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Abstract

This article presents Radical Walking as an engagement tool and a process to entice individuals to examine their surroundings in more creative and holistic ways. Radical Walking as a process stems from psychogeography, which has been structured as a tool to enliven engagement in community and economic development. The article illustrates how Radical Walking was used in a multi-ethnic urban neighborhood in Kentucky, concluding with examples of outcomes and lessons for other communities interested in using the tool. Finally, the potential and limitations of Radical Walking are discussed in relation to community development practice efforts to enhance community vibrancy.

Keywords

Radical Walking, Neighborhood Development, Cultural Plan Development, Public Spaces

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Background

Conventional town hall meetings, workshops, and invited comment media have strengths and weaknesses in bringing people together to discuss issues, needs, and visions for community projects of various forms and sizes. As much as these engagement methods and strategies work for and benefit many audiences, there are other times when they may not work effectively or at all. This issue makes it challenging for community development practitioners and stakeholders to gather information and act on a complete set of community needs that should be effectively reflected in strategic planning processes. Sometimes the limitations of community development processes may make projects difficult to pursue when appropriate means to engage people in the projects do not turn out the way as practitioners intended (Cornwall, 2008).

At times, community meetings and larger gatherings can be alienating, due to the fact that they can be dominated by a handful of outspoken people, while those who are shy or reticent are often silenced. These meetings may also be difficult for those participants who are unfamiliar with agendas or who do not understand how citizens can be actively involved.

What should a community do when conventional meetings, gatherings, tools, and techniques are unsuccessful in creating change? How should one approach facilitating and leading a community vision? These key questions led to the identification and structuring of Radical Walking as a community development practice that integrates portions of a variety of mapping exercises, such as asset mapping, inventory, and cognitive mapping among others, that are utilized in a range of fields. Although asset mapping is a conventional strategy for community development, there are challenges such as mobilizing inclusive participation and changes in associations and networks of leadership and members within communities (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003).

To overcome limitations to gathering stakeholder input in a large setting, we reversed conventional input strategies by emphasizing the engagement of people in multiple smaller discussions in familiar groupings to explore the very environment to improve upon.
Radical Walking: A Brief History and Description

The initial concept of Radical Walking emerged from the works of Guy Debord, a French geographer and Situationist Internationalist from the mid-20th Century, who claimed that we need to recapture our understanding of everyday spaces through dérive (French for drifting or otherwise sauntering or slow walking) (Debord, 1955; 1956). Since the 1930s critical walking has been used as a mode of political inquiry and aesthetic practice. Modern planning at the time was dividing cities into functional zones around the automobile and giant shopping malls. Debord (1956) argued that we are so dependent on public or private transportation that we do not pay attention to how our public spaces attract or repel us. He wanted to bring a sense of playfulness and creativity to the environment in which individuals would move from passive acceptance of their surroundings to more active involvement. He organized walks to explore how people really lived and to provide the groundwork for revolution ary theory and practice. The walking was a drift or saunter involving an abandonment of the terrain and what one encounters there. Debord (1956) believed that small groups were preferable for these walks, with an aim to shed class and other allegiances, thereby developing a more critical attitude. The activity avoided tourist destinations and favored walks through more marginal areas of the city. Participants were open to wander in places that generated awe, joy, or terror. Debord (1956) also believed that emotions could stimulate more critical thinking about one’s surroundings, which involved questioning the status quo (see also Bassett, 2004). Debord’s ‘The Naked City’ became part of the psychogeographic practice of a form of cognitive mapping of an environment that has re-emerged in recent years. Variations of the process have been used in Europe and large cities, such as New York, as part of development efforts or community studies with students (Bassett, 2004; Debord, 1957; Jacks, 2006; Nold, 2009).

