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M. Anteby: Moral Gray Zones

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Introduction

The Persistence of Organizational Gray Zones

IN 1997, in a steel mill in northern France, an ashtray rested heavily on a desk, its luster dimmed by time. It seemed to blend quite easily into the plant's surroundings, and yet something about it caused it to stand out. Upon noticing my gaze, the person with whom I spoke took the ashtray in his hand and began to recount his life. An hour later, when he finished, he returned the ashtray to the desk.¹ This ashtray, which he made with his own hands, was my first encounter with "homers," or as they are called in French, *perruques*. Two close observers of factory life, Michel de Certeau, who as a Jesuit priest spent time in the industrial town of Villeurbanne (France), and Miklos Haraszti, a former milling machine operator in a tractor plant in Hungary, offer the following interpretations of these terms. *La perruque*, according to de Certeau, "is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. *La perruque* may be as simple a matter as a secretary writing a love letter on 'company time' or as complex as a cabinetmaker 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room."² "A homer," Haraszti explains, "is an object made for his own purpose or pleasure by a worker using his factory's machines and materials. It is not an object made for sale as an additional income source. The word does not appear in most dictionaries, such as the Oxford or Webster's, but appears to be most widely used in England and America of a number of variants."³

The focus of this book, which centers on interactions around artifacts produced for personal use by plant employees, on company time, and with company materials or tools, might at first seem anecdotal. Artifacts such as these are found on coffee tables and in garages and attics, are easily mistaken for trinkets, and do not hold up very well to inter-generational transmissions. They seem merely part of an industrial folklore that will become slowly extinguished with the arrival of new generations. In context, however, artifacts are an inherent part of social systems and can offer fruitful insight into social meanings and processes, especially when, as will be shown, these artifacts are fairly prevalent in those systems.⁴ In that regard, delicate glass flowers and sturdy steel ashtrays (two fairly typical homers) are perhaps not merely

anecdotal. Both Haraszti and de Certeau caution us against dismissing these artifacts too quickly: “Connoisseurs of folklore may look on homers as a native, decorative art,” remarks Haraszti. “As yet, they are not able to see further than that.”⁵ De Certeau makes a similar point when he observes that institutional custodians of knowledge often-times extract the products [homers] in order to “set off a display of technical gadgets and thus arrange them, inert, on the margins of a system that remains itself intact.”⁶

This book goes beyond a study of homers as folklore.⁷ It explores, in the context of a particular plant, the gray zone in organizations that surrounds the manufacture and exchange of homers. Primo Levi, in the context of the Nazi concentration camps, referred to a gray zone as a “zone poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge”—a zone, he added, that “possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge.”⁸ In the less contentious context of work settings, gray zones are areas in which workers and their supervisors together engage in practices that are officially forbidden, yet tolerated by the organization. Examples of gray zones outside factory environments might include a manager in a financial firm authorizing an employee to trade at work on the side; a supervisor allowing a mail carrier to “hide” (meaning to return home or engage in non-work-related activities) once the mail has been delivered but before the end of the official workday; or a supervisor letting industrial bakery truck drivers take unaccounted loaves of bread to sell to their customers for added income. In this last example, the collusion between supervisors and workers is clear; management makes sure that there is enough extra bread available every day on the stock racks where drivers supposedly only take “their” bread. In all these cases, though, official rules are broken, and management, aware of these breaches, tolerates them.⁹

Organizational gray zones are found in many work settings, and as such, warrant our attention. Most people can easily identify gray zones in organizations for which they work: small, repeated leniencies tolerated by their bosses; informal, collective arrangements that violate company rules; or multiple infractions of official rules overtly endorsed by management.¹⁰ How these gray zones emerge and are sustained constitute key questions that this book addresses. The persistence of gray zones in organizations is puzzling. Outsiders would be quick to point to them as occurrences of theft; the truck drivers and their supervisor in the industrial bakery just mentioned above would easily be labeled thieves. Yet management with knowledge of these practices seems oddly unconcerned. The reasons for such apparent leniency confuse “our need to judge.” Consider, for instance, the practice

mail carriers have developed to “hide.” When a carrier with more than fifteen years of seniority (who was most likely hiding the entire time with the consent of his supervisors) was convicted of a minor offense (stealing lunchmeat) while hiding, he was immediately discharged for “improper conduct” because he hid.¹¹ The surprise lies as much in the harshness of the sentence as in the length of time such hiding was most likely tolerated. Setting aside for a second the offense itself, what did the mail carrier have in mind when he was hiding? Or, to draw another parallel, what do factory members believe they are engaging in when they make homers? Moreover, why does management tolerate these behaviors? How can the collusion be explained?

