

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS



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#### Institute of Current World Affairs

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## Practicing Citizenship In "Our Amazon"

By Raphael Soifer

Raeli took a final swig of Gury cola and tossed her empty plastic bottle into the water. "Where's your spirit of citizenship?" Carlos asked mockingly, and everybody laughed. Nobody else moved, though, so I swam to catch the bottle as it floated down Boim's *igarapé* — a small freshwater inlet — and back toward the blue-green Tapajós River. I set the bottle on the sandy bank next to my flip-flops, sunglasses, and the two-liter bottle of Coke that some drinking buddies had hurled down the dunes a few minutes earlier. Then I swam back to Raeli. "Be careful," I warned her. "If you leave it to gringos to take care of the Amazon, it's all going to go to shit."

"That's how it is!" Carlos nodded approvingly.

The need to defend the Amazon rainforest region from grabby foreign powers is a time-

honored populist trope in Brazil. Many view any outside involvement in the region with suspicion, whether it comes in the form of multinational lumber companies or land-conservation NGOs. To them, any intervention is part of a colonialist effort to keep Brazilians back, either by stealing natural resources or prohibiting their use in the name of protecting the planet. Amazonian self-determination — the idea that the interests of Brazilians must come before those of either the international economy or global environment — is a rallying call throughout the country. Since I arrived in Brazil in May 2007, dozens of people have looked me in the eyes and hit me with some variation of the refrain that the Amazon region "isn't the 'lungs of the world' — it's *our Amazon*."

Cristovam Buarque, a senator with the left-leaning PDT (Democratic Workers' Party) and



*Maickson, Raeli, Eldon, and another local girl at one of Boim's igarapés.*

Lula's former minister of education wrote a celebrated article for Rio de Janeiro's *O Globo* newspaper in 2000 that sums up many Brazilians' feelings toward the region. Prompted by an American university student to consider the Amazon "as a humanist, and not as a Brazilian," Buarque responded that he could see an imperative for placing the rainforest under international protection. Once the same vigilance was extended to nuclear weapons, great works of art, and the world's petroleum reserves, Buarque wrote, he would defend the "internationalization" of the Amazon. "But as long as the world treats me as a Brazilian," he concluded, "I will fight for the Amazon to be ours, and only ours."

Outsiders have been running rampant around the Amazon since European explorers first made it to the region in the sixteenth century. Indigenous communities have

struggled against assimilation ever since, but for most Amazonians — mixed-race *caboclos* descended from local tribes, imported laborers, and colonizers — self-determination is a relatively new concept. It's also a tricky path to navigate. Most of the region's small villages are inextricably linked to the contemporary world, occupying the lowest rungs of the modern economy, and relying on scant state services — especially education and health care — to replace the local knowledge and traditions that centuries of outside control have virtually eradicated. In geopolitical terms, Brazilian control of the Amazon is a question of national sovereignty, of the country's right to control its own destiny. On a local level, though, researchers, social workers, or lumber company representatives from Brazil's urban south and southeast seem nearly as out of place as the gringos who come through for the same reasons. "Our Amazon's" residents have been Brazilian for centuries, but their sense of citizenship — like their relation to Catholic piety or paid labor — often seems poorly defined and out of place.



Everywhere I've been in Brazil, I've heard about the need to defend "our Amazon." The assertion is sometimes backed up with grim statistics about deforestation, or else defended with the resilient urban legend that American geography textbooks mark the Amazon as US territory. Yet during the two months I spent in Boim, a village of about 100 families in the rainforest of western Pará state, I only heard it once. It came from Sarmento, an electrician from Santarém, a city of about 300,000 located 12 hours away by boat at the intersection of the Amazon and Tapajós rivers. *Boimenses*, the village residents, didn't bother to remind me.