Bassett (2004) further explored the various dimensions of how walking has been used as a critical and aesthetic practice in urban areas. He worked with university students in Paris in the early 2000s, using tape recorders and cameras in multi-ethnic and gentrified areas. On their walks, students explored gender dimensions and how different genders responded to the environment. They also recorded the senses of calm/dislocation and attraction/repulsion in cartographic forms. While some groups saw sterile environments, others had different responses. Bassett (2004) suggested these walks involved an opening of eyes and ears to what they had taken for granted. The project raised the students’ consciousness about Paris and significant issues they were able to recognize during the walks. The project also prompted students to question Paris tourist guides and what they recommended visitors to see or consume (Bassett, 2004). There are many versions of Radical Walking that can enliven community and economic development work by recognizing how the use of the five senses and emotions can provide new insights, often unable to be captured through other tools that do not immerse participants directly into the community environment. The act of walking, sensory observations and natural dialogue in small groups can be intertwined to help groups explore how space, particularly public space, should address the needs of diverse groups in such areas as recreation, safety, expression, commerce and other aspects of life.

Public spaces are part of an open democracy and are essential to building strong communities. They belong to all members of the community and everyone has a right to use these ordinary public spaces, such as parks, streets, sidewalks, public plazas, or squares. Oftentimes these spaces even serve as gathering spots (Jacobs, 1961). Such public spaces can vary in temperament. For example, streets may be flexible and blocked off for temporary gatherings like parades, civic and social events, or celebrations, while murals or buildings may serve as more permanent artistic expressions. People also gather in private spaces, such as a place of worship, parking lot, or restaurant, that also serve to enliven our communities and function as shared community places. To facilitate and lead strong communities, it is necessary to identify and clarify which shared spaces should be considered. By gaining input about community spaces from those who live and work in the community, practitioners will be better equipped to support structuring shared visions. Oftentimes, shared views toward public spaces in a neighborhood or community can solidify a guiding vision to collaboratively work towards.

Radical Walking is therefore a process that includes a tool to guide, facilitate, and entice individuals within a community towards examining their surroundings in a more structured, creative, and exciting way. The Radical Walking process helps individuals see their spaces from a more holistic perspective by using their bodies as collection devices that enable them to use the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch to facilitate a better understanding of their surroundings. Our bodily senses put things together in ways that no other device can; we can map sound-scapes, smell-scapes or taste-scapes that conventional maps cannot capture. We can also map how emotions such as terror, pleasure, and joy are related to a space (Nold 2009). The emotions associated with features and aesthetics of public realms are important findings that can inform and help communities more holistically enhance the physical environment and culture of their community.
Radical Walking in Practice

Radical Walking: Tailored Engagement

The North Limestone Community Development Corporation (NoLi CDC) is a multi-ethnic urban neighborhood organization focused on development. It was established in 2013 in the North End neighborhood in Lexington, Kentucky. The ethnically diverse neighborhood is situated in a comparatively lower-income area where historical districts and gentrification are imposing threats to the neighborhood’s livelihood. After NoLi CDC discovered that community members in the area were not interested in conventional meetings such as town halls, they reached out to University of Kentucky (UK) community and leadership development and landscape architecture faculty and students to address this challenge of community engagement in their neighborhood.

A Radical Walking experience was structured to set the stage for a community development project to create a cultural plan for the neighborhood. This first step, Radical Walking, was a project funded through the UK Office of Sustainability, Tracy Farmer Institute of Sustainability and the Environment, and the Student Government Association. The eventual overall cultural plan was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Knight Foundation among others (Figure 1).

![Figure 1](image-url)

Figure 1. Funding sources for the overall North Limestone Cultural Plan project highlighting the relationship of Radical Walking in the project process.

* Different Collaborators from the same institution.
Process, Tools, and Activities

Based on psychogeographical thought, the UK research team structured a Radical Walking experience into a dual-phase process: the actual walk of the neighborhood’s public spaces and multiple post-walk activities. The Radical Walking project provided a structured walking facilitation guide and schedule of activities including structured mixed-method surveys, both quantitative and qualitative. These tools enabled community development practitioners to train volunteers (i.e., community leaders and interested stakeholders) to facilitate discussions about the community’s public and/or shared spaces. Volunteers convened community participants in small groups, articulating their experiences by directly sensing and visioning ideas for the places.