Answers to these questions mainly revolve around a close examination of the identity dynamics that occur in gray zones. Gray zones constitute ideal settings in which to explore the ways participants see themselves, since participants, rather than organizations, are mainly the ones defining the rules of gray zones. At the onset, few guidelines are given once participants decide to navigate gray zones; if anything, the participants in gray zone activities seem left to their own devices. Although the material and monetary rewards are obviously tempting, the choices made around such engagements also influence the self-images participants build for themselves. For instance, the industrial bakery truck driver who decides, with his supervisor’s approval, to sell the “unaccounted for” loaves of bread, appears to do so after reflecting not only on the potential material gains, but also on the implications the decision might have on how he views himself and is viewed by others. The call one makes regarding whether or not to participate—and how to participate—in some ways is a window into one’s enacted identity. Numerous identities might surface in gray zones. Some of these identities are individual (the driver Jim’s identities), others occupational (the bakery drivers’ identity across organizations), and perhaps some even organizational (the Wellbreads bakery’s identity, the pseudonym for this bakery) or national (a British identity, since Wellbreads is located in the United Kingdom). Each of these identities is of interest; however, the focus of this book is the occupational identities of gray zone participants since they specify and help explain many of the gray zone practices presented and analyzed here. More generally, other identities might explain other gray zones; but many gray zones are likely to contain similar identity pursuits.

A study of these identity dynamics in gray zones also uncovers other dynamics, namely the delicate balance between freedom and constraint in organizations. This balance fluctuates between individuals’ aspirations to express themselves and find respect at work with the managerial imperative to achieve certain goals. As such, the study of

gray zones also raises questions of control within a given work group, and more broadly in organizations. While the physicality of delivering bread to customers each day or adjusting a bolt to an engine in a factory might seem sufficiently constraining to direct behaviors, repeated gray zone practices guide behaviors in perhaps more subtle but equally efficient ways than any moving conveyer belt, task description, or official rule can achieve. Similar to research on street corner societies or games at work, this book provides evidence of the significance and the regulating qualities of complex, perhaps even seemingly objectionable, informal practices for given communities.¹² Unlike past research, it shows the identity mechanisms by which such practices—here, gray zone activities—gain relevance in the eyes of participants and why, as a result, the practices are here to stay.

Homer-Making at Pierreville

This book answers the question of the persistence of gray zones through a study of the making and exchange of homers in a French aeronautic plant, labeled Pierreville (a pseudonym).¹³ It explores how the occupational identity of a subgroup of plant members (craftsmen) in the plant plays into the processes supporting the gray zone of homer-making, and how management relies on this interplay to exert its control over these craftsmen. The book is divided into three parts: part 1 describes the motivations and the setting for the field research supporting the book; part 2 presents the main findings from the analyses of the field data; and part 3 discusses the implications of these findings.

The relevance of social systems, specifically those involving gray zone practices, to the understanding of human behaviors provides the theoretical impetus for this book (chapter 1: “Revisiting Social Systems in Organizations”). This leads to the examination of the fairly common, albeit rarely documented, gray zone of homer-making, or the manufacture of artifacts for personal use on company time and with company materials or tools (chapter 2: “The Side Production of Homers in Factories”). Once familiar with homers, readers can enter the Pierreville aeronautic plant, the empirical setting for the study, where aside from homers, airplane engines generate most of the production (chapter 3: “The Pierreville Plant: Setting and Status Divides”). The plant provides the stage for an in-depth study of homer-making and, more broadly, the social regulations at work unearthed in the process. Given that data collection and analyses are closely intertwined, and before continuing

the roadmap to the book's content, an explanation of the methodology employed helps to appreciate the book's findings and implications.

