
“Black Soundwork, Knowledge Production, and the “Debate” Over Tap Dance Origins”

ABSTRACT In this commentary, I examine tap dance as Black soundwork and antiracist activism. Tracing a controversy over the supposed Irish contributions to tap dance’s early history, I question why non-Black practitioners rely on academic knowledge production, especially when Black soundwork is not just marginalized in the academy, but often controlled and rewritten to adhere to white standards. I argue that non-Black peoples need to understand the ways in which origins perform political work, and to critically examine the ways in which correcting origins is only the first step to dismantling systemic racism. **KEYWORDS** Race, Tap Dance, Academy

Tap dance might not be the first thing that comes to mind when we think of soundwork. But tap dance has always been a form of music that’s different from music, noise that is both ordered and unexpected, and a creative form of speech. When forbidden from using drums, enslaved peoples used percussive dance to express themselves and to resist. Tap always involves communicating with others and honing one’s signature moves in the improvisational “tap challenge.” The tap challenge consists of (at least) two dancers challenging each other, building off rhythms and styles, and improving or shifting the sound into something new. This back and forth banter is characteristic of elements in the minstrel show, which in turn has thoroughly shaped what we consider to be American culture today.¹

In tap dance, one’s very body communicates a personal story to others who use it to tell their own story. Because the Black vernacular dances are deemed “folk,” tap is often non-copyrightable. However, as Anthrea Kraut has explained, tappers use their very bodies to copyright.² For instance, no one can perform a stair dance without invoking Bill “Bojangles” Robinson’s tapping. The stair dance is perhaps one of Bojangles’s best-known numbers because it was featured in *The Little Colonel* with Shirley Temple. Originally danced to the minstrel tune “Swanee River,” Bojangles used a set of stairs to showcase his upright dancing style and his play with sounds: tapping his toes against side boards, using his knuckles to knock on stairs as he climbed, and using the hollow echo of stairs to accentuate cramp rolls—a four-sounded step with balls of the feet hitting first followed by the heels. Anyone performing a stair dance today would be seen as giving homage to Bojangles, making Bojangles’s very body act as the copyright. Thus, for tappers, the corporeal copyright is embodied soundwork that communicates Black history through the sounds of Black tap masters who came before.

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Tap teachers often speak these stories, telling students about the lineages of steps as we perform the sounds. Often, men's stories are told in sound, as in Savion Glover tapping the sounds of Chuck Green, Lon Chaney, Buster Brown, and Jimmy Slyde in *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*.³ But Black women have also used soundwork to tell their stories and discuss the intersections of racism and sexism in this country. In *Diary of a Tap Dancer*, Ayodele Casel dances while listing the men of tap, saying, "It's a man's world, but I Don't Care . . . there's space for me here, in these shoes looking and sounding exactly how I am now." Casel then taps and scats that personhood for 30 seconds before declaring, "these steps are my words . . . two pieces of metal on each foot and an infinite amount of music." Casel soundworks the artistry of Black women who came before—such as Jeni LeGon, Lois Bright, and Alice Whitman—as she diaries her own life in sound.⁴ In the face of racist and sexist exploitation of Black bodies and the appropriation of Black arts, tap dancers are all about reclaiming history by using soundwork to tell stories of self, of others, of resistance, and to bring attention to intersectional social inequalities.

TAP ORIGINS: THE "DEBATE"