Participants were asked to take a leisurely walk, lasting no more than two hours, with a group through the neighborhood’s shared and/or public spaces. Although walks could be completed in a large group setting, it was concluded a best practice was to organize participants into smaller groups of three to five people. The structured walking facilitation guide in the form of a script provided a background for why and how to guide participants through an informal group walk, while still providing a formal process for sharing observations, findings, and discussions of aspects that contribute to community capacity. The script included questions that encouraged observation, articulation, critique, and visioning of one’s surrounding environment, neighborhood, or workplace, particularly in the realm of shared or public spaces. The following are some overall guiding questions for the walks, particularly for the projects related to community public space:

- Where do you normally gather with others in the neighborhood?
- What do you value the most about our public spaces?
- What would you like to see changed in the community/neighborhood public spaces?
- What opportunities do we have for using our public spaces more creatively and to bring out the best in us and who we are?
- How do you situate yourself and understand the neighborhood or community in a fairly limited fashion? Facilitators asked participants to note both their senses and the emotions triggered as they experienced the neighborhood’s built environments. The questions in the structured walking facilitation guide were delineated based on the five bodily senses (see Table 1). During the walks, participants were also encouraged to discuss their observations, critiques and visions of the public spaces. After the walks, a post-walk survey questionnaire and other activities provided opportunities for community members and participants to focus on their own observations and findings without others’ influence.

Radical Walking, with its shared experience yet personal nature, enabled broad participation from all segments of the community, ranging in ethnicity and age, from individuals to families, students to teachers, and long-time residents to those recently moved in. Participation also included individuals who just worked in the neighborhood and/or valued the neighborhood’s public spaces and natural gathering spots.

The results of this project suggest that community leaders could use this process to reach out to individuals who may influence the future of the neighborhood, including potential stakeholders and decision-makers. It is also important to note that through this process some community members may voice their observations for the first time, providing fresh ideas and experiences that others may not have considered previously.

*Available as toolkits on the following websites: (Adult) North Limestone Cultural Plan (https://www.northlimestoneculturalplan.org/) and (Youth) University of Kentucky, College of Agriculture, Food and Environment’s Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK) (https://cedik.ca.uky.edu/community-design/tools).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense</th>
<th>Questions guiding the sensory of public spaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>VISUAL-SCAPE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sight is typically expressed by depth or range of vision</td>
<td>What do you see without judging the neighborhood?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A typical human's monocular visual field ranges 30 degrees centrally to an extended 100 degrees laterally, and 60 degrees upward and 75 degrees downward from the standard line*</td>
<td>What did you expect to see?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What surprised, amused or frightened you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What did you see that was beautiful or has the potential for beauty?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Future</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you want to see in the neighborhood?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What pleasant views of the neighborhood public spaces would you like to share with people?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOUND-SCAPE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sounds are vibrations that are picked up by tiny hair fibers in the inner ear</td>
<td>What do you hear?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typically, humans hear within a range of 20Hz to 20kHz **</td>
<td>What sounds are unexpected, the most pleasant or interesting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are there sounds in the neighborhood that trigger different kinds of emotions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are those emotions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you could develop a sound map of the neighborhood, what would it look like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Future</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What would you like to hear in a certain public space; for example, a poem, play, speech or certain kind of music?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are there opportunities for sounds to be experienced at greater or lesser levels?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What pleasant views of the neighborhood public spaces would you like to share with people?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SMELL-SCAPE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smelling is a chemical sense</td>
<td>What kinds of odors do you smell in the neighborhood?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odor molecules have a variety of features that can trigger olfactory receptors</td>
<td>What smells triggered your emotions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What would a smell-scale map look like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Future</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What would you like to smell in a certain public space?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are there opportunities to enhance or minimize certain smells to strengthen our neighborhood?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* (Source: Spector, 1990)
** (Source: Davis, 2011)
**TASTE-SCAPE**

Taste is a chemical sense

What do you taste during the walk?
What tastes surprised you?

