contact with individuals who are active participants.

◊ Williams: This is his radical act?

◊ Driscoll: We know that the city’s archdiocese is pretty strict and has a special way with training and helping these people become productive citizens.

Carl Denham
I'm listening.

Queen Kong

The houses that the St. Charles Ave. streetcars pass house the “good” families. I always thought (when I imagined it at all) that my only entrée might be with my Uncle R.’s landscaping work (“go in, if at all, through the side or back”) or as a maid (same kind of thing). I ended up going to college at Tulane⁸, which is across the street from those houses. By my senior year, I was dating a nice Catholic boy.⁹

Carl Denham
Was he black?

Queen Kong

Um, huh.¹⁰ But he was cool. He was friends with a young women who lived in one of the St. Charles homes, who, after several years of resistance, agreed to be presented to polite N’Awlins society. As a significant other, I was invited to the debutante party. We all ate carefully and chatted politely. I nodded “thank you” far too effusively to the black and uniformed waiters and attendants. There were no “others” in their numbers, and I was an only on the receiving end of their service I hoped that my nods communicated “I know that I’m here by some fluke. I joked with my boyfriend that maybe I belonged in the kitchen. “But *I* do all the dishes,” he shot back. Which was true. He was from a good Catholic family and had taken much more kindly to his training than I had.¹¹ I am from a Southern Baptist clan for whom training is just a test of one’s

Williams: The nuns and priest were (are) strict (especially) with their young black charges. Without the appropriate training, what might they become? [In New York, “a nun who teaches second grade at an elite upper East Side Catholic school ... scrawled ‘like a monkey!’ under the word ‘handsome,’ which [Kingsley Braggs, 7] had written to describe himself.” The young boy went home and asked his mother to cut his curly hair and to shave his arms. The priest principal defended his Catholic colleague, saying “I don’t think it’s fair to take this remark totally out of context and imagine that the teacher is standing with the Ku Klux Klan hurling racist remarks at children. It was meant in a very affectionate way.”] The emphasis for Kong and in N.O. culture was, like elsewhere, on middle class aspirations: *private* before Catholic. This tidbit reflects an early though brief acceptance by Kong of “Integrationist Poetics” — a belief that “social indicators [will] signal democratic pluralism in American life” and letters (Baker 77). Their (legal/documentary) ability to pay if they want is reflective of the possibility/ a movement towards an undifferentiated AMERICAN kind of play. [In response to the monkey incident, a mother wrote a letter to the newspaper that carried the story. In the letter she explained that she calls her beautiful blond and blue-eyed boy “a little monkey. It doesn’t hurt him,” she explains. “People should just lighten up.”] [See the continuing market for bleaching creams and spot removers.] “If you act “black” (on the page or in the room) (or think that beyond our specific historical experiences, there are no ideals of truth or meaning for us to achieve), then step back (or into the blackground). See melting pot metaphor, and forget the literary and historical tendency to identify blacks with ape-like creatures.

† Driscoll: At the time of Kong’s attendance, infiltration of this illustrious college by questionable elements was minimal at most.

Williams: Two lane or To lane was established, more or less, in 1884. For years one of Tulane’s illustrious fraternities held an annual parade through the campus. The brothers dressed in black face. The tradition ended the year they wore African-American Congress of Tulane t-shirts. According to Kong, in her essay “Aping, “the brothers’ mistake wasn’t the black face, but rather wearing those t-shirts. They made the relevance of tradition to contemporary life far too explicit. It is far more effective to “Keep ‘em [blacks] guessing, and keep it theoretical. One must leave room to argue for the narrative that will keep one kind and important.” In one journal entry, Kong quotes James Snead, “Historical ambiguity requires some sense of transhistorical certainty” (3).

† Driscoll: F.C.S. A young man from a liberal home in Newton, MA with occasional delinquent tendencies.

‡ Driscoll: No.

Williams: Was that really necessary? As if she were incoherent.

‡ Williams: F.C.S. seems to have been important to Kong. Her first journal entry describes her questioning his motives for pursuing her: “A walk on the wild side?” she writes. A later entry about him tells the story of him hiding on the

resistance, and a kind of provocation. At some point during the evening, the mother of the debutante was making the rounds again—greeting and welcoming and thanking. When she reached us, she turned to me and smiled broadly and said, “Why hello! We met last spring in Paris, didn’t we?” “No, we didn’t,” I responded flatly.¹² “Oh,” she pursed her lips and pushed on, thanking us for coming. Once she was gone, I turned to my good boyfriend and whispered, “Didn’t we meet last spring in Paris, dahling?” I held up my hand for him to kiss. He kissed me. “You did meet her in Paris. You were visiting me.” He sighed and shook his head.

Carl Denham

(Laughs) An interesting story. And another lie.

Queen Kong

Not really. It’s all about where you see it from.

Carl Denham

You did lie about not having met her.

Queen Kong

Nah, I just forgot. Or maybe I remembered too much. I felt like I was being asked to confirm her ideas about the Order of things. And I couldn’t be a part of that. And I wasn’t willing to be the exceptional other eaten with the pate.

Carl Denham

Please. You thought of all that in the moment between “hello, didn’t we” and “no”?

Queen Kong

I suppose. Probably not. Maybe I just saw the other behind the other.¹³

Carl Denham

What’s that got to do with anything? I mean...

Queen Kong

(Voice directed away from the receiver) Okay, all right.

I got to go. Do you believe me, though? That I am who I say I am?

Carl Denham

rooftop of a building and throwing eggs at the previously mentioned black-faced fraternity. Apparently he told her this story as he was teaching her to throw snowballs at monuments. Another journal entry describes a first meeting with F.C.S.’s friend from home who, that evening, drew a caricature of Kong as a cute monkey.

¹² Driscoll: Another bald-faced lie. We observed the subject’s encounter with this woman in the lobby of a Paris dormitory. Her refusal to acknowledge that encounter reflects unreasonable hostility.

Williams: Unreasonable? In a journal entry about the evening, Kong writes, “I would not transcend the race, the class, the “i”-dentifications (strong protective teeth), would not evolve under the tutelage of her gaze. It’s all about where you’re standing when you see it. We had not only not met in Paris, we had not met in New Orleans.”

¹³ Driscoll: Again the subject deflects from the truth.

Williams: In her last essay “Seams,” Kong writes, “Had Eve been an African-American woman, although she might have made the same choice, she would have seen where the snake was coming from. Blackness requires the ability to not only understand multiple perspectives, but also to “see” from multiple vantage points. This is the only way one ducks the missiles aimed at one’s head. Improvisation, jazz, crazy quilts are all about that, stitching together time, patterns. All improvisers are seamstresses. All writers are seaming and seeming things together.

Well, I still want to see you.

Queen Kong
I'll give you a call tomorrow.¹⁴

¹⁴ Driscoll: Subject's relationship to Carl Denham continued over the next dozen years or so.
Williams: From Kong's essay "Seams," "Our suspicions stem from what we get from stitching—there is no whole cloth in which we can wrap our whole selves. So we just stitch here-scrap together."