Scholars of tap dancing have always claimed that the origins of tap dance stem from the melding of Irish step dancing and African dancing. I am a South Asian American non-Black woman of color, who teaches a class on Black feminist thought and intro level tap dance out of a women's studies department. In the first article I wrote on tap dance, I provided a short history in which I put forth this "fusion" story.⁵ Mark Knowles's book *Tap Roots: The Early History of Tap Dancing* has whole sections on Irish, English, and African influences that led to the formation of tap dance.⁶ Constance Valis Hill, the foremost historian of tap dance and curator of the Library of Congress's tap dance database, points to the 300-year "musical and social exchange" between Irish indentured servants and enslaved peoples.⁷ Hill describes the intermixing of poor Irish and Black people in urban spaces, Black and Irish labor that built the railroads, and even similar uses of satire in Black and Irish communities that could have led to the "tap challenge."⁸ In his 612-page book on the history of tap, Brian Seibert describes the "closeness" between the Irish and enslaved peoples that led to "shared recreation" between the two groups, making their dances indistinguishable. Seibert suggests that "the jiggling of Tom, that black slave in Texas, might have been Irish after all." Seibert even claims that the status of the Irish might have been lower than enslaved Black people because, unlike enslaved peoples, the Irish were not considered property and thus not worth money.⁹

I find it extremely problematic to suggest that the Irish had a lower status than enslaved peoples, especially because white supremacists have used the idea of the Irish having it as bad, if not worse, than enslaved peoples to justify their racism in the present. Popular media stories about "Irish slaves" and widely shared memes have flattened the realities of slavery and equated it to Irish indentured servitude, thereby painting a picture in which (white) Irish peoples overcame slavery and its aftermath through their resilience and determination, while Black people in America today have not. In 2016, Irish historians wrote an open letter to *Irish Central*, *Irish Examiner*, and *Scientific American* voicing



FIGURE 1. Meme by Jabowen Dixon, Dance & Delivery Facebook page and Instagram account, June 10, 2020. Used with permission.

their opposition to this flattening and explaining how the historical inaccuracies were fueling white supremacy.¹⁰

The shared labor or shared recreation between Black peoples and the Irish in the early- to mid-19th century does not necessarily mean an equal exchange of dance or an equal contribution to Black soundwork. There is, as far as I know, no Irish step dancer of fame in early tap. The person credited as the first tap dancer, Master Juba, was Black. As Jabowen Dixon has argued in a series of social media memes, the earliest tap dancers were Black, and “even most of those tap dancers we are most familiar with (such as Fred Astaire) from old times, had Black teachers or choreographers.”¹¹ White blackface minstrel performers mimicked what they perceived to be Black percussive dance, pointing again not to the Irish, but to Black roots of tap dance. Furthermore, in these scholarly histories that push forth the Irish/African fusion theory, it is not clear what is meant by “African” influences. In the wonderful short documentary by Simone Maurice, *Lost in the Shuffle*, the Black tap master Jason Samuels Smith says:

Every writer has said the same thing without any real specific details especially coming from a Black or African perspective. It’s always Irish and African, Irish and African. Can I have a little bit more detail? Can you specify what African styles of dance? What African places, countries, these styles of dance actually came from? And then let’s talk about the lineage! Let’s talk about are there any Irish step dancers in the lineage of tap history? No.¹²

Smith goes on to explain how the Sabar dance tradition in Senegal is in conversation with drums much like the tap challenge. For Smith, tap is the dance of the West African diaspora in America, rather than a fusion of Irish and “African” traditions.

In early June of 2020, in the midst of Black Lives Matter protests throughout the world, an Irish American tapper, Lane Alexander, wrote an email to some tappers about the violence of rioters and his objections to erasing the supposed contributions of the Irish to the art of tap dance. Alexander is the founder and director of the Chicago Human Rhythm Project, a respected entity in the tap world. One of those emails was sent to Bril Barrett, founder of M.A.D.D. Rhythms (Making A Difference Dancing), also a respected entity in the tap world.¹³ Barrett responded with an open letter signed by hundreds of tappers worldwide:

Violence is kneeling on an unarmed man's neck until he is strangled to death, staring into a camera at a world of witnesses without a care, confident that your actions will be protected by the state. Violence is breaking into a home with impunity and shooting a woman sleeping in her own bed. Violence is profiting from Black labor, Black pain, and Black art while failing to support Black people.¹⁴

Meanwhile, on Facebook tap dance sites, Daniel Léveillé, a white Canadian contemporary dancer, defended the Irish/African fusion theory by citing the scholarship and expertise of Constance Valis Hill, the tap historian.

