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To cite this article: John Dennis Anderson (2017) The medium is the mother: Elsie McLuhan, elocution, and her son Marshall, Text and Performance Quarterly, 37:2, 110-128, DOI: [10.1080/10462937.2017.1349261](https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2017.1349261)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2017.1349261>



Published online: 13 Sep 2017.



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The medium is the mother: Elsie McLuhan, elocution, and her son Marshall

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ABSTRACT

This essay pays homage to Leland Roloff by exploring the influence on Marshall McLuhan of his mother Elsie Hall McLuhan's career as a platform elocutionist, bridging periods in the history of Performance Studies. Canadian-born Elsie Hall McLuhan (1889–1961) studied elocution and expression and toured her platform recitals in the 1920s and 1930s. Her programs included solo performances of plays, character sketches (some in dialect), and other works of literature ranging from lowbrow to highbrow. Accounts of Elsie McLuhan's performance career and her correspondence with her son provide evidence of influence on her son's intellectual development.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 January 2017
Accepted 10 April 2017

KEYWORDS

Leland Roloff; Marshall McLuhan; Elsie Hall McLuhan; elocution; expression; oral interpretation

Leland Roloff's 1973 textbook *The Perception and Evocation of Literature* was a visually arresting departure from other oral interpretation textbooks of its time. Its squarish width was striking, but even more attention-grabbing were the photographs, which Roloff intended as "nonverbal probes of each chapter's emphasis" (Preface). I recall as an undergraduate at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, poring over the Magritte reproductions and the mysterious photographic images Roloff used to suggest the metaworlds of literature. Roloff's book itself opened metaworlds of new ways to conceptualize the oral interpretation of literature as a return to acoustic space. Roloff drew on the work of media theorist Marshall McLuhan for this key concept in his approach to the performance of literature, and he taught classes at Northwestern University on the history of oral traditions that placed the field of oral interpretation in a vast macrocosmic context of transitions from primary orality to print to electronic orality.¹ My goal here is to trace a microcosmic manifestation of these epic transitions in the line of influence from a platform reciter to Marshall McLuhan to Leland Roloff. I pay homage to Roloff by exploring the influence on him of McLuhan and especially on McLuhan of the career of his mother Elsie Hall McLuhan as a touring "Reader and Impersonator." This study thus provides a footnote to the study of oral tradition, and it traces a thread of historical continuity that bridges periods in the history of Performance Studies from elocution to expression to oral interpretation.²

Roloff directly cites McLuhan only three times in *The Perception and Evocation of Literature*, but McLuhan's understanding of media permeates Roloff's book. In his first

chapter, “Literature as a Presentational Act,” Roloff identifies the oral tradition of the spoken performance of verbal art as “presentation in acoustic space” (11), and he notes that the invention of movable type displaced the acoustic-space world of literature for four centuries. He claims that electronic media, though, have redeveloped and expanded acoustic space. “In fact,” Roloff notes, “Marshall McLuhan uses the phrase to describe a world which is sound oriented, which is dependent upon sound for the meaningful learning of culture, and which is filled with machines and devices for instantaneous ‘hearing’ and ‘seeing’” (11). Then, in Roloff’s last chapter, titled “Multiforms: Experimental Approaches,” he turns to multiperformers (or group performance), mixed-media and multimedia performance, and creative syntheses (such as happenings). In discussing mixed- and multimedia, Roloff references McLuhan’s famous distinction between “hot” and “cool” media: “Applying these terms to literature,” Roloff explains:

we would classify T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as “cool,” for repeated scanings of the poem yield more and more information. Longfellow’s “The Ride of Paul Revere” is “hot”; once heard or read, its linear, sequential development and logicity of parts fill the listener’s or reader’s ear/eye with a totality of information so that repeated scanings are not necessary. (351–52)

Finally, Roloff references McLuhan’s famous aphorism “The medium is the message” when he discusses the messages or “languages” of various media (353).

The Perception and Evocation of Literature contains the standard tropes of an oral interpretation textbook (treating behavior and gesture, figurative language, style, personae, literary modes and genres, etc.), but it is a textbook that explicitly links old and new traditions of oral performance of literature, as Roloff states in his first paragraph. Electronic orality “entirely envelops the participants. This sense of envelopment is the restoration of the oral tradition; but it is, at the same time, the creation of a new one” (3).³ A similar sense of continuity, of what is old becoming new again, is also expressed in Elsie McLuhan’s elocutionary influence on her son Marshall McLuhan and his influence on Leland Roloff, who placed “somatic thinking – that is, thinking, intuiting, and feeling about literature with the body” at the center of his pedagogy. For Roloff, “performances of literature originating somatically are not mere performances nor acts of self-indulgent posturings imposed upon unwary audiences by ‘elocutionists,’ ‘actors,’ and ‘readers’ – terms stamped as pejorative by those who opt for silent reading and cool reflection” (3). Significantly, while Roloff here distinguishes somatic thinking from “self-indulgent posturings,” he also distances himself from the “cool” reflection of silent readers who pass judgment on elocutionary performance; he remains open to the “hotness” of embodied performance. “Cool and hot,” Roloff notes in the last chapter of his book, “are not judgmental terms; they describe the nature of a response to an event” (352). Roloff’s approach to performance, like McLuhan’s to media, is capacious and expansive. Roloff states in his Preface to *The Perception and Evocation of Literature* (in regrettably gendered terms that seem dated to our contemporary ears) that the book’s purpose, “more than any other, is to lead the student to respond with all of his being to the ‘touch of art’ – to that which is most expressive of man, and in so doing, by that touch, to be changed” (Preface). This holistic response by a student is evocative of McLuhan’s emphasis on the overall ratio of the senses and how various technologies extend and recalibrate the balance among them. Art, for McLuhan, as he claimed in the introduction to the second edition of *Understanding*

Media, while its “purpose may be not to enable us to change,” was “more than ever a means of training perception and judgment” (xi, ix).