An Overview of the Methodology

The strategy adopted in this book, to begin by observing the small (in this case, these homers) in order to illuminate the large (the social regulations in the plant), is inspired by Walter Benjamin's technique of enlargement that "brings the rigid in motion . . . drawn as it is to everything that has slipped through the conventional conceptual net or to things which have been esteemed too trivial by the prevailing spirit for it to have left any traces other than those of hasty judgment."¹⁴ This book seeks to uncover the social dynamics that govern activity in gray zones and beyond through an examination of apparently insignificant organizational artifacts at the Pierreville plant. A combination of interview, observation, survey, and archival data are mobilized in this examination. The interviews were conducted with retirees of the plant; the observations occurred mostly at the plant Labor Council, situated just outside the plant gates; the surveys were administered to a sample of retirees; and the analyzed archives include corporate and union documents relating to the plant.¹⁵ An overview of these four data sources follows. (For more details, see appendix A, "Data and Methods.")

After discovering via my informant zero that homers were manufactured at Pierreville, I initially sought official company endorsement of the study. Unsurprisingly, the company refused to endorse it, the official reason being that "the priorities of the plant could not accommodate the request." Though a bit disappointing, their refusal provided me with the freedom to pursue this study by other means. Having disclosed my intentions in good faith to management, I now felt I could approach any plant member without the fear of being reported. Specifically, I approached the retiree group of the plant's Labor Council since retirees are not as prone to corporate sanctions. I shared my interest in homers with them, and asked if I could interview them and if they knew other retirees I could meet. This snowball sampling technique yielded a first set of thirty interviews and allowed for entry into the Pierreville community. Many retirees expressed interest in documenting the social history of the plant and saw select homers as unique craft pieces highlighting the plant's past, so they decided to endorse the project. Their endorsement provided me with access to the contact database of all plant retirees registered at the Labor Council.¹⁶ Direct mail solicitation of a random sample of plant retirees yielded another forty interviews. A total of seventy interviews with retirees, spanning

all hierarchical levels, who worked in the plant, mainly from the 1970s to the late 1990s, therefore constitute the first source of data.

Given the methodological biases of the study—positing that interactions sustain social identities—it is only fair to describe my own relationship to these retirees. (Appendix B, “Position in the Field,” further clarifies the relationship.) I never worked in the plant before or during this research project, and I had only driven by it a few times before I embarked on the study. Thus, this study began as an outsider’s perspective on a given social system. Many small actions made my initial disconnection salient: minor decisions, such as selecting the “wrong” drink from a menu when visiting retirees at their home or referring to workshops by name rather than number (the former favored by management and headquarters, the latter by lower-level plant members). At the same time, that a relative of mine worked at Pierreville and that the plant had a significant population of technicians and engineers (closer in training to mine) allowed me to find ways to connect with the retirees. Though I never became an insider, by the end of the project, when I walked by groups of retirees to whom I had grown attached, they often shouted out in my direction, smiles on their faces, “Here is the homer-maker!” suggesting that despite my social oddness at Pierreville, the Pierreville members made a place for me.

One could often find groups of retirees in the Labor Council building at Pierreville, dropping off insurance claims or attending a retiree’s bridge or photography club meeting, and sometimes at the factory museum attached to the plant, where they reconditioned old engines later displayed in aeronautic museums. The observations I conducted there constitute a second important set of data. Once a week for nearly a year, either between formal interviews or simply to “catch up” with retirees, I spent time in these places.

I obtained a third data source from a survey I conducted on retirement homers, which I administered to a random sample of retirees. Restricting the focus of the survey to retirement homers was a condition of the Labor Council’s endorsement of the survey. The survey tested potential variations along occupational lines in patterns of receiving retirement homers and solicited interviews. A total of 184 surveys were analyzed. Whereas receiving a retirement homer is different than participating in the manufacture of a homer or in interactions dealing with more generic homers, the survey provided an additional entry point into the community of homer-makers, since homer recipients are often homer-makers as well.

Finally, I also used the factory archives, which contain both corporate and union documents, to identify evolutions in occupational dynamics at Pierreville that might yield insight into homer activities.

These archives provided data on employment trends, detailed cases of homer events gone wrong, and, more broadly, allowed me to better comprehend the Pierreville community. They added to, and often completed for me, a picture of the social system in which the retirees worked. Through an analysis of the combined data, the findings presented here gradually emerged.