Why would non-Black peoples insert the unsubstantiated Irish origins into tap at this seminal moment in antiracist activism? And why rely on academic histories to prove those supposed Irish origins?

ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND BLACK SOUNDWORK

We are saturated with white stories and with the marginalization of Black soundwork in the ivory tower. The nature of Black soundwork, which often straddles music and dance, falls through the cracks of scholarship in both disciplines.¹⁵ African influences in (white) modern dance are more often taught and written about in academia than are African influences in tap or hip-hop.¹⁶ Tap dance, if it is taught, is usually an elective and only offered at the beginning levels. Many colleges and universities don't have adequate floors let alone professors trained in tap. Even with support from the music and dance departments at my institution, I have had to fight for space and times to teach my class and for stage performances. In the fall of 2019, my tap class—and its Black feminist content—was trolled by an intellectual dark web type with hundreds of thousands of followers. Despite the ways in which Black soundwork is integral to American popular culture, I've had to prove to those unfamiliar with Black vernacular arts and those hostile to ethnic studies and feminist studies that tap is worthy of academic inquiry.

White and Western knowledge production shapes the parameters for the marginalization of Black soundwork in the academy. In *Ring Shout, Wheel About*, Katrina Dyonne Thompson discusses how on the plantation, dance was used by whites as a controlling mechanism over enslaved peoples. While whites gained dance skills by hiring teachers from the concert world, Black dance was not seen as a skill, but as innate to enslaved people's bodies. That which we consider learnable skills, then, are defined by white standards. In white supremacy, whiteness benevolently "allows" the dance of Black bodies

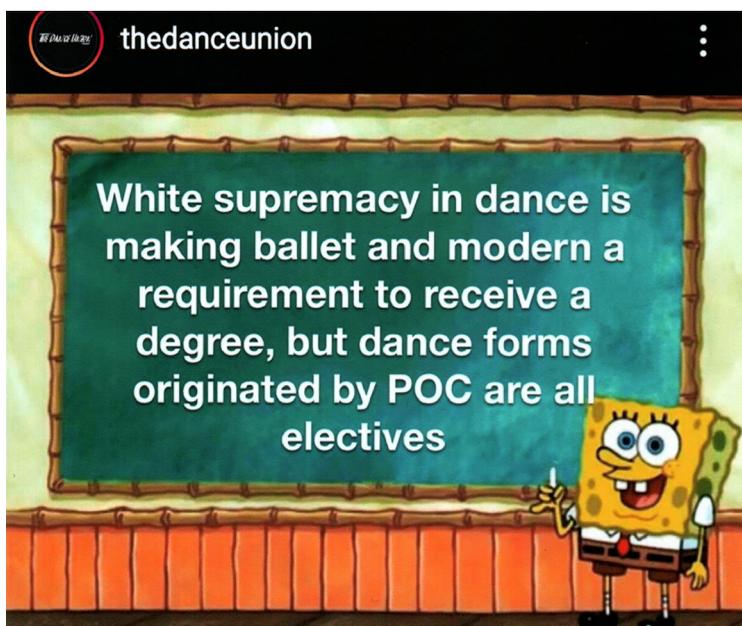


FIGURE 2. Meme by J. Bouey, The Dance Union, Instagram, November 8, 2019. Used with permission.

only in controlled spaces, times, and formats.¹⁷ Enslaved peoples were deemed to be closer to animals, and they were sexualized. In *The Black Dancing Body*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild discusses white sexual voyeurism of Black women's bodies and the ways in which the Black butt is sexualized from Venus Hottentott to Josephine Baker. As Gottschild explains, "emphasizing the buttocks indicates an unacceptable—read "black"—aesthetic standard."¹⁸ In white supremacy, innate "animalistic" and "sexualized" movement needs to be controlled in the white concert dance world that teaches "skill." In a widely shared article in *Dance Magazine*, J. Bouey outlined the ways in which value in dance departments is shaped by white supremacy. As Bouey's social media meme articulates (Figure 2), white supremacy in dance curriculums makes the dances of people of color elective courses, while courses in European traditions are required for majors. In their article Bouey also outlines how white supremacy assigns value to certain music without lyrics over popular music, values an audience that is still instead of social, and values feedback of form over emotion—all of which work to marginalize Black soundwork in the academy.¹⁹