McLuhan’s earliest exposure to art, particularly the arts of elocution and expression, was through his mother. Elsie Naomi Hall McLuhan (1889–1961) studied elocution and expression under two 1906 graduates of Emerson College of Oratory, and she toured Canada and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s with her platform recitals, billing herself as a “Reader and Impersonator” in her publicity.⁴ Her programs included character sketches (some in dialect), solo performances of plays, and other works of literature, both popular and classical. She often performed in churches and for women’s clubs, and her texts were sometimes inspirational, such as Henry Van Dyke’s “The Mansion.” One review of a 1934 recital in Montreal notes:

This entertainer is also an author. Her sketches, “The Church Tea” and “An Historical Resume,” are witty and well written. In fact, “An Historical Resume,” which is a skit on an old maid lecturing on English history and getting all her facts wrong, is not far short of brilliant. (“Comedy Sketches”)

Her son described her as “the Ruth Draper of Canada, but better” (Kostelanetz). (Born in New York City, Draper was famous throughout the world for her performances as a diseuse, or performer of monologues she wrote herself, from 1921 until her death in 1956.)⁵ In 1933, Elsie McLuhan became the Director of Dramatic Art in the Von Kunits Academy of Music and Art in Toronto, and she participated in a summer workshop at the Pasadena Playhouse in California in 1939, where she introduced her son to his future wife, acting student Corinne Lewis. Elsie McLuhan was living in Detroit in the early 1940s and directing plays, retiring to live near her son and his family in Toronto in 1953. An examination of the records of Elsie McLuhan’s performance career provides evidence of a striking juxtaposition in her repertoire of high-, middle-, and lowbrow literature that reflects her son’s later interest in the products of popular culture as well as canonical and high modernist literature. Elsie McLuhan’s extensive correspondence with her son also provides insight into her influence as a platform artist on her son’s intellectual and aesthetic development.

Elsie McLuhan’s training and career

The future mother of Marshall McLuhan was born on 10 January 1889 on a farm near Kingston Station in Nova Scotia. The Hall family had roots in Nova Scotia that went back four generations. Elsie graduated from Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia with a teaching certificate. McLuhan biographer W. Terrence Gordon’s discussion of her elocutionary training at Acadia bears quoting at some length:

Among the faculty members there was Miss Josephine L. Goodspeed, who had trained at Boston’s Emerson College of Oratory [Class of 1906] and brought much of that institution’s program with her.

Elocution, in the Emerson tradition,⁶ was a fine and complex art, involving far more than techniques of voice control and public speaking. Miss Goodspeed taught her students to express “by means of the body, the face, and the voice, the various emotions of the soul” [Acadia University calendar, 1907–08, p. 27]. Elocution promoted personal development through the awakening of latent powers and literary appreciation through the acquisition of interpretive skills. In this respect, Elsie’s grounding in the elocutionary craft, later

honed to perfection during her early years in Winnipeg (and absorbed by both her sons at that time), converged with the performance-based aspect of literary New Criticism that her son Marshall would learn at Cambridge University. The parallel did not end there, for the Course of Study in Elocution at Acadia sought to offer students powers for the true expression of thought and emotion and to encourage independent thinking. The syllabus speaks of students “developing their originality,” the course “enabling them to speak with conviction and in a pleasing manner, upon any subject in which they may be interested,” the method aiming to “arouse and keep the imagination active while speaking” [ibid. 42]. These were skills that Elsie cultivated and passed on to her sons. (Gordon 7–8)

Gordon acknowledges the impact of the Emerson tradition on Elsie McLuhan through her teachers, a tradition that transcended elocutionary craft to embrace college founder Charles Wesley Emerson’s philosophy of expression.⁷ Gordon also notes that Marshall’s introduction to New Criticism through I. A. Richards at Cambridge University complemented his exposure to elocution and expression through his mother. New Criticism was a major factor in the evolution of expression into oral interpretation, so Marshall McLuhan was in a good position to appreciate the implications of changes in approaches to performance of literature, as his letters attest. McLuhan scholar Liss Jeffrey in her 1997 McGill University dissertation “The Heat and the Light of Marshall McLuhan: A 1990s Reappraisal,” notes that:

[His] mother Elsie left home to pursue a career performing on stage as an elocutionist and recital artist. Impressed by this early exposure to the practice of rhetoric as theatrical monologue, his letters show that McLuhan learned early the importance of audiences, and the nuances of performance, taste, and reception. (173)

Elsie Hall furthered her studies in elocution and expression after her marriage. When her parents migrated west to Alberta in 1906, Elsie stayed behind in Nova Scotia, teaching school in East Margareville, before joining her parents in 1908 in Alberta. While teaching school in Alberta, she boarded with the family of James McLuhan in Manville, where she met her soon-to-be husband. On 31 December 1909, Elsie married James’s son Herbert McLuhan. In less than a year, Elsie convinced her husband to move to Alberta’s capital, Edmonton, where their son Herbert Marshall McLuhan was born on 21 July 1911, and his brother Maurice two years later. During World War I, the family moved to Winnipeg, the capital of Manitoba. Winnipeg was the location of the Alice Leone Mitchell School of Expression, founded in 1912. Like Josephine L. Goodspeed, Mitchell was a 1906 graduate of Emerson College of Oratory; Mitchell had gone on to complete some graduate work at Emerson in 1906–1907 before heading the oratory department at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick for six years. Mitchell conducted her Winnipeg school in her home, and Elsie McLuhan became one of her star pupils. Winnipeg history blogger Christian Cassidy has noted that “Mitchell was a regular on the city’s society pages and her students held numerous well-attended recitals each year in churches and theatres around the city”. At first under Mitchell’s tutelage, Elsie began to give recitals locally, most often in churches but also at least once each at a Lions’ club, a lodge, a hospital, and a movie theatre, according to the local newspaper. In 1922, when her sons were eleven and nine, she began to arrange tours for herself, hiring a housekeeper to care for her family, according to McLuhan biographer William Toye (McLuhan *Letters* 2). She would tour east as far as Halifax and west as far as Victoria in alternating years

(Gordon 12).⁸ For example, the *Winnipeg Evening Tribune* on 13 December 1930 reported that:

Elsie McLuhan has returned from an extended recital tour of cities in Eastern Canada and the United States. Cities visited included Toronto, Minneapolis and St. Paul. A return engagement for a series of six recitals will be made early in February to Toronto, and later recitals will be given at St. Paul and Minneapolis under the auspices of the Women's clubs of the Twin cities. ("Elsie McLuhan Returns from Successful Tour")

In 1933, when Marshall was a student at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg (earning his BA in 1933 and his MA in 1934), Elsie took her younger son Maurice with her to Toronto to live. Though Herbert and Elsie McLuhan never divorced, they lived apart for the rest of their lives.

