

# Mr. Seale Goes to Antioch

*by Gary Percesepe*

9:30 AM, April 27, 2002. Bobby Seale leans into you when he speaks. He assumes the interviewee's position, which he understands as close, then closer. Still fit at 65, he is wearing a black shirt with a lavender tie, gray sports jacket, topped with his trademark black beret, on which is inscribed, "Seize The Time," a reference to the title of his 1970 history of the Black Panther Party (still in print) and what he hopes will be the subject of Spike Lee's new movie. He is talking fast-- faster, you think, than you have ever heard anyone talk in Ohio. His words crash over you in cascading waves, making you wise up and put down the pen. In the world he inhabits there are two kinds of people, those who know what time it is and those who don't. "You and I know the world is round," he is saying. "Some people believe the world is flat. What you want is, to have your ideas and beliefs and values and understandings line up with reality."

Former Chairman, Surviving Founder and National Organizer of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, Bobby Seale was born in Dallas Texas in 1936. (Huey P. Newton, Co-Founder and Minister of Defense, was gunned down by a young drug dealer on August 29, 1989.) He grew up in Oakland and Berkeley, California, where he worked as a carpenter, stand-up comedian, jazz drummer, draftsman, and mechanic. He later joined the United States Air Force to become a structural repairman on high performance aircraft. At Merritt College in 1962 he was first introduced to his African-American people's history of struggle. Profoundly influenced by Malcolm X, in 1963 Seale began his career as a community organizer through the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). The death of Malcolm X radicalized him. He dedicated his life to, in his words, "Help turn this backward racist world around, to make some human sense."

He has come to Yellow Springs, Ohio—a leafy village east of Dayton and south of Springfield-- to carry his message of "the

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continuing human liberation struggle" to the 2002 graduating class of Antioch College, at the invitation of the students.

Student selection of the commencement speaker is an Antioch tradition. In June 1965 the speaker was Nobel Peace Prize winner Martin Luther King, Jr., who arrived in the village amid death threats. A few years ago Michael Moore—the author of *Downsize This!* and *Stupid White Men*, and the creator and star of the memorable film *Roger and Me*—played to laughs in the cathedral of trees that ring a grassy mound just behind the back stairs of the North Residence Hall (built in 1853 and one of three original buildings still standing on campus), where the Antioch commencement ceremony takes place each year.

Two years ago there weren't many laughs. Antioch students selected Mumia Abu-Jamel, the award-winning Pennsylvania journalist who has been on death row since 1982, sentenced (some believe wrongfully, some, justly) for the shooting of police officer Danny Faulkner. Mumia Abu-Jamel's case is currently on appeal before the Federal District Court in Philadelphia. His fight for a new trial has won the support of individuals and organizations around the world, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, The European Parliament, Alice Walker, Paul Newman, Maya Angelou, Sister Helen Prejean, Danny Glover, and Amnesty International. His selection set off a firestorm of criticism; a group led by the articulate and determined widow of the slain police officer arrived in Yellow Springs to protest Mumia's taped address. Faced with the potential for violence (inflammatory and hate-filled emails had been coming into Antioch by the hundreds per day), the Antioch/Yellow Springs community mobilized in an organized witness for peace. Yellow T- Shirts bearing the simple message "Yellow Springs Host." were printed up and distributed to some 100 community volunteers. A forum was organized for the protesters and the Mumia supporters. All sides were invited to be heard. On commencement day the Mumia tape was played. No violence, peaceful protest. It was a lesson in participatory democracy of the kind that Antioch prides itself on, for anyone who might have been paying attention,

who had that kind of attention span; for those willing to pick up the remote and click past Bill O'Reilly, to the news behind the news. Few did.

What remains is the place name. Antioch. Yellow Springs. The place that was turned into a Media Flying Circus several years ago when it instituted Something Completely Different: A Sexual Offense Prevention Policy (SOPP) that was the butt of jokes around the country. Students agreeing to discuss their intentions, getting consent for each escalation in sexual intimacy? Yikes! "Can I touch you here? How about there?" Another fifteen minutes of fame; national news media AND Saturday Night Live. Lost in the tee hees was the fact that the policy seems to be working. Again, it was student-initiated, not imposed by the administration. At Antioch, even sex is viewed as educational, especially sex. Lost in the news is the fact that other colleges and universities have used the Antioch model in revising their own campus policies. No joke.