Outline of the Findings

Part 2 of the book presents the main empirical findings of the research and shows how actions that take place in gray zones might look like theft, but also encompass—from the perspective of the participants—moral pursuits.¹⁷ It starts with the act of giving homers to colleagues upon their retirement or departure. Chapter 4 (“Retirement Homers: An Entry into the Community”) offers an analysis of retirement homers, but also reveals the occupational dynamics at play in their reception. Survey data indicate that craftsmen—a highly technically trained group of plant members that includes blacksmiths, fitters, and welders—are central to the receiving patterns of such homers. As such, their unique position in the plant and their occupational identity are further analyzed throughout this book. Whereas each subgroup of craftsmen (for instance, fitters who fit and assemble parts made from metal) might be considered a distinct occupational group in its own right, craftsmen sufficiently identify with each other to form an occupational group of their own. However, in this exploration of retirement homers, other homers—homers distinct from retirement gifts—surface and ultimately expand the still mostly amorphous boundaries of the homer gray zone.

Chapter 5 (“Homers Gone Wrong: Delimiting the Gray Zone”) specifies the boundaries of this gray zone by examining homer interactions that do not seem to fit agreed-upon internal expectations. It clarifies the boundary between homers and theft. Refusals to engage in homer work, denunciations of homer-makers, and suspicions of theft around homer activities provide the data to examine the distinctions plant members draw between homer-makers and thieves. By contrast, specific instances of homers gone wrong inform our understanding of tolerated homers. The criteria used at Pierreville to make this distinction involve an assessment of the degree of recycling and transformation of company material: the appropriation of new material, taken directly out of storage, pointed to theft. The transformation of scrap material, instead, suggested homers. Suspicions of profiteering also evoked theft rather than homer-making. But attenuating circumstances were also

noted: in the event that skill development could be made evident, the suspicion of theft was less likely. Skill development was deemed a legitimate pursuit. Thus, the morality of homer-making begins to become salient in this chapter. At Pierreville, homer-makers or “builders” are not to be confused with thieves.

But even within the more accepted nontheft boundaries of the practice, clear distinctions between meanings (and implicitly, moralities) of homer activities were made. The analysis of homer events narrated in the interview data unveils these distinctions. In chapter 6 (“Shades of Homer Meanings: Occupational Variations”), beneath the facade of surface uniformity, we see the coexistence of multiple meanings of homer interactions: “respect and recognition,” “collegiality,” “regular work,” and “exchanges.” Participants understand homer interactions framed as collegiality as generic signs of belonging to the broader Pierreville community, but they do not acknowledge participants’ specific professionalism or skills. By contrast, when targeted individual acknowledgment does occur, the homer interactions are framed as signs of respect and recognition. Other homer interactions, framed as regular work, are hardly distinguishable in meaning from the official tasks Pierreville members are charged with carrying out; the main difference is that the product (the homer) is generally received by a plant member—often a supervisor—not an external customer. A final consideration of homer interactions highlights yet another meaning: interactions framed as exchanges focus on material trades that often involve money or bartering of services. Distinguishing among the various meanings of interactions that lead to homers illuminates the complex nature of these gray zones and the multiple “currencies” in which members of the gray zones trade: both hard and soft, material and symbolic.

Homer interactions in which craftsmen produce an artifact for their own or another craftsman’s use are associated most frequently with respect and recognition, which suggests occupational identity dynamics within gray zones. These meanings are not randomly distributed across homer activities; the occupational background of the participant, as well as the occupational background of the recipient, are shown to specify the meaning of these interactions. Whether a craftsman engages in homer interactions with another craftsman, a supervisor, or an office worker shifts the meaning. Analyses of various “missteps” reinforce this finding that occupational background partly conditions the meanings of these interactions. For instance, when a participant attempts to frame an interaction in a manner that deviates from the norm and in a way other than what is recommended by the occupational backgrounds of the participants, the interactions are

strongly resisted. An example of such a misstep might involve an office worker asking a craftsman for a homer for his office boss, trying to frame it as an act of respect and recognition, even though the craftsman thinks of it as an exchange. (See chapter 6 for other examples of such missteps.)