"Putting on"

In an interview with Nina Sutton, Marshall McLuhan characterized his mother's career as "a one woman theater. She travelled from coast to coast from year to year putting on plays and acts. Single. Yes, she put on whole plays single. Played all the parts, yes. With big audiences, yes" (Gordon 357). In later years, Elsie reminded Toronto neighbor Jack Birt of the actress Rosalind Russell. "He remembered her long, flowing dresses, the chiffon scarf she often carried, her elocutionist's expressive tones and waves of the scarf in wide gestures to emphasize her very positive ideas" (Gordon 166). From 1933 when she moved to Toronto, Marshall and his mother maintained a rich epistolary relationship, "suffused with warmth and affection, kindled partly by distance, partly by the mutual support and admiration each offered the other – she for his educational attainments and he for his mother's forays into acting and directing" (William Toye in McLuhan *Letters* 2). For example, writing to his mother from Cambridge University in England on 3 November 1934 (where McLuhan began studying that fall), he gave her advice for an upcoming talk she was to deliver:

I would elaborate the theme that elocution has suffered, more than singing, from its seeming proximity to common parlance. Point out that excellence therein is as far removed from the flowers and intonations of rhetorical oratory (with its narrow compass of tones and showy emphasis) as is excellence in poetry (with its organic relation or interdependence *between content and tone and metrical patterns.*) from the easy swing of doggerel. (McLuhan *Letters* 34)

Here McLuhan articulates raising the standards of excellence in elocution above shallow showiness and emphasizes naturalness in delivery, an aspiration characteristic of the shift away from elocution in the expression movement.

As cited above, Marshall McLuhan said of his mother's performances "she *put on* whole plays single;" she "played all the parts" (Gordon 357; italics mine). Significantly, McLuhan described his own style as a lecturer in terms of "putting on" his audiences – in multiple, punning senses discussed by his biographer Philip Marchand.⁹ From his studies of rhetoric, McLuhan learned the value of provoking his audiences:

He rarely went before any group with a prepared text. Armed, at best, with a few headings, he "put on" the audience by appearing to know something they did not know about the very

things they were most certain they knew. (McLuhan believed that speakers who read from prepared texts put on the texts, not the audience.) (190)

In contrast to his mother who “put on” the personae of literary texts, McLuhan “put on” various public personae in his lecture performances:

By “putting on” audiences and trying to outmaneuver opponents in debate, McLuhan projected the protean face of an actor, capable of assuming different expressions without being committed to any one of them. ... When he was being recorded he tended to put on different tones of voice with the same facility he put on facial expressions.... The moment’s performance was what McLuhan relished. At his best – perhaps when he was not so conscious of “putting on” his audience – these performances could make a roomful of people come alive. (Marchand 191)

When McLuhan began a serious study of the work of James Joyce around 1950, particularly *Finnegans Wake*, he would read sections aloud in an Irish brogue. According to Marchand, “McLuhan fancied he had a talent for mimicking accents” (103).

In a 24 May 2016 post titled “The put-on” in his blog *McLuhan’s New Sciences*, philosophy scholar Cameron McEwen explored the impact of Elsie McLuhan’s career as an elocutionist on her son, noting their ongoing theoretical discussions about the subject. McEwen calls particular attention to the complex layering of voices in Elsie’s performances, identifying the “phantasmagorical” effect created as key to her son’s career.

The particular language of a poem was used, or “put on”, by the poet in “the presentation of self” [in the sense explored by sociologist Erving Goffman] in his or her particular individual and social circumstances. And then this first level use could be used again by an elocutionist in presenting such poems in *her* “presentation of self” to audiences with *their own* complex “assumptions” and “investments”.

In sum, Elsie specialized in “putting on” different points of view in a situation where success depended entirely on a related ability to “put on” the role of “impersonator” before people who had “put on” the role of an audience. There is a house of mirrors effect here where points of view are reflected within points of view reflected within yet further points of view.

McLuhan’s whole career may usefully (not to say exclusively) be understood as the attempt to understand this phantasmagoria – an attempt he himself often likened to Alice’s adventures behind the looking glass and to Joyce’s adventures in that other literary isolate, *Finnegans Wake*. (McEwen)

McEwen notes that in McLuhan’s book *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout* (written with Barrington Nevitt) McLuhan explicitly describes the experience of “putting on” literary voices as an extension of our language analogous to the larger “putting on” of media:

When we read a poem or listen to a song, we put on an extension of our language. Such extensions bring into relation to us the experiences of multitudes of lives. These experiences can be the means of enlarging or sharpening and enriching our private perceptions. However, when we “put on” an entire service environment, such as radio or TV, something more seems to happen than in the case of the individual means provided by a poem or song or book. (McLuhan *Take Today* 146)

Ultimately, McEwen is more interested in the implications of “putting on” for McLuhan’s concept of ontology, “the dance of being” or the “gestures of being itself,” as McLuhan describes it in the context of the work of James Joyce. Suffice it to say here that Elsie

McLuhan's "putting on" of elocutionary performances was a rich source of inspiration to her son and bears a close look.

Elsie McLuhan's repertoire

The texts Elsie McLuhan performed in her recitals ranged from canonical to popular works, some in dialects such as Irish, 'Negro', and French-Canadian, and with a wide range of personae, suggesting that she had great facility as an "impersonator." More than 40 texts performed by Elsie McLuhan are mentioned in two sources: newspaper notices in the *Winnipeg Evening Tribune* from 1921 to 1933 (and one in the *Montreal Gazette* in 1934), and W. Terrence Gordon's list of her repertoire as documented in the McLuhan collection at the National Archives of Canada (357). I have been able to identify and locate about 30 of these, 5 of which were mentioned as being performed multiple times. The one most often noted as performed (five times) is the Christmas story, "The Mansion" by Henry Van Dyke; the dramatic monologue in verse "Wolverine" by E. Pauline Johnson and the one-act plays *The Florist Shop* by Winifred Hawkrigde and *The Slave with Two Faces* by Mary Carolyn Davies were each noted as performed by her on three occasions; *The School for Scandal* by Richard Brinsley Sheridan was cited as performed on two occasions.