9:35 A.M. Bobby Seale tells you about his career in stand-up. He got his start in L.A. one night when he was a jazz drummer. Between sets someone handed him the mic and he discovered he could make people laugh by doing his imitation of Chester and Miss Kitty on Gunsmoke. Telling this story to you now, leaning in closer and laughing, shaking his head at the thought of those days, it seems hard to recall the Bobby Seale of 1965, on the day of Malcolm X's death.. On the first page of *Seize the Time*, Seale writes, "When Malcolm X was killed in 1965, I ran down the street. I went to my mother's house, and I got six loose bricks from the garden. I got to the corner, and broke the motherfuckers in half. I wanted to have the most shots that I could have, this very same day Malcolm was killed. Every time I saw a paddy roll by in a car, I picked up one of the half-bricks, and threw it at the motherfuckers. I threw about half the bricks, and then I cried like a baby. I was righteously crying. I was pissed off and mad. Every paddy I'd see, whop! I'd throw a brick, and it would hit the cars, and zoom! They're driving down the street, and I'm throwing bricks for a motherfucker. I thought that was all I could do. I was ready to die that day."

One day at Berkeley Bobby Seale gave a speech. He recited Ronald Stones' poem "My Soul Trusted Uncle Sammy," an improbable and funny antiwar poem that urged blacks to refuse military service until they had equal rights. He was confronted by an undercover police officer for profanity and obstructing the sidewalk. Seale claimed that the officer never showed a badge. A struggle ensued. A second fight broke out between Huey Newton and another police officer. Both Seale and Newton were arrested and charged with assault.

Seale and Newton wrote out a ten point program even before they had a name for their organization. They wrote it in the "War on Poverty" office in Oakland. Point Number One had to do with power. Newton believed that power is the ability to define a phenomenon, then to act in a desired manner. Point Two had to do with shelter and decent housing for human beings. Point Three called for full employment, Point Four decent education and true history. Point Five called for an end to the robbery of the black community through disinvestment in the core city. Point Six (the first Point that the pair wrote) called for exemption for blacks from military service. Point Seven was a demand for the end of police brutality and the murder of black folks. Points Eight and Nine called for retrial of blacks convicted by all white juries and full constitutional rights, and Point Ten was a summary demand for land, bread, housing, clothing, justice and peace.

Few remember that Seale was employed by the city when the party was founded. One day Seale received in the mail a document from the Mississippi Lowndes County Freedom Organization that had a logo of a charging panther. In an interview with CNN, Seale remembers Huey Newton saying something like, "You know the nature of a panther is that if you it into a corner he will try to go left to get out of your way. And if you keep him there then he is going to go right to get out of your way. And if you keep oppressing him and pushing him into the corner, sooner or later that panther is going to come out of that corner to try to wipe out whoever's oppressing it in the corner." So Bobby says something like, "Huey, that's just like us,

that's just like black people. So this is really the way we wound up naming our organization the Black Panther Party. Our position was: If you don't attack us, there won't be any violence; [but] if you bring violence to us, we will defend ourselves."

The law at the time permitted people to carry unconcealed firearms. Under Newton and Seale's leadership, the Black Panthers Party for Self Defense members carried shotguns and became watchdogs in their communities. It was, in its way, an answer to Plato's question in the Republic, "Who will guard the guardians?" The Black Panther movement, which at its height had more than 5,000 members nationwide, also provided free breakfasts for children, health care, and other community service programs.

The Black Panthers were a kind of national Rorschach test in the 1960s and 70s. They were seen as folk heroes by some, as troublemakers and worse by others. What is not a matter of opinion is the sad fact that the ensuing altercations with police became gun battles. 29 Black Panthers and 14 police officers were killed.

In 1970-71 Bobby Seale was tried for the torture-murder of former Panther Alex Rackley, who was suspected of being a police informant. That trial ended in a hung jury, and afterward, Seale moderated his more militant views. He left the Panthers altogether in 1974.

Today, Seale tells you, ten Panthers are still in jail. They will never get out. It was, Seale says, a tragedy for both sides.