I was in Boim leading a theatre workshop and directing a Christmas pageant with local kids. A newly founded group called JUSC (Jovens Unidos Servindo a Comunidade - Youth United Serving the Community), run by local adolescents, helped organize my stay. While I was in Boim, villagers welcomed me into their houses or stared at me in the crooked dirt streets. Teenagers like Raeli and Carlos led me to the *igarapés* at either end of their village, while old women and little kids sometimes refused to make eye contact. No one ever pointed out explicitly that I was an outsider on their land, though. My sense is that I was so obviously out of place that no one in the village felt any need to remind me that this was their territory. But it may also have been a question of habit. For generations, locals have become so accustomed to outside incursions that one more gringo doesn't make much difference.

Since 1690, when Jesuit priests founded the village on the Tupinambá tribe's land, the Catholic Church has dictated much of daily life





*Boim has the only church in Brazil that faces a body of water sideways, rather than from the front. Beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the first three (front-facing) churches sank into the Tapajós.*

in Boim. The Church replaced the Tupinambá language with Portuguese, local customs with enforced devotion (today, many villagers still pay monthly tithes), and acted as Boim's principle conduit to the outside world. The Church's central role in the village is immediately visible in Boim's architectural oddities. In the midst of the village's thatched-roof wood houses, for example, there's a stone schoolhouse built by Franciscan monks from Illinois in the 1950s. The village also has a beautiful stone-and-concrete building that used to function as a medical clinic—built by the same Franciscan monks and abandoned in the early 1980s — and a much less glamorous priest's house made of similar materials, which is where I lived during my two months in the village.

Padre Sidney, the current local priest, ministers to 42 communities along the Upper Tapajós. He only comes to Boim about once a month to lead mass and hear confession, so when social projects come to town, visitors usually stay in his house. Padre Sidney's visits

are a major village event. Whenever he's in town, crowds of kids come over to page through the comic books and magazines he brings with him, or to tease his pet monkey (which stays in the village, but only seems to appear in public with the priest). At night, families invite him to dinners featuring luxuries like pork and potato salad. Even in Pa-



*A recently gutted traditional wood house next to a new residence being built out of IBAMA bricks.*





*A three-woman choir sings a hymn (to the tune of "Michael Row Your Boat Ashore") at Boim's kindergarten graduation.*

dre Sidney's absence, though, the Church has a powerful role in the village. Given that priests and monks have spent centuries "modernizing" the village — lecturing locals on moral codes and acceptable cultural practices, introducing formal Western education and (eventually) basic modern healthcare — most of Boim's public life has at least a vague Catholic presence. The graduation ceremony for the village's kindergartners in late December, for example, started off with a local teenager delivering a long-winded sermon, complete with readings from Psalms. Even the ubiquitous local raffles — held to raise money for village social clubs or to repair the generator that provides Boim with 90 minutes of electricity every night — often begin with a "Hail Mary."

I met the priest during my first weekend in Boim, when he came to the village for a mass and a worship rock concert commemorating the one-year anniversary of JUSC, the youth service organization. Padre Sidney was cautiously optimistic about the club's prospects, but he warned me about what he saw as a lack of community spirit in Boim. "There's nothing worse than a poor man with a rich man's heart," he told me, lamenting villagers' reluctance to collaborate on projects for the greater good. Márcio, a lay minister accompanying the priest, was even more blunt. "They've been here for what — 275 years? — and the village looks like it could have been settled last year!" he said. He lambasted what he saw as the lack of community initiative. Where were the vegetable gardens, the kids going door to door selling bread and manioc-flour *beijú* flatcakes? "They could be making something, doing well for themselves," Márcio complained, "but instead, they're waiting for everything to come to them from Santarém."

Marcio managed to get almost all of his facts wrong. If he'd visited on a Monday or a

Wednesday, for example, he would have seen Maickson, a local 16-year-old, selling bread. If he'd stayed a while longer, he might have discovered which household planted collard greens — it took me over a month to find out — or realized that most families make their own *beijú* and spend their food budgets on pricey staples like rice, beans, coffee, and powdered milk that come in by boat twice a week. Still, he had a point: local initiative isn't hard to find, but with the exception of a few local bars and general stores, economic opportunity in Boim has always come from Santarém or beyond. Historically, as the Church reshaped Boim's cultural and social organization, outside business interests have popped up at irregular intervals to tie Boim into the money economy (sometimes in concert with the Church, as if to test the locals' Christian work ethic.)