The most highbrow works I have found documented as performed by Elsie McLuhan were plays by Shakespeare (*Romeo and Juliet*) and Sheridan. When McLuhan performed with other students of Alice Leone Mitchell in an elocution recital at the Fort Garry Hotel in Winnipeg in May of 1930, a reviewer noted that Shakespeare and Sheridan were given "honored places on the program." McLuhan's only named contribution to that evening, though, was Constance D'Arcy Mackay's short historical verse play "Ashes of Roses" (1915). The piece is a sentimental melodrama in iambic pentameter in which the eighteenth-century actress Kitty Clive renounces a man from her past Clive still loves to a young rival. Mackay was a prolific author of plays for children and historical pageants and served on the national advisory board for the Children's Theatre of Emerson College (Davis). Mackay's "Ashes of Roses" is more middlebrow than highbrow, as are the majority of the works I have identified as performed by McLuhan (mostly in the 1920s), with some showing popular appeal closer to such lowbrow entertainments as vaudeville.

Marion Wilson Kimber in her book *The Elocutionists: Women, Music, and the Spoken Word* notes that the height of elocution coincided with attempts to elevate public tastes, yet the works that elocutionists actually performed ranged widely on the axis of cultural hierarchy:

Female performers did recite Shakespeare, Tennyson, and Longfellow, but ... they were just as likely to imitate the dialects of African Americans, European immigrants, or small children; to give humorous sketches appropriate for vaudeville; or to recite poetry from popular periodicals that hardly qualified as literary masterworks. (18–20)

Kimber describes "countless works" on elocution programs as "middlebrow" (with the caveat that the term was only coined in the 1920s) "yet they may well have represented high culture to the audiences that heard them" (20), and she notes that some authors once considered highbrow such as Longfellow have since fallen in critical estimation. The repertoire of Elsie McLuhan is an excellent case in point of Kimber's broader analysis.

For example, in addition to the texts already named, her repertoire included other monologues in prose, poetry, fiction, and other plays. Prose monologues she performed included “Hunting an Apartment” by May Isabel Fisk, “The Trials of a Census Man” by an unknown author, and “Should Women Propose?” by Dorothy Dix. Poetry in her repertoire included “My Ships” by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, “Encouragement” by Paul Laurence Dunbar, “The Red Canoe” by William Henry Drummond, “Jacob Unrecognized” by Isabel Ecclestone Mackay, “The Part that Willie Gets” by Carl Werner, “When Father Played Baseball” by Edgar A. Guest, “The House by the Side of the Road” by Sam Walter Foss, “I Have a Rendezvous With Death” by Alan Seeger, and “The Walrus and the Carpenter” by Lewis Carroll. Among the works of fiction she performed were “The Story of the Other Wise Man” by Henry Van Dyke, *The Land of the Blue Flower* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, “The Man among the Drums” by Beatrix Demarest Lloyd, and “Mademoiselle” by Florence Guertin Tuttle. Other plays she performed included *Within the Law* by Bayard Veiller, “The Exchange” by Althea Thurston, “Pauline Pavlovna” by Thomas Bailey Aldrich, and *Dust of the Road* by Kenneth Sawyer Goodman. Examining the texts performed (at least these reported in the press and as listed by Gordon) yields insight into the scope of Elsie McLuhan’s performance work and reveals the variety of voices and the range of cultural material to which she exposed her son as well as her audiences. Much of her repertoire reflected the norms of women elocutionists and reciters of her day. As Nan Johnson notes of late-nineteenth-century collections for recitation, genres recommended for women promoted “the cultural message ... that women should be associated primarily with the performance of sentimentality” (Nan Johnson 39–40). Yet, as Jane Donawerth explains, “elocution reinforces training in the performance of gender, but may also become a site of resistance to gender ideology” (124). Elsie McLuhan’s performance of literature in dialect is of particular interest in terms of cultural norms and how she navigated within them, as are the gender norms expressed in the works. Newspaper accounts allow an analysis of a sample of the works that she programed in the early 1920s.

Elsie McLuhan’s programs 1921–1924

In 1921, the *Winnipeg Evening Tribune* reported that on 12 November “The program for a musicale to be given ... at Victoria hospital, River Ave., Wednesday evening,” would include two readings by Elsie McLuhan, “Hunting an Apartment” and “Apple Blossom Time” (unidentified) (with music accompaniment). “Hunting an Apartment” is a comic monologue written by May Isabel Fisk, a widely published author of satirical monologues in the early-twentieth century who also performed her monologues on vaudeville stages in New York, Boston, and London. Julia Hans characterizes Fisk’s monologues as expressing “women’s discontent through a mask of humor at a time when popular writers idealized feminine felicity and passivity” (130). The speaker in “Hunting an Apartment,” published in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* in 1903, is a bossy, mercurial young woman who looks at three apartments in succession, with her submissive fiancé and their dog in tow, only to be told (when each time it comes out that the couple is not married) that the apartments are all rented. The humor of the piece grows out of the woman’s distracted chatter, full of tangents and contradictions. Fisk’s work was championed by *Harper’s* editor William Dean Howells, was published in eight collections of her monologues and stories, and

has been compared to Twain's performed humorous works such as "The Story of Grandfather's Ram" (Piacentino). The vaudevillian humor of "Hunting an Apartment" is fairly broad satire of leisure class women, typical of what Hans refers to as Fisk's "lady satires." Some of Fisk's other monologues are in dialects tailored to working and middle class audiences (Hans 131): "Whereas the lady satires make the women sound educated but look foolish, the dialect satires make the women sound uneducated but look wise" (133).