9:45 A.M. Bobby Seale is telling you about his cookbook, Barbeque'N With Bobby. The cookbook—its subtitle is Righteous Down-Home Barbeque Recipes by Bobby Seale-- published by Ten Speed Press in Berkeley in 1988, is no longer in print. When you tell him that you found a copy via one of Amazon.com's used book suppliers, and that it cost you \$99.00, Bobby brightens. He tells you he has about ten copies of the cook book squirreled away. He's going to put them up for sale when he gets home, he says, raise some quick cash. Of course, this is why he wrote the cookbook in the first place, he says, to raise money for one of his youth organizations in

Oakland. It was Jerry Rubin who was the first to suggest that he write a cookbook, back when they were political prisoners in 1969 during the Great Chicago 8 Conspiracy Trial. Not surprisingly, Seale begins the cookbook with a cultural etymology of the word itself, tracing the word itself back to the Taino people of the Bahamas, who pronounced it "ba ba coa." Seale insists that barbecue is a misspelling that no self-respecting black cook would use. "Most restaurants whose signs lacked the suffix que seemed to be void of that ever pervasive down-home hickory-smoked aroma which would literally carry for blocks."

In the Acknowledgements to *Barbeque'N With Bobby*, Seale pays tribute to all the former Black Panther Party members who helped to feed the needy, register people to vote, preserve the health of the people, and put their lives on the line for their love of the community. It was a time, he says, when many Black Panther Party central committee meetings had to be held in the headquarters office kitchen. Why? "Because many times, as chairman and key organizer I would happen to be smothering some meat or stewing a gigantic vat of my hickory chili to feed the daily hard-working party members."

On the back cover of the cookbook Bobby Seale writes, "There was a time when 20 million liberals and left radicals across the country were saying, 'Free Bobby Seale.' Now they've grown up and have their own barbeque grills and pits in their backyard. This is an American pastime. I love it. Barbequeing [or Bobby-que'n, as he calls it elsewhere in the book] can change a grumpy attitude to a pleasant kind of serenity."

In 1969, imprisoned with Jerry Rubin, Tom Hayden, Rennie Davis, and the rest of the "Chicago Eight," things were not so serene. Arrested for disrupting the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, during his trial Seale was bound, gagged, and strapped to his chair. While in jail, incarcerated for two years while entangled in courtroom battles), Seale wrote *Seize the Time*. Eventually all political charges were dismissed or thrown out of court. Today,

Bobby Seale acts as the Community Liaison with the Department of African —American Studies, Temple University, in Philadelphia.

10 A.M. The commencement begins with a processional. John Rinehart, Professor of Music, plays Beethoven's Adagio Cantabile from the "Pathetique," on a small electric piano. It is very cold outside. The students walk past the steps of North Hall to cheers from the fifty or so people seated on the steps, on the landing, and in trees. Informal dress is a hallmark of the Antioch commencement. The first student in line, a theatre major named Nicolas Shawn Ruley, is dressed in black plastic vinyl pants, platform heels, and a feathery black top that sets off the tattoos on his neck quite nicely, and appears to be on loan from Auntie Mame. One young woman wears on her head what appears to be a set of pink bunny ears. Some of the students are wearing coats. The students walk by singly or in pairs; three women walk in together, holding hands. They are led by Antioch's president of three months, Joan Straumanis, a 1957 alum. She wears a smart business suit. There are no caps or gowns at Antioch, no valedictorian or salutatorian, no class rankings, no grades. In lieu of grades, professors write evaluative paragraphs on student work; they are measured against themselves-- their capacity, growth and potential-- rather than against each other.

Straumanis mentions that this is Antioch's 150th year. There is warm applause for the faculty, administration, and the Chair of the Board of Trustees, Robert Krinsky. There are at least two former Antioch presidents in the audience, including Straumanis' immediate predecessor Bob Devine, who has remained at the college as a tenured faculty member after stepping down from the presidency, and will speak later in the ceremony at the invitation of the students. She introduces Bobby Seale, who half-rises out of his chair and waves to the crowd of some 400 people.

Straumanis asks for a moment of silence in memory of Emily Eagan and Emily Howell, two students who would have graduated on this day had they not been murdered in Costa Rica. The two young women were in Costa Rica on their "co-op" — a unique

Antioch work-study program required of all students-- when they were attacked and killed by three men. Believing that poverty is the root cause of the problems that troubled their daughter's attackers, the family of Emily Howell has set up a scholarship program for Costa Rican youth. This is not mentioned by the president. A simple silence is observed.