Business in Boim has been globalized at least since the late 19th century, when rubber companies showed up to exploit the surrounding forest's wealth of latex trees. The rubber economy continued, in boom-and-bust cycles, for decades. In the 1920s and early 1930s, the village's population swelled. Enterprising locals built makeshift hotels for newly arrived workers and visiting investors, one of whom even decided to build a gunpowder factory in the



*Playing on the floor as Padre Sidney leads Mass.*





*Local first graders learn an “environmental respect” dance in a workshop led by Projeto Saúde e Alegria, an NGO based in Santarém.*

village. The rush faded quickly in the mid 1930s, however, when the rubber firms left town and the gunpowder factory closed. Eventually, Brazil-nut extraction and wood harvesting firms took over. For at least a couple of generations, there was almost always work in the village, however precarious or underpaid. For the past few decades, though, local opportunities have been on the decline. In 1998, with most of the valuable local hardwood already long gone, the federal government declared the west bank of the Tapajós a protected “extraction reserve” with strict limits on woodcutting. These days, most villagers between 20 and 40 years old go to Santarém or to the bigger cities of Manaus and Belém — each two days by boat from Santarém — to find work. The few who stay behind are, almost without exception, single mothers or physically handicapped young men.

Most of my teenage friends in Boim are already looking to a future beyond the village. For them, the question is less whether or not to leave, and more a question of where and when. Many have only a vague idea that, eventually, the time will come to head to Santarém (where most have family members) and look for work, either in the service industry or manual labor. Several others plan

on pursuing a university education, which is a major step toward a more involved citizenship and a massive investment for village families. Boim prides itself on the number of schoolteachers and clergymen that the village has produced — including two bishops — but I never heard of a villager who had managed to pass public university examinations guaranteeing a tuition-free education.

JUSC, the community service group founded by this generation of adolescents, has succeeded in drawing many of Boim’s teenagers together, but the club obviously can’t do much to change the basic economic realities of life in “our Amazon.” Maickson and Felipe, two of the group’s founders and de facto leaders, eventually hope to form a company to make pulps and preserves from Boim’s mango and cashew trees, since most of the ripe fruit winds up rotting on the ground. They have a knack for buzzwords — their product would be 100 percent sustainable and organic, and direct from the “heart of the Amazon,” they told me — but no access to capital or to business models. For now, they’re dreaming of public university courses in Belém, Manaus, or (in Felipe’s case) Rio de Janeiro.

Projects like Maickson and Felipe’s fruit scheme aren’t





*Mayara playing in front of the priest's house. Photo by Rayce and Rick Rafael.*

hard to find in “our Amazon” these days. The difference is that villagers hardly ever create them. In some of Boim’s neighboring communities, for example, an NGO based in Santarém collects toy animals fashioned out of local latex or dead wood to sell to tourists in the city. The project seems to work relatively well. Elsewhere in the country, defenders of “our Amazon” accuse Amazonian NGOs of being money-laundering fronts or cleverly disguised schemes to rape the land. Historically, many of them have been, and many continue to be. Locally, though, the attitude toward NGOs is much more welcoming.

I made it to Boim through Projeto Saúde e Alegria, (Project Health and Happiness - PSA), an NGO based in Santarém that has worked throughout the region for over 20 years. PSA brings public health projects, educational workshops, and a traveling circus troupe to hundreds of small communities on the Tapajós, Amazon, and Arapiuns rivers. In recent years, PSA built outhouses throughout Boim, and installed running water in all of the village’s households. While I was in the village, a two-man construction crew from PSA completed renovations of the abandoned medical clinic in preparation for a telecommunications center that will connect the village to the internet.