In June of the next year, 1922, a "concert party" broadcast on radio by the *Tribune*, which "scored one of the biggest successes which can be recalled," included two readings by "Mrs." Elsie McLuhan: "The Trials of a Census Man" and "My Ships" ("Joe Lyons' and Merry Party Give Concert").¹⁰ The *Tribune's* reporter gushed that "It is really too late in the day to sing the praises of Mrs. McLuhan as one of the very finest of local elocutionists and readers, every beautifully-enunciated word which fell from her was a perfection of fineness." "The Trials of a Census Man" is mostly a rambling comic monologue in Irish-American working class dialect by Mrs. Rafferty, a mother addressing a census taker. It was published anonymously in *The New York Sun* and reprinted in 1900 in *Current Literature*. The text notates Mrs. Rafferty's dialect with various techniques such as omitting final consonants (buyin', workin'), phonetic spellings ("bukés" for "books," "bekase" for "because," "mate" for "meat," "gur-rl" for "girl"), and syntax and diction ("mebbe I oughtn't to spind it, but the sun was so bright glory be;" "you should see the dignacious way he'd be takin' his hat off to a leddy, and him goin' down the street") (Anonymous, "The Trials of a Census Man"). (I will have more to say about Elsie McLuhan's performances of dialect literature further on.)

"My Ships" is a sentimental, heavily rhymed poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, an immensely popular poet in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, who lamented in her autobiography that "the highbrows have never had any use for me," according to Virginia Woolf. Wilcox dispatched the highbrows, Woolf wrote in her amusing 1919 review essay "Wilcoxiana," with the phrase "May you grow at least a sage bush of a heart to embellish your desert of intellect!" (Woolf 178). "My Ships" imagines the loss of a figurative fleet of ships laden with precious freight as enduring as long as the speaker's "love-ship" comes "home to me" (Wilcox). Paul H. Gray identifies Wilcox as part of the social phenomenon of popular poet-performers of the period from roughly 1870 to 1930, noting that the movement was "self-consciously and deliberately 'low-brow,' seeking a following among neither the readers nor the writers of traditional poetry With the important exception of folk literature, it was America's most oral poetry" (Gray 1). Wilcox herself was not a performer, but her work became a staple in the repertoire of elocutionists such as Elsie McLuhan who chose material to appeal to the same mainstream audiences as poet-performers such as James Whitcomb Riley and Will Carleton (Gray).

As mentioned earlier, it was in 1922 that Elsie started touring with her performances. Back in Winnipeg on 23 December 1922, the local newspaper reported that she performed "The Mansion" by Henry Van Dyke in a special Christmas program at Nassau Baptist Church. Van Dyke's tale, reminiscent of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, is an enduringly popular holiday story about a wealthy man's dream of heaven teaching him that "only those gifts in which the giver forgets himself" are worthy. Van Dyke, a respected Princeton literature professor and diplomat, "seems likely to go down in our literary history as a representative of the stifling gentility against which the early modern writers struggled,"

according to Alfred Bendixen (341). This was to be a recurring selection for Elsie McLuhan's recitals at churches in the 1920s, and she also performed another Christmas story by Van Dyke, "The Story of the Other Wise Man," in 1929. The prominence of Van Dyke's "quaintly artificial and overly didactic" works (Bendixen 341) in Elsie McLuhan's repertoire is indicative of a conventionality (perhaps more in her audiences than in her own tastes, to be fair) that her son would encourage her to transcend by performing modernist authors. Another index of the conventionality of Elsie McLuhan's repertoire is her performance of dialect literature.

Elsie McLuhan's 17 February 1923 "Pop" Concert in Grace Church is notable for performances of two poems in dialect, "Wolverine" by E. Pauline Johnson and "Encouragement" by Paul Laurence Dunbar. "Wolverine" is a dramatic monologue in rhyming tercets in mostly iambic heptameter; the speaker is a white trapper who speaks in a folksy dialect and tells his listener a story of the unjust treatment by white men of an Indian brave who tried to help them:

Wild? You bet, 'twas wild then, an' few an' far between
The squatters' shacks, for whites was scarce as furs when things is green,
An' only reds an' "Hudson's" men was all the folk I seen. (Johnson)

E. Pauline Johnson (1861–1913) was a Canadian writer whose father was Mohawk; later in life she adopted the name Tekahionwake. Reginald Buckley reported in 1913 that:

In 1907 she toured the American Chatauqua [sic] Institutes, and all her life has brought her art to the people as a living thing. Her poetry is the very stuff for recitation – vivid, human, not too literary in the narrow sense. Is there anything more poignant than the tale of Wolverine? He is an Indian who lends his horse to a white man beset by wolves. Wolverine escapes on foot, but some time later comes upon a convoy of whites, who are so terrified at the sight of armed Indians that they shoot him This dramatic quality marks a number of her poems. These obviously are written to be spoken in public, and have a fine tense rhythm. (84)

McLuhan presumably performed "Wolverine" again in January of 1924, when the *Winnipeg Evening Tribune* reported that "Miss Elsie McLuhan" had returned from "a successful tour of western cities, from here to Victoria, with charming appearance, unaffected manner and wonderful voice-placing" to present "her first Winnipeg recital in Nassau Baptist church Tuesday night before a large audience." The reviewer went on to say that:

Miss McLuhan showed great versatility in her program. Pauline Johnson's smoothly-flowing cadences gave her an opportunity of which she took advantage. The selections included melodious narrative to quaint and rollicking humor and all were given with rare insight and finish. ("Miss Elsie McLuhan Pleases at Recital")

The dialect in "Wolverine" is not as salient as the melodramatic narrative and the didactic theme of injustice against Native Americans, and it is notable that the selection has a white male speaker, even though it was written as a performance piece by a mixed-race Canadian woman for herself to perform. More dissonant to contemporary sensibilities are McLuhan's performances of African-American dialect pieces, but cultural and historical context is important.

Elsie McLuhan and black dialect literature

Such dialect pieces were crowd-pleasers in the early-twentieth century, and Gavin Jones, in his 1999 book *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America*, provides helpful background for understanding the phenomenon. Jones explores the complexity and ambiguity of the “cult of the vernacular” in late-nineteenth-century America, including dialect performances on the lecture circuit and vaudeville. Between the Civil War and the early 1900s, he summarizes, “there was an overall movement away from demeaning appropriations of vernacular voices toward the use of dialect to represent the multifarious features of minority culture” and in the twentieth century to draw from dialect “to enrich diverse depictions of a multicultural nation” (211). In his discussion of “vaudeville dialectics,” he notes that comedians would commonly layer minority selves in single personae: Jewish comedians performing Irish songs; Irish performers as “Dutch” (i.e. German) comedians dancing Scottish highland flings, etc. This “multilayered fusion of selves” is evocative of the “putting on” of personae that Elsie McLuhan exhibited and on which her son rified in his sense of “putting on” (176–77).