Robert Krinsky invokes the memory of Horace Mann, the founder of Antioch and its first president (1853-59), who, in his first commencement address famously implored graduates to be ashamed to die unless they had won some victory for mankind. The progressivism of Horace Mann, combined with his deep idealism, lives on at Antioch and appears at times to be a heavy burden, best borne with humor. Krinsky draws a few laughs with his riff on Mann, "Be ashamed to live unless you are winning some victory for mankind, and if you die...Oh well."

10:27 A.M. Bobby Seale takes the podium to a standing ovation. He begins by thanking the students for bringing him out here to the country...in Ohio (laughter). He tells them that some folk still think the earth is flat, including his Aunt Velma, a Church Woman who once dragged him to the ocean, telling him to look out and see how flat things were. That round earth stuff ain't nothing but the devil, Aunt Velma said. At twelve years of age, Bobby Seale knew better. Aunt Velma wanted to know, was he saved? Sure, Bobby thought, I'm saved, I'm being saved every day from believing myopic stuff like that. He was deeply moved when he heard Martin Luther King speak at the Oakland Auditorium in 1962. King exhorted his audience to support the boycott against companies that discriminated against blacks, including Wonder Bread, telling the crowd that "we want to make Wonder Bread wonder where the money went." When he said that, Seale recalls, 7,000 people hit the floor. The key thing to remember is that you have to align your beliefs, your values, and your understandings to reality. This, he says, is what the Black Panther Party was trying to do all those years ago. He quotes the Ronald Stone poem from memory, swaying and dancing at the podium, clearly enjoying himself. The crowd roars. He tells them

that he and Huey Newton attached the last two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence to the end of the Party's Ten Point Program, again, rapping these famous paragraphs by heart and giving them a Bobby Seale flavor. He is happy to be here at 65 years of age, he says, to inspire you to make these connections, like the sun, moon, and planets are connected, to make connections among all peoples in the ongoing homo sapien human being liberation struggle. I am happy for you, he says again. Some of you, he says, are going to give a commencement address one day.

As predictions of the future go, this one certainly seems safe. For such a tiny school (current enrollment is about 650 and sliding; today there are 88 graduates listed on the program, with a significant number of them finishing coursework this summer) Antioch graduates have done remarkably well. To name a few:

"Twilight Zone" creator Rod Serling

Mark Strand, Poet Laureate of the United States, 1990

Award winning children's book author Virginia Hamilton

Playwright Herb Gardner

Harvard scientist Stephen Jay Gould

Clifford Gertz (appointed to Einstein's chair at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton)

New Yorker cartoonist Ed Fisher

U.S. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton

Judge A. Leon Higginbotham

10:50 A.M. The president recognizes two retiring faculty, both of whom offer remarks. Hazel Latson, retiring professor of education, delivers a brief history of Antioch which is an emotional as well as a chronological journey. Stephen Schwerner offers his thoughts on "What I Learned At Antioch." A former student, he came back to Antioch in 1976 as Dean of Students, "his fantasy job." (Later, the president will chime in, "And that position is open now! The crowd, especially the rowdy contingent seated on the North Hall steps, calls out names of candidates, ever helpful. The president chuckles lightly and keeps the program moving.) He observes that in order to argue

with someone you have to know their position at least as well as you know your own." A lot of arguing goes on at Antioch. Students and staff have a "love hate" relationship with the college, Schwerner says. The finely honed debating and critical thinking skills are employed daily on the institution closest to hand: Antioch. It is the place you love to hate, Schwerner states, but it is also the place you will miss and cannot imagine yourself without.