Although Boim is 12 hours away from the city center, it’s legally still part of the municipality of Santarém. Yet Santarém’s politicians invariably come from the urban cen-

ter, leaving the municipality’s far-flung riverbank communities essentially without political representation. While I was in the village, a political crisis unseated Santarém’s mayor, elected by an overwhelming majority only weeks before. *Boimenses* had voted in the obligatory election, but only a few half-heartedly followed the story on Radio Rural (the only station with a radio signal that reaches the Upper Tapajós). Most ignored it all together.

Even when the government shows up, it’s usually mired in some sort of confusion. While I was in the village, some families received free shipments of bricks and concrete from IBAMA, the Brazilian Institute for the Environment (a federal government agency equivalent to the EPA). The materials were intended to let the villagers upgrade their houses or build new ones, encouraging “our Amazon’s” local residents to stay put and continue to watch over their land. Based on a bureaucratic tangle, though, IBAMA took responsibility for shipping the materials to the village and for constructing the houses, but not for transporting them from the riverbank into the village. Some families spent weeks carrying bricks up the steep sandy incline. Those who could afford to hired some of the few young men available for manual labor. Others simply let their bricks sink into the Tapajós, which moves in quickly at the end of the dry season.

For centuries, it’s been the Church’s role to identify — or create — and attend to the village’s needs, and for the





*Rick Rafael, a fourth grader, stands in front of the local schoolhouse. Classes are held under thatched palm awnings in the backyard while the building awaits repairs. Photo by Mayara and Rayce.*

state to intervene much later, usually making only slight adaptations to existing institutions. For example, foreign monks began regular education campaigns at least as early as the 1870s, and oversaw the construction of an American-style schoolhouse in the 1920s. (The building, which reminded me of my elementary school in Massachusetts, even has glass windows, which are otherwise impossible

to find in Amazonian villages.) State-supported public education, though, only arrived in the 1970s.

As PSA begins to take over the Church's traditional role in the community, the same pattern continues. Almost 20 years after the Franciscans abandoned their clinic, the municipal government finally built a community health post



*Two boats dock behind soon-to-be abandoned IBAMA bricks on a Saturday morning in Boim.*





*The former medical clinic and future telecommunications center near the end of its renovation. Later, PSA project leaders made the construction crew paint a yellow outline around the blue paint, since blue could be seen as an (unintentional) endorsement of the right-wing PSDB (Brazilian Social Democratic Party).*

in the village, complete with a full-time nurse and unreliable electrical power from solar panels. In the intervening years, villagers relied on the *Abaré*, a PSA-sponsored “floating hospital” that visits communities an average of once a month. In late 2008, as PSA’s work neared completion on the telecommunications center, *boimenses* waited patiently for the federal government to deliver the wireless antennae to connect the village to the internet. Months beyond its promised delivery date, the village is still waiting.

PSA’s mission statement advocates for “integrated and sustainable community development that contributes...to the quality of life and exercise of citizenship.” In Boim, this “exercise of citizenship” is based largely on PSA’s relationship to JUSC, the village youth group that the NGO helped found. Villagers told me that most *boimenses* were happy to receive PSA’s services, but that even in long-awaited projects — like the water installation in 2004 — they tended to leave all the work to project staff members from Santarém. It’s a pattern that PSA is determined to break with the next generation. During renovations for the telecommunications

center, the NGO’s coordinators insisted on JUSC members’ participation pitching in by sweeping floors, painting walls, and hauling (apparently legal) lumber in from the surrounding forest. Toward the end of the process, a small group of JUSC members took it upon themselves to spend a couple of mornings hacking away at the dry shrubs surrounding the building with machetes and planting small trees in their place.

It doesn’t take too much initiative to clear weeds and re-plant bushes, even in the thick heat of the Amazon, where temperatures during the July — December dry season usually reach the 90s by mid-morning. But the kids’ effort showed a sense of responsibility — and an ability to mobilize — that came from within the community. A month earlier, PSA’s project coordinator had visited Boim to check on the center’s progress, and to let JUSC’s members know that he expected their collaboration. His pep talk led to more kids hanging out around the center, though it’s unclear how many of them had actually come to work. When the kids showed up of their accord, shortly



after New Years, they took a small but notable step toward making the telecommunications center their own, and not just another sign of “progress” built on their behalf.