As a student and practitioner of tap, I find it very telling that Irish Americans are taking this moment—in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests—to insist on inserting the Irish's supposed contribution: *In the controlling and marginalization of Black soundwork in a white supremacist world, non-Black dance practitioners may not "allow" a form of Black soundscape to exist unless that history is rewritten to be at least equally white in origin.* It is additionally telling that non-Black dancers are responding to Black artists by relying on academic scholarship: *Complicity in white supremacy need not be interrogated when one can rely on knowledge shaped by white supremacy—knowledge that acts as the source and proof of what is valued, what counts as skill, and which bodies matter.* Especially for non-

Black people such as myself, we need to really examine the white fragility that surrounds origins if we are to truly engage with the antiracism inherent in the awesome power of communication that is Black soundwork.

THE POLITICAL WORK OF ORIGINS

Origins perform a particular type of political work and often produce debates.²⁰ We assume that origins shape a historical trajectory and tell us who we are today. We can understand Lane Alexander's emails reinserting the supposed Irish origins of tap into tap dance history to be a way of controlling not just the origin but also the trajectory of who can do and who can profit from Black soundwork.

It may feel, then, that the "woke" response would be to correct the origin and thereby correct the present. But in the racist patriarchy, one's subject position and experience of historical and generational trauma may make the political work of origins different from another's. For non-Black peoples, correcting the origin story of tap cannot act as the beginning and end of antiracism. Because the white concert dance world is tied to academic ideas about what counts as skill; because those definitions of skill influence granting foundations; because only certain dances can enjoy legal protection and copyright; because casting directors, writers, directors, producers, and audience members make choices based on these standards and norms; and because we have seen decades upon decades during which non-Black Hollywood performers have been the ones making money off Black soundwork—correcting the origin is only the first step in a larger process of dismantling systemic oppression.

Here, I think it is important to note the work of postcolonial feminists who outline the problems of the search for a precolonial truth when something as violent as colonization has occurred. Postcolonial feminisms has long critiqued the Western assumption that an authentic precolonial native can be recovered especially because the search for the true unadulterated native is often tied to European ideas of self. The Orient has a special place in Western experience, and as Edward Said's classic text tells us, the way discourse is ordered around the Orient may tell more about Western peoples than it does about the non-West.²¹ Uma Narayan has examined how the attention of Western feminists to differences between women can unwittingly lead privileged groups to construct "cultural others" in their own image, thereby replicating rather than challenging colonial orientalist frames.²² Looking at how scholars research peoples in nations that experienced extraction colonization (as opposed to settler colonialization), Rey Chow has argued that there is a Western/white desire to have the ethnic specimen placed where they believe the specimen should be. A changed native, a native who takes on new histories and deviates from the original frame set for her in advance, makes the Western scholar uneasy. Thus, there is a desire in Western scholarship to show a truth, the precolonial original truth, without the realities of the present. As Chow writes, ". . . whenever the oppressed, the native, the subaltern, and so forth are used to represent the point of 'authenticity' for our critical discourse, they become at the same time the place of myth-making and an escape from the impure nature of political realities."²³ Lata Mani and Ruth Frankenberg have

looked at the concept of time as it relates to colonialism and critiqued the idea of “post” in postcolonial studies as separate from the original violence of colonialism. Colonial discourses in the white Western imaginary are dispersed across space and time and ongoing settler colonialism. Just because there is no longer a British Empire does not mean that colonial frameworks aren’t replicated in the present. As such: “cultural time is paced differently according to one’s location in relation to systems of domination. Thus, the ‘afterlife’ of colonial discourse is different for the colonizer and the colonized.”²⁴