As Schwerner offers these reflections you cannot help but wonder what is going through the minds and hearts of the three ex-Antioch presidents and university chancellors in the audience, at least two of whom were forced out by the Board of Trustees, as well as what might be transpiring within Straumanis herself, who was faced with an organized student protest this month, when concerned students with a variety of grievances left their dorms and took to their tents, creating a tent city on the Main Lawn of the Antioch College campus. Beginning on April 2, after the college's spring break, students began pitching their tents; they were joined by the college's community government budget manager Chad Johnston. The number of tents ranged from 14 to about 20. The creation of the tent city seemed a spontaneous event, according to a story in the Antioch Record, arising from a variety of forces that range from the anticipation of spring to protest over several recent college decisions. While the decisions cover a variety of issues, they have as a common thread the perception by students that they have been left out of the decision-making process. In a public statement, the "in-tent" group wrote, "The campout on the Main Lawn at Antioch College represents a number of intersecting issues and concerns that affect our community. These include, but are not limited to, the recent layoffs as a result of the administrative consolidation among the Yellow Springs campuses of Antioch University, including worries about adherence to our affirmative action policy, the undermining of our tradition of self-governance, a lack of student, staff, faculty and administrative voice in decisions affecting our campus, local programming cuts at WYSO, mold problems in several

dormitories and the recent movement away from greening our campus."

Many of the students' grievances seem to stem from the process surrounding last fall's budget crisis, during which the university Board of Trustees mandated that the college cut \$1.8 million from its current budget. While the trustees accepted recommendations from a committee of faculty, staff and students, some students believed that the resulting changes took place without sufficient community input.

According to the Record, some believe that the root of students' grievances with the decision-making process was the lack of leadership in the college from September, when former President Bob Devine resigned, to February, when Straumanis stepped in as president. Although Jim Hall, former Antioch University chancellor, served as acting president for the college during that time, the college was essentially without an advocate that understood its normal processes. (The relationship between Antioch College, in Yellow Springs—the flagship school in a network of institutional affiliations known as Antioch University, which includes schools in such places as Seattle, Keene, New Hampshire, and southern California and was initiated by President Jim Dixon—is a complex one, and the source of endless controversy here. Some believe that Dixon's missionary zeal to spread the Antioch model around the nation, and indeed, the world—let a thousand Antiochs bloom, was the way one College official described it—resulted in a perpetual funding crisis for the Yellow Springs campus. Today, the College operates on a deficit budget, and is subsidized from revenue generated by the University. Got that?)

"We went for seven to eight months without a president, which created a vacuum that had a devastating effect on our community," said Scott Warren, Dean of Students. "It made the governance process confusing. The board got more involved than it normally does, or that it should."

Most students seem to support Straumanis and believe she isn't responsible for the origin of their grievances.

In a long commentary in the Record recently, Straumanis addressed each student concern. Regarding communication, she said, "I understand that communication was the top problem identified by participants in a community poll last week. It is a top priority for me as well. . . . Please help me to think of other ways, and new structures, for regular communication and mutual education on community issues."

It is clear that Straumanis takes the title of president seriously—as one who presides over the continuing educational conversation which is Antioch—rather than as a CEO. So far, this approach is working. She has been in office three months.

Schwerner concludes his remarks by observing that, "We are terrific at criticizing ourselves....We hold ourselves to impossibly high standards and then get upset when we cannot live up to them."

It is precisely this volatile combination of a crusading spirit of progressive democracy and high idealism that makes Antioch, Antioch. It is infectious, as evidenced by the student remarks which are always the highlight of an Antioch commencement.

11:15 A.M. The first of eight student presentations—the graduates vote on who they wish to speak-- is made by Nicolas Shawn Ruley. Ruley makes his way to the lectern in his vinyl pants and faux fur, cigarette in hand, and the fun begins. He issues a welcome to "Joan's Flying Circus," and manages to combine the words "gay," "sex," and "fuck" in the first sentence. He thanks mom and dad as well as significant others, "who taught me to breathe through my asshole." He takes a long drag on his cigarette, and there is an enormous clap of laughter. He is followed by a woman who, accompanied by a friend on guitar, sings George Harrison's soulful tune, "There Are Places I Remember." It is a lovely moment. Another student compares Antioch to a petri dish, "where we students are the squishy things wriggling around inside." She then makes a telling remark: "This has been the most uncomfortable and

frightening place I have ever been. And I wouldn't have it any other way."