There are four major types of taste that the tongue can detect: sweet, salt, sour and bitter

**Future**

What tastes can we enhance or add to the neighborhood?
What would you like to tell people about the tastes of the neighborhood's public spaces?

One can also taste textures, edible and non-edible items or even the saltiness of the air on the sea

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**TOUCH-SCAPE**

Touch involves a sense of pressure, usually with the skin

What do you feel if you rub against built or non-built places in the landscape?
What do you feel when your feet touch the pavement, grass or dirt?
What does the touch of the bark on a tree, fence, wall or fountain feel like?

It is often expressed as a texture

What happens when you experience people, animals or insects touching you or not touching you?
What emotions do these touches trigger?
If you led a blind person through the neighborhood, what would you want them to touch?

**Future**

What would you like your feet to touch?
What would you change about the built or natural environment that would encourage people to touch?
Facilitation and Collaboration

The NoLi CDC collaborated with researchers at the University of Kentucky to apply Radical Walking in their neighborhood, which is situated in a contested area of the larger urban fabric. As a community capacity building and development process, the role of the facilitator for Radical Walking was essential for the effective engagement and initial empowerment stages. Facilitators were responsible for initially recruiting their peers to go on walks. They were also expected to serve as neutral guides and ask unbiased questions that were not prescriptive nor judgmental. The collaborators in the North Limestone Cultural Plan project viewed the reflections from Radical Walking as forms of storytelling that could be incorporated into the cultural plan.

Storytelling

Radical Walking enabled participants to share insights and fresh ideas that others may or may not have considered or previously voiced. Some participants shared stories about public places in the neighborhood that provided an understanding about the area’s history or sense of place. Follow-up questions during the Radical Walks also highlighted parts of the story that stakeholders vocalized should be kept alive, while other parts should be forgotten. Questions included what type of action(s) may be needed to enhance the neighborhood’s public spaces. For example, participants discussed that sidewalks were poorly maintained and unsafe in the neighborhood. In other cases, there were indications that parks were underutilized because they were not considered inviting or safe. Participants also viewed some public art as a reflection of the neighborhood’s history, while at the same time they saw other artwork as part of an external culture that was imposed on the neighborhood.

The Arts

The Radical Walking process can help groups identify and critique the types of art that are found in the neighborhood. It is well-known that public places are expressions of who we are and what we want in our communities to make us stronger. Depending on particular places or times of the year, various types of arts in the form of music, dance, visual arts, written word, street theatre, or other expressions can reflect the community’s diversity and cultures. In this project, some forms of art attracted a particular group, while others found some forms disturbing. The walks helped elucidate the types of artistic expression that stakeholders appreciated in comparison to what outsiders thought possibly reflected the neighborhood. This opportunity also highlights the enhanced artistic or cultural strengths of a neighborhood that groups may want to see in the future.

Post-Walk

After the informal group walk, participants were asked to reflect on their experience through a survey instrument and other activities as part of a structured dialogue in an enclosed meeting space. Participants placed dot stickers denoting frequently used public spaces and how they accessed them on large maps that were placed on the walls. Participants also wrote their observations about the public spaces on sticky-notes and posted them on blank sheets so others could see their remarks. They were then guided through a debrief about what they had learned. These activities were intentionally designed to provide participants with several opportunities to strengthen and articulate their experiences so they would be represented as part of the collective community perspective and vision. The survey instrument (see Table 2) has two alternative templates which