Elsie McLuhan’s use of dialect in performance, though, was inflected by her training in elocution and oral interpretation, which strove for a more middlebrow (if not highbrow) standard than lowbrow vaudevillians or comedic lecturers (Kimber 109–13). Yet these lines often blurred in Elsie McLuhan’s performances, as suggested by her choice of material. In a 1922 book titled *Dialects for Oral Interpretation*, Gertrude Johnson, an influential professor of oral interpretation at the University of Wisconsin from 1910 to 1944 (Skinner), noted that schools of expression neglected the study of dialects, including her own alma mater, S. S. Curry’s School of Expression in Boston, although Marion Kimber states that “Several dialect types were included in Emerson College’s ‘Platform Art’ course” (109).¹¹ Johnson wrote that:

Dialect is not generally employed as a means or method for benefiting the individual in vocal and bodily reactions, nor is much time devoted to a study of its philosophy and possible advantages Often, then, it may happen that . . . Dialect may come to be considered more or less of a trick performance, rather than a fundamental study of importance to any teacher or interpreter. (Gertrude Johnson 7–8)

Gertrude Johnson, who was a pioneer in graduate education in oral interpretation and communication, attempted a scholarly study of dialects for oral interpretation in her book, warning her readers to be wary of sinking to demeaning stereotypes. She discusses black dialect (referencing the work of African-American dialect poet Paul Laurence Dunbar), arguing that:

Sympathetic understanding is an element absolutely essential to Dialect. The author must have this, and identification in the character situation to be set forth, if he would appeal to the auditor or reader. It must appear in all of his work, whether it be humorous, tragic, pathetic, or tender. (14)

She warns that “Negro Dialect” especially is abused:

[M]any pseudo-authors who have no real appreciation of the wealth of beauty and rich humor back of the Dialect use the Dialect as an end for some poor mock-situation, putting uncouth and untrue expressions into the character’s mouth. For the instructor or pupil of interpretation a word to the wise is sufficient: “Know your authors”. (Johnson 15)¹²

Elsie McLuhan's repertoire included at least three pieces in black dialect: Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Encouragement" (1913), Dorothy Dix's "Should Women Propose?" (1914), and the anonymous sketch "The Ship of Faith" (1887).¹³ The works by Dunbar and Dix both have female speakers and present them encouraging reluctant suitors. Dunbar's dramatic monologue is in six nine-line verses, each verse consisting of four rhyming couplets ending with the line "Speak up, Ike, an' 'spress yo'se'f." The speaker addresses her caller, Ike Johnson, as she teases and flirts with him, ending with the last verse:

Ike, I loves you, – yes, I does;
 You 's my choice, and allus was.
 Laffin' at you ain't no harm. –
 Go 'way, dahky, whah's yo' arm?
 Hug me closer – dah, dat 's right!
 Was n't you a awful sight,
 Havin' me to baig you so?
 Now ax whut you want to know, –
 Speak up, Ike, an' 'spress yo'se'f!

Once celebrated, African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) has been largely dismissed by critics since the 1920s when James Weldon Johnson suggested that his dialect poetry perpetuated the minstrel and plantation traditions embedded in white depictions of black speech. Dunbar had performed for enthusiastic audiences his dialect poetry, the success of which was a mixed blessing for him, lamenting that writing in dialect is "the only way I can get them to listen to me" (Jones 183). Gavin Jones noted that "So popular were Dunbar's live performances that he could boast in 1901 that he had become a teacher of 'elocution,' educating eager Dunbareans in how to recite his work properly" (261). In his poetry as well as his performances of it, Jones argues, Dunbar managed to interfuse authentic black folk culture with white reappropriation of it in a complex way: "Here was a black man parodying what was predominantly a white literary parody of black speech with the mixed results of both confirming racial conventions and refiguring them, from within, with his vernacular black difference" (207). Elsie McLuhan's performance of "Encouragement" adds another layer of complexity, presumably evoking as well as a performance across race: the image of a woman manipulating a man into marrying her, an ambivalent image of a woman with feminist agency but to a patriarchal end.¹⁴

The *Winnipeg Evening Tribune* on 6 April 1927 reviewed a recital by Elsie McLuhan at the Nassau Baptist Church, noting that "Should Women Propose? a witty dialogue between two negresses, was ... well received" ("Character Sketches Feature Entertainment"). "Should Women Propose?" is a monologue in black dialect included in Canadian elocutionist Jessie Alexander's collection of her 1916 *Platform Sketches Original and Adapted* and noted there as authored by Dorothy Dix but altered for recitation by Alexander. Dorothy Dix was the pen name of Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer, noted as the forerunner of today's gossip columnists. I have identified the original in a chapter in Dix's 1914 book *Mirandy* titled "Women Popping the Question." In the piece as slightly adapted by Alexander, Mandy (changed from Mirandy) recounts her friend Alviry

telling her she plans to propose to the widower Eben; after Alviry leaves, Mandy responds to her daughter Ma'y Jane's question "Ma, do you believe in de women proposin' to de men?" The second half of the piece is Mandy's humorous account of how women have ways to get men to propose, including her own story of getting her husband Ike to propose to her 30 years earlier. John Shelton Reed in his book *Dixie Bohemia: A French Quarter Circle in the 1920s*, discusses Dix's "Mirandy" stories in the context of so-called "darky" material and notes that it was produced "for the market – which, incidentally, was mostly not in the South" (65).

On 18 October 1929, the *Winnipeg Evening Tribune* noted that reader and impersonator Elsie McLuhan provided a large audience with "a most interesting entertainment" by "impersonating over twenty characters of varied nationalities, times and places" ("Fine Recital"). One of the selections mentioned in the review was "a quaint negro sketch, 'The Ship of Faith.'" Presumably this is the anonymous sketch in black dialect by that title published in 1887 in *Baker's Comic and Dialect Speaker: Readings and Recitations for School or Platform in Negro and Irish Dialect*. It begins "A certain colored brother had been holding forth to his little flock upon the ever fruitful topic of *Faith*, and he closed his exhortation about as follows," and the remainder of the text is a comic parable about a man's hubris in swimming alongside "de Ship of Faith" instead of getting on board and as a result only narrowly avoiding death by being saved from a shark by a lion, with the non-sequitur punch line being "don't put your trust in no such circumstance. Dat pore man he done got saved, but I tell ye *de Lord ain't gwine to furnish a lion for every nigger!*" Consistent with Gavin Jones's thesis that dialect literature gradually moved away from demeaning representations of race, this text from a quarter century earlier than the texts by Dunbar and Dix, as problematic as they are, is more blatantly offensive. The speakers in Dunbar's and Dix's works are both tricksters who make others the butt of the jokes, but "The Ship of Faith" seems to be holding up the speaker to ridicule.