Timothy Andrew Dixon Noble tells the audience that he is a third generation Antiochian . Noble is the grandson of former Antioch president Jim Dixon; he reminds the crowd of this, adding that his grandfather (who is seated in the audience) "was eventually kicked out." He explains that for a time, when Antioch was without a president, a University Chancellor was brought in (Jim Hunt, also in the audience) who "was not familiar" with the way things were done on campus. That's OK, Noble says, by the time he left, he was (peels off laughter). He adds, to more laughter, that it was hard for the students this year—they had to break in two presidents.

It occurs to you, listening to these students, that this commencement is no different than any other Antioch commencement—what it is at bottom is a celebration and affirmation of the college's core values, on public display. (Straumanis, in a phone interview the next day, agrees with you when you suggest this, and laments the fact that not many College Trustees were there to witness it.) The great philosophers and theoreticians of democracy and education in America—Horace Mann and John Dewey among them-- viewed education—particularly public education-- as the last, best hope for America, a laboratory for social innovation and democratic reform and a powerful force for the revitalization of democracy. It also occurs to you how fragile this American experiment in education really is. To believe in democracy, Cornel West says, is to be a prisoner of hope. If this is true then places like Antioch hold the keys to our liberation. The world is changing, not always for the better. Often, these days, you feel afraid. One can easily imagine a world in which there is no Antioch College. It is not a world you would choose to inhabit.

You begin to get it, why Bobby Seale was selected by these students to bring their commencement address. As interested as they were in what Seale might have to say to them, they were in a sense providing for Seale—and by extension, for all of us—a lesson in what education is supposed to do for you. Seale's own revisionist

story-- his selective telling of that story, his careful editing of the story, including his claim that the Panthers viewed guns as "symbolic" (it is hard to kill 14 real people with a symbolic gun)-- indicate that his self-education continues, and Antioch is the perfect place to tell this kind of story. Antiochians get it. They are willing to listen. It is a place where a person can start over, mid-sentence, and imagine a different ending.

Melissa Kristen Petrol takes the podium to reflect on how the College's co-op experiences have shaped her. The thing about co-op, she says, is that it prepares you for leaving. Every three months as she prepared to go on co-op, she had to decide what she could take with her, what was important, and what must be left behind. You put down your pen when you hear her say this, astonished. Then she adds, "I have become skilled at leaving."

12:10 P.M. It is unbearably cold. You decide to leave. Another of the students is speaking. You can hear her voice, growing fainter now as you arrive near your car. There is another clap of laughter, sustained. You wonder what she said. You consider turning around and going back, but no—you get in your car and drive back through the little village of Yellow Springs.

Along the way you see the places you know you will always remember, places where you gathered for hours with friends and lovers. The Trail End Tavern and Ha Ha Pizza on your left, the Little Theatre on your right, and the Winds Café. Mary Grimm and Nolan Miller. And Gabrielle. You remember your friend Gabrielle, a senior at Antioch who worked with you at the Antioch Review. One night in your car she read you pages from her journal, a journal she had showed no one in this world, the entry she had just written days before, the week she came out and the day she interviewed Ani DeFranco and knew she was in love. Gabrielle in her commencement costume: an elegant black cocktail dress that shows off her hairy armpits to perfection, and her string of pearls. Her parents, from South Philly, sat in the audience, beaming. That night in the car she cried and hugged you, her head balanced carefully on

your shoulder; then she leaned over to kiss you. In that moment you wanted to adopt her. Antioch, you think, is such a strange and wonderful place, utterly original, colorful, often maddening. There was also that day, seven years ago, when you almost punched out the Editor of the *Antioch Review*, a history professor at the College.

Hours later, trying to make sense of all this, you pull off the shelf a copy of Mark Strand's poetry. You page through it until you find the poem you are looking for:

*Keeping Things Whole*

*In a field  
I am the absence  
Of field.  
This is  
Always the case.  
Wherever I am  
I am what is missing.  
When I walk  
I part the air  
And always  
The air moves in  
To fill the spaces  
Where my body's been.  
We all have reasons  
For moving.  
I move  
To keep things whole.*

You will sit up half the night listening to George Harrison and wondering about Mark Strand: Did he write that poem as he was preparing to leave for co-op? You'd like to think that he did.

This place. These people. You realize tonight what it is that is bothering you. You are afraid you may lose it, lose them. You look over what you have written and it comes to you clearly, that you have been in a costume of your own today as a reporter but you

have written this for them. You want to love them as hard as you can.