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Overview of Radical Walking survey contents.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRIMARY TARGET AUDIENCE</td>
<td>Template 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUMBER OF DISTINCT SECTIONS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUMBER OF TOTAL QUESTIONS</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYPES OF QUESTIONS</td>
<td>11 Open-ended, 6 Multiple Choice, 5 Range, 1 Drawing Exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANTICIPATED COMPLETION TIME</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
included questions reflecting the core of the community public spaces, arts project goals, and/or target audiences. One survey format balanced open-ended questions with multiple choice questions; the other was comprised of primarily open-ended questions. While Template 1 focused on youth, Template 2 targeted a primarily adult audience; however, both surveys addressed content and topics that broadened the scope of public spaces and arts in order to convey a neighborhood’s short and long-term cultural vision.

After Radical Walking

The research team, along with NoLi CDC, initially anticipated that participants would have conversations in their smaller groups about what they experienced during the walks and summarize their experiences through a group drawing, a short skit, or some alternative approach. However, the organizers neglected to provide an adequate framework to encourage such activities. In hindsight, the post-walk reflections should have included an activity to encourage participants to take some type of collaborative action towards making the arts become more fully alive in the neighborhood. The NoLi CDC planned to follow what groups decided to do collectively and was available to provide additional assistance if needed. The end goal and hope was that Radical Walking would build consensus through democratic participation and a greater sense of solidarity in the neighborhood.

To underscore the importance of youth involvement in the Radical Walking process, University of Kentucky landscape architecture students used the ideas from middle and high school students to develop visual plans for public spaces in the neighborhood. This effort occurred in the fall of 2015 as part of a university service-learning collaboration. The inputs from both adults and youth were reflected in the North Limestone Cultural Plan, completed by the neighborhood organization (North Limestone CDC, 2016).
Outcomes and Lessons Learned

Over the course of nine months, more than 100 walkers were guided through the neighborhood in small groups. Walkers represented a broad cross-section of the working class neighborhood - including homeowners and renters, both generational and newcomers - as well as organizations and groups who have a stake in the neighborhood: social service organizations, artists, business people, faith-based institutions, middle and high school students, teachers, immigrant groups, and city planners (see Table 3).

The walks provided community members with a visceral understanding of the neighborhood, leading to a greater awareness of public spaces and natural gathering spots. While conventional public meetings are limited in their imaginative scope, Radical Walking allowed for a more honest, emotional, and engaged reaction as it immerses participants directly in the community that is being planned for. This immersion seems to trigger memories, reactions, and thoughts more directly than traditional public meetings. In addition, the process allows individuals who might not feel comfortable engaging in a dynamic group conversation to participate as equally as individuals who feel comfortable in traditional settings.

The post-walk questionnaire and activities led to greater clarity about the issues that mattered the most to people. As mentioned earlier, the organizers should have capitalized on the Radical Walking activities with more exercises to stimulate group action. The need for neighborhood input into the cultural plan tended to overshadow the need for collective action. The organizers assumed that ‘action’ would come about after the cultural plan was published or summarized through neighborhood meetings.

Table 3
List of groups, stakeholders, and other participants engaged in Radical Walking in the North End neighborhood.

- Middle school students, teachers, staff, volunteers
- High school students, teachers, staff, volunteers
- Higher education students, faculty, staff
- Neighborhood residents
- Neighborhood associations and members
- Neighborhood/local business owners, staff, patrons
- Non-profit organization staff
- Local government agency staff
- Local religious organization members
- Refugee/immigrant groups

The service-learning project conducted by the University of Kentucky landscape architecture students further utilized the ideas gathered from the youth participants. They used this information to develop a range of conceptual public space plans and designs that enhanced the spatial functions of the neighborhood. In addition, the North Limestone Cultural Plan contained 28 recommendations about local public spaces as well as proposed implementation plans as a result of the Radical Walking process (North Limestone CDC, 2016). As of the end of 2017, nine out of the 28 recommendations have either been completed or are in progress, five of which are focused on public art.