Despite their already fairly high standing in the plant, craftsmen seem quite keen to gain additional respect and recognition. Such acknowledgment is particularly sought after when other, more official forms of respect and recognition evanesce. Craftsmen find their positions increasingly challenged at Pierreville. They are slowly being marginalized in the plant industrial process as computer-assisted design takes hold and new recruits are able to more efficiently achieve the same results on a computer as craftsmen once did in the workshop. As a declining occupational group, the craftsmen's need for recognition is increasing. Chapter 7 ("The Rise and Fall of Craftsmanship") presents an analysis of this occupational decline that reveals the increasingly shifting context in which gray zone homer-making occurs and might be of particular interest to readers attracted by history. Whereas attractive work options for craftsmen are dwindling, homer-making allows for the maintenance, and sometimes even the fashioning, of more desired self-images. These images take root in the occupational identity of craftsmen, who value skilled manual labor and autonomy in the accomplishment of their tasks.

The trades around homers, which create the ability to enact occupational identities, are, in part, what sustains this gray zone. These trades, the organizational control that emerges around homer-making, and the ensuing situated moralities (i.e., moralities that make sense and exist only within given social boundaries) are further examined in chapter 8 ("Trading in Identity Incentives"). Homer activities are shown to be a regulating mechanism that accommodates both craftsmen's desires to enact their occupational identity and management's desire for control. By allowing craftsmen to find respect and recognition in these gray zones, supervisors who tolerate homer-making engage in trades with their workers. Supervisors and managers who ignore homer-making in whole or in part are, *de facto*, allocating hidden identity incentives to those involved in the activities. What management gains from participating in these gray zones, in terms of added control, might be as large or even larger than what workers gain in terms of occupational identity. Thus, the morality of gray zones might have more to do with the fairness of the exchange than with the theft of company time and materials. From within the organization, the multiple moralities of homer practices are clear. The craftsmen's quest for respect and recognition, though perhaps self-

centered, is viewed as a moral one. Management's tolerance of homer-making can reasonably be construed as a moral endeavor as well, inasmuch as it furthers organizational goals.¹⁸ Gray zones might, therefore, be best understood as venues that accommodate both identity pursuits and quests for control.

Implications and Conclusions

Homer activity is a strategic venue in which the intersection of gray zones and identity enactments can be analyzed. Owing to its concreteness, it is not easily hidden, but many organizations harbor their own, often less visible gray zones. (And many gray zones exhibit similar dynamics to those found around homers.) Gray zones are defined as areas at work in which workers and their supervisors together engage in practices that are officially forbidden, yet tolerated by the organization.

The third and last part of the book draws broader lessons on gray zone activities from the study of homer-making at Pierreville. It starts, in chapter 9 ("Organizational Gray Zones as Identity Distillers"), by reviewing some gray zones other than those associated with homer-making—analyzing, for instance, gray zones in restaurants, hospitals, and on docks—and extends the argument beyond Pierreville. This chapter offers examples in which similar occupational identity struggles emerge. Also, because the complicity of coworkers and bystanders is required—even if this complicity means turning a blind eye—their attention is more focused in gray zones than in other work settings. Thus, gray zones emerge as potentially sought-after venues for identity enactment before peers and other coworkers. Moreover, frictions around the appropriate enactment of occupational identities among members of distinct occupational groups, and between members of a given occupation, play out in these examples of gray zones.¹⁹ Given that identities result from moments of friction (either with proponents of alternate ways to enact these identities or members of distinct identity groups), gray zones prove quite appealing to their maintenance. Thus, gray zones might be more moral than initially thought to be the case. With respect to homer-making and other examples of gray zones, this text suggests restraint from too hastily judging such instances as mere theft. Rather, it conceptualizes gray zones as likely venues for organizational and identity dynamics to converge.

The goal of this book is not to acquit or convict gray-zone participants or enablers; rather, the hope is to explain how many gray zones sustain themselves, and why their disappearance is unlikely. The conclusion and last chapter of the book (chapter 10, "Identities, Control,

and Moralities”) details the main implications of this study on homer interactions at Pierreville, for both organizations and the individuals who work in these settings. The implications also provide some answers to the sustainability of gray zones in organizations. The three main implications encompass: (1) a novel understanding of gray zones as conducive to identity pursuits; (2) a complementary reading of gray zones as a form of identity incentives control; and (3) the use, outside official work, of morality as an occupational boundary.