Marshall McLuhan's response to his mother's performance career

Given Elsie McLuhan's inclusion of these dialect pieces in her repertoire, some references to dialect performances in her son Marshall's letters to her are enlightening. On 14 October 1934, Marshall McLuhan wrote his mother from Cambridge University that he was reading Harley Granville-Barker on producing Shakespeare, and he quoted "something that should interest you" about performance of soliloquies:

For a parallel to its full effectiveness on Shakespeare's stage we should really look to the modern music-hall comedian, getting on terms with his audience – recalling, those of us who happily can, [music hall performer] Dan Leno as a washerwoman, confiding domestic troubles to a theatre full of friends, and taken unhindered to their hearts.

McLuhan adds: "A find and an idea, is it not? You could do it splendidly[.] It would be away ahead of the intimate tone of the office-boy. You could do it in Irish or plain Canadian" (McLuhan *Letters* 23–24). He followed up this topic in a letter dated 19–20 October 1934: "Oh yes Mother – regarding the Washerwoman number – you would naturally hesitate to assume a brogue – might the negro do? I'm afraid that negro psychology would not have enough in common with our own for the purpose" (McLuhan *Letters* 26).

Apparently, Granville-Barker was alluding to Dan Leno's 1896 pantomime dame performance as the Widow Twankey in *Aladdin*. Leno biographer Barry Anthony described the character: "Ostensibly Chinese, with silk jacket and tightly drawn top knot, Aladdin's mother was clearly a home-grown laundry lady, a close relative to his other dowdy, but indomitable female creations" (137). The domestic troubles Leno as the Widow Twankey confided in the audience included:

Oh dear! What is it about washing that makes people so bad-tempered? I'm sorry I ever adopted it as a profession. But there when Mustapha left me to battle with an untrusting world what could I do? I tried lady-barbering, but the customers were too attentive and I – poor simple child – was full of unsophisticatedness and I believed their honeyed words. I remember young Lord Plumpler agitated me so much with his badinage that there was a slight accident. I believe he would have proposed to me, but in my confusion I cut the end of his nose off. Ah! It was a near shave (Anthony 138)

In his eagerness to suggest performance material to his mother, he seems to advocate that she adapt Leno's washerwoman persona with a black dialect, although he acknowledges the cultural gap that she would have to bridge.

Marshall McLuhan's enthusiasm for his mother's performance work also included recommending that she study for performance the poetry of the modernists T. S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and he explored performance opportunities for her in England. On 6 December 1934, he wrote to her:

[Y]ou could take the elite London by storm. There is a persistent and really irresistible drive, here, for the right reading *aloud* of poetry, and there is no one to do it. This "desire" is limited to leisured cultivated classes and to university circles. I do not say that the above poem of [modern] civilization [Eliot's "Coriolan: Triumphal March"] would thrill an Ontario audience but I am not sure that it wouldnt [sic]. Most people are sufficiently conscious of the crucial conditions of morals, belief, hope, government, and the future of society, to enable them to be moved by an adequate reading of such a poem. . . . He has many shorter poems (30 lines) that you could start with as an experiment. But there is really an amazing opportunity for you Mother to break with the outworn idea of an elocutionist as a pre-movie entertainer¹⁵ and to use *your art* to focus attention on really great modern art. (42–43)

He went on to compare the work of Eliot to that of Robert Browning in terms of rhythm and use of the dramatic monologue:

Moreover his poems, like [Browning's] use the method of dramatic monologue with its swift ranging over every sort of experience. But Eliots [sic] "consciousness" is not that of a lover, a count[?], or a distinct individual – it is *impersonal* and universal and instead of ranging over *individual* associations he ranges over all history and all modern society, but with a miraculous relevance and effectiveness. (43)

A few months before, on 16 October 1934, McLuhan had written that:

[A]ll of [the lecturers here] try to read poetry . . . and do it only respectably. That is firmly (doggedly determined to weigh scrupulously each syllable) and without any transitions of manner to suit the poem. I'm not quite sure if this standard way is justifiable or not. In any case it lags miles behind your interpretation Mother, and I simply must get a background of technique. (McLuhan *Letters* 25)

These letters provide a remarkable insight into a rich period of literary ferment and its impact on the performance of literature. Marshall McLuhan, studying in the 1930s at

Cambridge with I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis, here anticipates the resounding impact of modernist writers and New Criticism on the fading echoes of elocution and the Expression Movement that would result in the paradigm shift to Oral Interpretation of Literature that was underway. The study of such shifts in performance paradigms would later occupy the attention and influence the pedagogy of Leland Roloff at Northwestern University, who would be a pioneer in acknowledging the impact of Elsie McLuhan's son Marshall on the perception and evocation of literature. In his textbook by that name, Roloff would include poems by Eliot, Yeats, and Hopkins, and none of the texts known to have been performed by Elsie McLuhan.