On my third day in Boim, I loaded myself onto a one-level covered boat with about 40 *boimense* kids and two teachers (both from Santarém). We crammed ourselves onto benches, into hammocks, and on the floor for the three-hour ride to Surucuá, a small community on the northern end of the upper Tapajós region. Surucuá’s public school was hosting a *gincana*, sort of a cross between a talent show, school spirit contest, and academic fair. Three teams — Boim, Os Malas (roughly, “the Pains-in-the-Ass,” secondary school students from Surucuá), and their elementary school counterparts — competed in 25 challenges that ranged from “build a photographic display of your community’s history” to “dress a boy as a girl and a girl as a boy.” Judges cancelled the “fit as many people as possible on top of a bike” contest after Os Malas managed to break theirs while practicing. That was more than enough, the *gincana*’s MC decided. “After all, bicycles are a very important form of transportation for us in the region.”

Surucuá’s *gincana* was a combination social outing

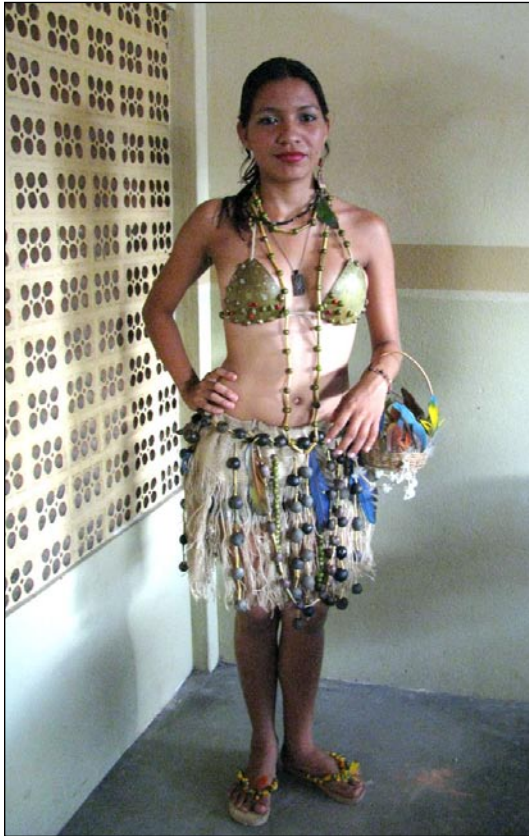
and civics lesson. Local identity and citizenship were the contest’s major themes. Guidelines called for team members to dress in costumes made out of local plants and fabrics; to give oral histories of their towns; and to present the judges with the largest selection of foods made out of manioc, the traditional staple food on the Tapajós. Kids also had to demonstrate a sense of environmental responsibility. Different activities called for the teams to show off their own recycling schemes, such as presenting a team flag made from reusable materials and finding as many household uses as possible for plastic PET bottles. Boim’s team brought more than two dozen environmentally friendly creations, including a flag made from Coke bottle labels, and PET baskets, toy cars, and elongated handles for picking mangos and cashew fruit from the trees that dot their village.

Boim’s team got themselves psyched for the *gincana* by tying red cellulose bandanas around their heads, which made them look a bit like a band of French revolutionaries. As they rehearsed their “community chant” just before the start of the competition, I realized that the teachers and community leaders who had accompanied the boat were focused on winning at least as intently as the kids were.



*An early morning walk past Boim’s radio station, which blares music for about an hour each night when the village generator comes on.*





*Raeli shows off her outfit, which won first place in the "Make a Regional Costume out of Local Materials" contest at the gincana.*



*A hand-woven basket made of PET bottles.*



*Seu Edem and Andressa prepare for the gincana.*





*Boimense kids celebrate a victorious gincana under their recycled Coke bottle-label flag.*

The *gincana*'s judges had to interrupt Seu Edem, the president of the community association, as he went over the history of Boim in painstaking detail. The competitors had started getting ready for the *gincana* weeks before, but still had to prepare some challenges at the last minute. "You do theatre — can't you make a funny skit for us?" Maickson demanded. I walked them through the idea of a local "newscast," but they vetoed my plan in favor of two burly teachers in drag making fun of gay men, which was a major success.