The first implication of this study is to understand gray zones as conducive to identity pursuits. Though the collusion between management and workers in these gray zones has long been documented, the mechanisms by which gray zones operate have mostly been assumed. Previous literature addressing gray zones primarily focused on the relaxation of an organizational constraint, not on the pursuit of identities.²⁰ These accounts viewed gray zones as (at least initially) disabling organizational rules rather than enabling individual pursuits. At best, they were depicted as generating positive attitudes toward an employing organization.²¹ The previously overlooked, potentially generative aspect of gray zones for participants—identity pursuits—is here made evident.

The second implication of this text is to extend the repertoire of available forms of organizational control by suggesting identity incentives as a potent, alternate form of control. The give and take between management and workers in these gray zones constitutes a form of control, allowing for the expression and fashioning of desired identities in exchange for sustained efforts on official work or compliance with other managerial requests. Gray zones illustrate a form of organizational control, labeled here “identity incentives control,” that relies on the select positive arousal of identity feelings to induce actions or efforts. These findings help balance the idea that engagement in the labor process, including gray zones, unilaterally manufactures consent.²² They show that through this process of engagement, workers also actively build identities—specifically occupational ones—that carry value in their eyes.

Third, and last, this study makes evident the ways in which workers rely on moral boundaries, outside of official work, to sustain their occupational identities. Whereas occupations are most often defined in terms of the tasks in which members engage, or by the formal requirements (such as education or credentials) necessary to belong in the occupation, moral boundaries also define occupations. The craftsmen at Pierreville were not craftsmen only because of what they did or how they were trained, but also because they knew when not to cross the line. At Pierreville, crossing the line meant producing ho-

mers that were deemed wrong. The direct appropriation of new company material with no actual transformation constituted a breach of morality from the craftsmen's perspective, but the deployment of skill to craft a unique artifact from scrap material was deemed legitimate; thus, the question of appropriate enactment is constant within gray zone practices. Gray zones provide key venues for testing these moral boundaries and, by extension, sustaining participants' occupational identities. Moral boundaries outside of official work, in that sense, also define occupations.

Overall, *Moral Gray Zones* suggests a reappraisal of which workplace practices might be considered moral or immoral. Despite their theftlike appearances, gray zone practices might be viewed as potential moral endeavors. This is not to say that all gray zone activities are legitimate pursuits; the broader costs and benefits of the practices need to be weighed. For instance, the practice of corporate accountants colluding with supervisors to "cook the books," despite company rules banning such behavior, would not find much sympathy from outside observers. In this last example, the potential fulfillment of participants' occupational identities pales in comparison to the social costs incurred by the larger, extra-organizational community. However, the ways in which occupational dynamics illuminate the moralities of this and other gray zones provide insight into how they may attract participants. Accountants might long for the kind of "respect" they could potentially gain when developing complex book-cooking schemes, as opposed to that gained through routine work. Understanding the occupational dynamics of gray zones might allow for a more balanced assessment of the moralities of gray zones, though this assessment in no way precludes condemnation.

Far from being, as Michel de Certeau feared, "inert [objects] on the margins of a system that remains itself intact," the artifacts resulting from the gray zone practice of homer-making provide insight into Pierreville's social system and regulations.²³ These artifacts highlight tensions and resolutions, hopes and constraints, choices and compromises. The reading of gray zones as identity pursuits, the focus on identity incentives as a form of control, and the moralities of occupations together show that the associations and disassociations among individuals are crucial elements of the workplace environment. Taken together, these findings help explain the sustainability of gray zone practices. Members of organizations exhibit multiple levels of agency and create structure, which carries important implications for them-

selves as individuals and for their organizations. Next to the family, the work setting is probably one of the main loci of contemporary Western society. The experiences of work might therefore also inform our grasp of broader social dynamics outside of work. The decisions individuals make and the costs they are willing to incur (in terms of partial surrender of control) to enact desired identities might translate into other realms of society.²⁴ I trust and hope that readers will find other insights in this book. If this occurs, I will, of course, turn a blind eye, and consider any unearthed, added wisdoms to be the readers' own homers.