Discussion

Implications for Community Development

The overall Radical Walking process was both enlightening and energizing for the participants because it engaged their senses and ideas and eventually led to the creation of the community-wide cultural plan development effort. Participants were excited to observe the special features and characteristics of everyday spaces often taken for granted. During the Radical Walks, individuals and groups evidenced a sense of delight and pleasure in the data collection process, while also contrasting their data with each other.

Through data compilation via post-walk surveys and activities, the research team learned more about the concerns that participants wanted to address in the neighborhood as well as suggestions to support its culture and identity. These outcomes led to discussions regarding potential community-based actions about public spaces in the North End neighborhood. The walks provided a form of asset mapping by identifying the strengths or assets of the neighborhood.

The process also triggered discussions about additional data needed for cultural development as well as insights into economic development. For example, the participants recommended there should be incentives for the creation of minority-owned businesses in the neighborhood. Community members also wanted to profile, document and share stories of successful businesses within the neighborhood. They wanted to include artists in conversations about the community development process at all stages, including during conceptual planning, engagement and execution.

In essence, Radical Walking stimulated deep discussions about changes needed in the neighborhood while also strengthening the sense of neighborhood unity. These discussions led to 59 policy recommendations emerging to deal with community services; business
development; streets and sidewalks; community gardens; privately owned public spaces such as parking lots; and arts, culture and creativity. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many residents feel a stronger sense of identity with the neighborhood after the walks.

Limitations and Further Applications

The Radical Walking participation rate and number of representative groups could have been higher with an extended project timeline. Also, logistical limitations impacting participation occurred such as weather, academic schedules, and seasonal work patterns. Although the structure of the process and tool provided clear guidance, the walks were most effective when participants were given both beginning and ending point/destinations as well as a time frame, rather than being guided in a linear fashion.

It may be necessary to facilitate dozens of walks to accommodate a variety of groups in order to maximize public input. One population not adequately represented in this project, because of unsafe sidewalks and pedestrian crossings, was people in wheelchairs or otherwise physically challenged. In addition, the researchers could have introduced other aspects into the walks; for example, some walks could have been conducted with blindfolds to heighten other senses. It is important to note that research should not be confined to just the five senses. Economic, demographic and historic data were also used to complement the information gathered from the walks.

Another way to incorporate the walks into the community development plan engagement process would be as an activity during community dinners, small study groups or house meetings. Walks conducted during different seasons, weather conditions and time of day also will produce different observations. For instance, a nighttime walk during a city festival will be distinct from a quiet early morning walk, and a winter walk will differ from a summer walk. Inclement weather during a walk could affect how and what participants might experience or even lead to the cancellation of walks.

In summary, Radical Walking is a form of structured sauntering in which participants use the five senses to identify strengths and opportunities, and provide critiques about what is needed in a particular space. The walks take place in small groups which are perceived to be more people-friendly than large public meetings. It is essential that Radical Walking experiences be accompanied by post-walk reflections or surveys in order to maximize participant input. Ultimately, as an engagement tool, Radical Walking provides great potential for community capacity building and economic development efforts to enhance community vibrancy.

Conclusion

Radical Walking has long been underutilized as an engagement tool in the community development process. Radical Walking can open new opportunities for community development practitioners. Instead of traditional town hall processes, which tend to reinforce already existing power dynamics in communities, Radical Walking provides a more equitable groundwork for gathering community input - creating an even playing field for participation. Furthermore, Radical Walking is a more personal and intimate form of community development planning - by validating and honoring the direct reactions that people have to the places they call home. Radical Walking's direct exposure techniques can be visceral, honest, and imaginative - a framework more closely linked to the lived human experience than a traditional town hall meeting context.
References


Debord, G. [1957]. The naked city: illustration de hypothèse des plaques tournantes en psychogéographique / G.-E. Debord. Permild &amp; Rosen-gren. [The illustration is housed at the Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.]


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