Boim won almost all of the local and environment-related contests. But in the most traditionally Brazilian of the challenges, all three teams fell flat. The MC asked each team to send forward a member to sing through the country's florid, grammatically extravagant national anthem in its entirety. No one got past the first of the song's three verses, and only Boim's team managed to finish a complete sentence.

Beyond highlighting the national anthem's notoriously difficult lyrics, the contest underscored the separa-

tion between the upper Tapajós and much of the rest of the country. There's no questioning the area's Brazilian-ness. *Boimenses* speak Portuguese, eat rice and beans, and cheer on the *seleção*, the national football team. Kids (and adults) anywhere in the country would stumble through the national anthem, but watching them do it in the sticky nighttime heat under a thatched roof in Suruacá's school social hall, talking into a wireless microphone that was nearly drowned out by the gruff humming of a diesel generator, I had a visceral sense of how far "our Amazon" is from the rest of the country.

Things have never moved very quickly in the Amazon, but modernity is slowly sliding into the region. The worship rock concert on my first weekend in the village, the coveted pirate DVDs and CDs that family members bring home from Santarém or Manaus, and PSA's nearly-completed telecommunications center are all signs of changes underway. Like the Church and occasional forays into the money economy before it, citizenship is making its way into Boim. Like other facets of village life, though, it often seems to be an outside imposition. □



# Current Fellows

## **Elena Agarkova • RUSSIA**

May 2008 - 2010

Elena is living in Siberia, studying management of natural resources and the relationship between Siberia's natural riches and its people. Previously, Elena was a Legal Fellow at the University of Washington's School of Law, at the Berman Environmental Law Clinic. She has clerked for Honorable Cynthia M. Rufe of the federal district court in Philadelphia, and has practiced commercial litigation at the New York office of Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP. Elena was born in Moscow, Russia, and has volunteered for environmental non-profits in the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. She graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 2001, and has received a bachelor's degree in political science from Barnard College.

## **Pooja Bhatia • HAITI**

September 2008 - 2010

Pooja attended Harvard as an undergraduate, and then worked for the *Wall Street Journal* for a few years. She graduated from Harvard Law School. She was appointed Harvard Law School Satter Human Rights Fellow in 2007 and worked as an attorney with the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux, which advocates and litigates on behalf of Haiti's poor.

## **Eve Fairbanks • SOUTH AFRICA**

May 2009 - 2011

Eve is a *New Republic* staff writer interested in character and in how individuals fit themselves into new or changing societies. Through that lens, she will be writing about medicine and politics in the new South Africa. At the *New Republic*, she covered the first Democratic Congress since 1992 and the 2008 presidential race; her book reviews have also appeared in the *New York Times*. She graduated with a degree in political science from Yale, where she also studied music.

## **Ezra Fieser • GUATEMALA**

January 2008 - 2010

Ezra is interested in economic and political changes in Central America. He is an ICWA fellow living in Guatemala where he will write about the country's rapidly changing economic structure and the effects on its politics, culture and people. He was formerly the deputy city editor for *The News Journal* (Wilmington, DE), a staff writer for *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, MA) and a Pulliam Fellow at *The Arizona*

*Republic*. He is a graduate of Emerson College in Boston.

## **Suzy Hansen • TURKEY**

April 2007 - 2009

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer*, her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times* Book Review, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

## **Cecilia Kline • CENTRAL AMERICA**

January 2009 - 2011

Cecilia is a graduate of Georgetown University, Loyola University Chicago School of Law, and the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. In 2007 she began with Casa Alianza in Tegucigalpa, Honduras providing outreach for youth living on the street. As an ICWA Fellow she will write about youth-service programs from several Central American cities as a participant observer.

## **Derek Mitchell • INDIA**

September 2007 - 2009

As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

## **Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL**

April 2007-2009

Raphi is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, he has worked in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

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