To bring this back to tap dance, correcting the origin may seem like an easy fix. But can that easy fix be more concerned with relieving the anxieties of white/non-Black peoples than with centering Black history? As Frankenberg and Mani argue about cultural time and “afterlife” of colonialism, non-Black scholars and practitioners of tap need to understand the “afterlife” of slavery as different for them based on their location and relation to systems of racial domination. The same might be said of other Black dances, such as the Lindy Hop. Kendra Unruh has traced the Black roots of Lindy Hop—how the dance was whitened and the Black origins glossed over, especially in the revivalist era of the 1990s. Although non-Black Lindy Hop revivalists might know the Black roots of the dance, “[white] dancers want to enjoy the dance without confronting the cultural appropriation that took place in history.”²⁵ For non-Black peoples especially who are steeped in a long history of exploiting Black soundwork, the origin as a simple corrective may act as a non-racist performative, exculpating non-Black peoples from having to engage with systemic social change. From having to deal with, in the words of Rey Chow, the “impure nature of political realities” in the present. Without a critical eye to the political work of origins, we risk replicating rather than dismantling white supremacy.

In teaching tap, I try and ask students to think through origins, and why and how origins produce debates in the racist patriarchy. We do this by looking at the origins of the tap dance called the “Shim Sham Shimmy.” The Shim Sham is known as the tap dancer’s national anthem. It consists of four phrases separated with a syncopated break: a shuffle combination that swings, a crossover step with syncopated balls and heels, a shimmied step that accentuates the butt known as the “tack annie,” and a time step with half breaks. The four combinations are then repeated. The second time around the breaks operate as “stop time,” where the dancer stops the dance to allow the band or drums to respond in conversation. The entire dance ends with the classic sound: “shave and a haircut, two bits.” The Shim Sham, once danced to Count Basie’s “Lester Leaps In” by light-skinned Black women dancers in the chorus line, was the showstopper. Nothing else could follow the sound of the Shim Sham as the chorus line dancers “stopped the show” with the number. But its origins are contested.

Was the Shim Sham created by a Black man named Leonard Reed who was so light skinned he could pass on the white vaudeville circuits? Or was it stolen by Reed from Black women of the Whitman Sisters vaudeville troupe? Is there anything remotely related to Irish step dancing in the Shim Sham or its history? And perhaps most profoundly, what does it mean to learn this dance with contested origins from a non-Black WOC, at a college with a history of excluding and discriminating against Black people, in a predominantly white institution, in a predominantly white state? I always feel the class



FIGURE 3. Bril Barrett Facebook page, June 26, 2020. Used with permission.

wanting to condemn the appropriator, to find an origin to act as the corrective, and to restore some kind of inner truth. It's much harder to move the class to try and think through white supremacy in knowledge production, to confront the violence of systemic racism, and to think through the intersectional activism of Black soundwork.

Lane Alexander's email to Bril Barrett and his comments about the supposed Irish origins of tap, along with accusations from students about body shaming and sexism, led to the appointment of a new interim director at the Chicago Human Rhythm Project, Emmanuel Neal. But things are far from resolved. The "debate" illustrates how deeply embedded Black soundwork is to that which we consider American, and to white America's continued need to control. I find myself returning to the power of communication embedded in tap's soundwork. The ways tap tells the stories of self and others, of history and resistance, and of innovation and altered sounds allow us to imagine new futures in sound and communication. Futures in which origins are not debates because we refuse to lean on academic knowledge production shaped by white supremacy. Futures in which communicating the resistance embedded in Black soundwork teaches us how to dismantle systemic racism.

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NOTES

1. This article uses the concept of "Blacksound" alongside the concept of "soundwork." Matthew D. Morrison has discussed the concept of Blacksound as tied to the legacy of the blackface

minstrel show. According to Morrison, Blacksound “demonstrates how performance, (racial) identity, and (intellectual) property relations have been tethered to the making of popular music and its commercialization since the early nineteenth century. Blacksound also reveals how practices of exclusion that are germane to musicological discourse are connected to the racist practices and supremacist systems that defined society and popular culture throughout the nineteenth century.” Matthew D. Morrison, “Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 781.