Notes

1. Paul Edwards (1999) discusses how Roloff approached the Northwestern Interpretation Department's graduate-level "history" seminar beginning in the early 1970s.
2. Paul H. Gray (1996) identifies "the elocution-expression-interpretation-performance continuum" in the field of performance studies, institutionalized in what Paul Edwards (1999) calls the National Communication Association (NCA) tradition. Elocution as an epoch in this field or tradition refers to the study of vocal and physical delivery formalized in the eighteenth century in England and continued in America into the nineteenth century. Elocution came to be associated in the later nineteenth century with what some perceived as artificial and excessive forms of delivery, and the expression movement (centered in Boston, Massachusetts) arose as a reaction against those excesses. Some sources cited in this essay appear to use the term "elocution" broadly and generically to encompass "expression" as well.
3. Paul Edwards (1999) provides a contrastingly narrower sense of Roloff's view of the history of the field, one derived from taking Roloff's history class in 1973 and from a 1998 interview, where Roloff takes a shorter historical view that reaches – not from primary orality – but from elocution to electronic orality, while highlighting Marshall McLuhan's contribution and the role of the body:

In Roloff's view, the sudden upsurge of interest in delivery – "elocution" – in the eighteenth century, was not the revival of an ancient art. It was the response to a profound mind-body dissociation, a sounding of alarms in our first crisis of the book. Roloff reshapes the field's history as a short but an ongoing episode in the shift from typographic culture to postliteracy: a healing restoration of the book to the body The present century has answered the book with newer technologies of text-and-image transmission, calling into question our notions of both book and body. "As McLuhan was fond of saying, you can talk about it any way you want," Roloff . . . observes, "but most of it plugs into walls". (30)

4. Elsie McLuhan's choice of nomenclature is telling; it reveals that she negotiated a liminal position for herself between competing schools of thought in regard to suggesting a character versus overt impersonation. A "Reader" avoided the taint of the moralistic anti-theatrical prejudice by distinguishing herself from an actor. According to James S. Smoot,

When "readers" began to abandon their reading stands, memorize their material, and attempt to represent a character by movement, gesture and vocal mimicry, the Impersonator was born The impersonator occupied a spot between the actor and the dramatic reader, a mid-point which contained features both distinct from and common to either category. (97–98)

McLuhan thus straddles both sides of the "Great Debate" between interpretation and impersonation that David A. Williams described as taking place in 1915 between Maud May Babcock of the University of Utah and Rollo Anson Tallcott of Ithaca College. Roloff

extended the terms of this debate to acoustic versus printed space in his 1973 article “The Roles of the Interpreter and the Actor.”

5. On 16 October 1934, when Marshall McLuhan was studying literature at Cambridge University, he wrote his mother about one of his professors, Professor Mansfield Forbes, lecturing on “metre rhyme, rhythm, and the reading (aloud) of poetry,” Marshall describing it as “the biggest intellectual treat of my life.” When, on 24 January 1935, Forbes referred slightly to Ruth Draper, Marshall wrote his mother that he would “sound him in the matter.” On 7 February 1935, Marshall wrote his mother that:

He said she jammed her houses in London Oxf and Camb. – That she made a mistake in attempting to perform in a large room (when she did). But that her ability to hold an audience for 2 hours he considered very remarkable. He said she was effective in light pieces but quite unsatisfying in serious numbers. This may prove useful to you. (McLuhan *Letters* 24, 52, 58)

6. ‘Expression’ or ‘oratory’ would be more accurate terms to describe the focus of Emerson College of Oratory in 1906. Charles Wesley Emerson used the term ‘elocution’ along with ‘oratory’ in the Introduction to the 10th edition (1899) of his 4-volume textbook *Evolution of Expression*: “The volumes of this series are an attempt to put the study of elocution and oratory upon this methodical basis” (5). However, by the revised 33rd edition (1920), that sentence is omitted from the largely identical Introduction. Edyth Renshaw notes that “In order to escape the opprobrium which was the lot of elocution teachers of his day, Emerson gave to his school and to its principal study a more respectable name than elocution” (35), i.e. oratory. Emerson’s theory of the evolution of expression was the foundation of his approach to oratory, which he claimed “is in reality the study of literature,” or more precisely, according to Renshaw, “the study and practice of oral interpretation of literature” (36).
7. Edyth Renshaw explicates Charles Wesley Emerson’s philosophy of expression in her 1950 dissertation on three schools of speech (Renshaw).
8. Biographer Douglas Coupland notes that “Herbert and Elsie fought a great deal Eventually the boys came to prefer home life when Elsie was away touring” (27).
9. “He . . . seemed to have a particular fondness for bad puns. Throughout 1965 he liked to tell audiences the one about the first telephone pole – Alexander Graham Kowalski.” (Marchand 189)
10. It is perhaps significant, in light of her eventual separation from her husband in 1933, that she was identified as “Miss” Elsie McLuhan in the same newspaper on 30 January 1924, when she was reported as having returned “from a successful tour of western cities” (“Miss Elsie McLuhan Pleases at Recital”). She was also identified in notices in the same newspaper as “Miss” Elsie McLuhan in 1925, 1926, and four times in 1929, but as “Mrs.” in notices in 1927, 1929, and in 1933. In many other notices, she is identified only as Elsie McLuhan.
11. Marshall McLuhan taught for the 1936–1937 academic year at the University of Wisconsin, toward the end of Gertrude Johnson’s illustrious career there. It seems likely that he would have met Johnson, given his interest in his mother’s vocation.
12. Another dialect piece in Elsie McLuhan’s repertoire was the sentimental French-Canadian poem, “The Red Canoe” by William Henry Drummond, noted as part of a program described in the *Winnipeg Evening Tribune* on 10 January 1931. Gertrude Johnson also discusses Drummond’s French-Canadian dialect poems:

Though Doctor Drummond is not a French-Canadian, his constant association with these people through a long period of years has given insight into their lives. He has written several volumes of monologues in the French-Canadian Dialect, portraying with deep and sincere appreciation and sympathy their quaint humor. The peculiar melodic form and rhythmic movement of their language is delightful and exceptionally well preserved. (15)

13. Elsie McLuhan also performed, as one of a set of five “Character Impersonations,” one titled “Liza’s Wedding (Negro).” It was part of a long program she presented in January of 1931, but I have not been able to locate the text (“Elsie McLuhan to Give Recital at Home Street”). The text could possibly be the lyrics to “Anna ‘Liza’s Wedding Day,” Irving Berlin’s popular “coon song” of 1913.
14. This ambivalent and complex layering echoes Julia Hans’ characterization of May Isabel Fisk’s use of dialect satires making women “sound uneducated but look wise,” cited earlier.
15. In September of 1923, Elsie McLuhan had provided pre-movie entertainment at the Metropolitan Theatre in Winnipeg when the featured movie was *The Cheat* starring Pola Negri and Jack Holt, according to ads in the *Winnipeg Evening Tribune* on 24–26 September that heralded: “Big Added Programme/ELSIE McLUHAN/Reader and Impersonator.”

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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