Michele Hilmes has used the term “soundwork” to discuss the new materiality of radio through media such as podcasts and digital streaming. Hilmes describes soundwork as “creative/constructed aural texts that employ the basic sonic elements of speech, music, and noise; this excludes the field normally encompassed by the term ‘music,’ though of course the boundaries are anything but clear.” Michele Hilmes, “The New Materiality of Radio: Sound on Screens,” in *Radio’s New Wave: Global Sound in a Digital Era*, eds. Jason Loviglio and Michele Hilmes (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 60.

I see tap dance as both Blacksound and soundwork. Hence, I use the term “Black soundwork” in this article.

2. Anthea Kraut, “‘Stealing Steps’ and Signature Moves: Embodied Theories of Dance as Intellectual Property,” *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (May 2010): 173–89.
3. “Green, Chaney, Buster, Slyde,” *Bring in ‘da Noise, Bring in ‘da Funk*, Original Broadway Cast Recording (Bingham, Duquesnay, Wilder, Mark), 1996.
4. Ayodele Casel, *Diary of a Tap Dancer*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4374&v=v99Bu3QLMi8&feature=emb_logo (accessed June 24, 2020). See also the stories from *Diary of a Tap Dancer, V.6: US*, diared on New York City Center website <https://www.nycitycenter.org/pdps/2019-2020/live-at-home/diary-of-a-tap-dancer/>.
5. Sonja Thomas, “Educated Feet: Tap Dancing and Embodied Feminist Pedagogies at a Small Liberal Arts College,” *Feminist Teacher*, 27, no. 2–3: (Fall 2018).
6. Mark Knowles, *Tap Roots: The Early History of Tap Dancing* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002).
7. Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2.
8. *Ibid.*, 2–15.
9. Brian Seibert, *What The Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 40.
10. Liam Hogan, “Open letter to *Irish Central*, *Irish Examiner* and *Scientific American* about their ‘Irish slaves’ disinformation,” March 8, 2016, <https://medium.com/@Limerick1914/open-letter-to-irish-central-irish-examiner-and-scientific-american-about-their-irish-slaves-3f6cf23b8d7f#.tb66klcft> (accessed September 2, 2020).
11. “Black People Created Tap Dance,” Dance & Delivery, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBRCDjWF3tz/>; <https://www.facebook.com/dancendelivery/photos/2974415042636578>. See also, Jabowen Dixon’s memes on Black roots of Swing.
12. Quoted in *Lost in the Shuffle*, a film by Simone Maurice: Multimedia Maverick, 2017.
13. I am currently working with Bril Barrett as a subject matter expert on a future M.A.D.D. Rhythms project.
14. “An Open Letter to Lane Alexander, Chicago Human Rhythm Project,” June 4, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CBCOmhXnjF7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link (accessed June 24, 2020).
15. See Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

16. Ann Kilkelly, "Footnotes: Tap in the Twentieth Century," in *Reflections on American Music: The Twentieth Century and the New Millennium*, eds. James R. Heintze and Michael Saffle (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2000), 228.
17. Katrina Dyonne Thompson, *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 78.
18. Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography From Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 148.
19. J. Bouey, "Are College Dance Curriculums Too White?" *Dance Magazine*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.dancemagazine.com/are-college-curriculums-too-white-2645575057.html> (accessed September 2, 2020).
20. Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 39–40.
21. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 6.
22. Uma Narayan, "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism," *Hypatia* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 89.
23. Rey Chow, "Where Have All the Natives Gone?" in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 124.
24. Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani, "Crosscurrents, Crosstalk: Race, 'Postcoloniality' and the Politics of Location," in *ibid.*, 355.
25. Kendra Unruh, "May We Have This Dance? Cultural Ownership of the Lindy Hop from the Swing Era to Today," *Atlantic Studies* 17, no. 1 (2020): 56.