



The Geographical Heterotopia in Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*

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Abstract

By locating Palm Springs, the setting of *Generation X*, within the highly capitalist American society in the 1990s, Coupland transforms it into a geographical heterotopia in terms of both spatial and temporal dimensions—spatially it is distinct from the middle-class working environment characteristic of modern urban America; temporally it resists the stereotypical scenarios of the West that have been all-too-often sedimented in the public mind since American Westward expansion. By highlighting the anti-capitalist ethos and apocalyptic tones of this geographical heterotopia, Coupland expresses his disappointment with and resistance to all-pervasive capitalism in US.

Key words: Generation X; Heterotopia; American west; Myth of garden; Atomic frontier

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INTRODUCTION

When the Eagles released "Hotel California" in February 1977, they might not expect its long guitar coda steeped in lyrical melancholy would linger for a much longer time, nor might they realize that they pithily sang out the intrinsic ambivalence of California: "this could be Heaven or this could be Hell". California, a state that possesses

diverse geography ranging from moist temperate rainforest in the north to arid desert in the interior and to snowy alpine in the mountains, a state that witnesses the savagery and violence of the Bear Flag Revolt and the Mexican-American War as well as the influx of "a heterogeneous population" (Durham & Jones, 1980, p.190) seeking their fortunes, and a state that symbolizes both the realization and the collapse of Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Hypothesis", namely the "existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" (1980, p.9), enters The Canadian Writer Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* as the main setting. In this novel, Coupland manages to render this location a geographical heterotopia by superimposing the fictional characters' life in Palm Springs, California upon the ambiguous complexities of the Far West frontier.

Since the nineteenth century, the heterogeneity of the West has never failed to find its representations in American novels. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), for instance, documents two Wild Western images in its pivotal Chapter LX II: the White Steed of the Prairies and the Vermont colt maddened by the scent of a buffalo robe. These images, according to Henry Nash Smith, help "establish the incantation of whiteness, the sinister blend of majesty and terror which Ishmael perceives in the White Whale" (1970, p.79). Such a blend bespeaks Melville's equivocal attitude: to him, "the Wild West, like nature in general, came to seem in the highest degree ambiguous. It was not more certainly good than bad, yet in either case it was terrible and magnificent" (Smith, 1970, p.78). "It was not more certainly good than bad", a judgment that prefigures Foucault's notion of "heterotopia" where everything, instead of being good or bad, is simply different, implies the ambivalent nature of the Far West frontier: it is "a source of freedom and a place of danger; an exciting challenge, but also a cause of hardship and

exhaustion; a place for heroism, but also an excuse for racism, sadism, and brutality; an inexhaustible mine of humor, but humor too often tinged with cruelty or false sentimentality" (Durham & Jones, 1980, p.1). Naturally, generations of American writers gravitate towards this Western frontier, a territory full of possibilities, and give free rein to their imagination in literary creations.

Then, apropos of *Generation X*, the challenge of the novel's chosen setting is to highlight the heterogeneity of Palm Springs while simultaneously overcoming hackneyed literary representations of the West. Coupland accomplishes this difficult task by locating his setting within the highly capitalist American society in the 1990s, thus transforming it into a geographical heterotopia in terms of both spatial and temporal dimensions—spatially it is distinct from the middle-class working environment characteristic of modern urban America; temporally it resists the stereotypical scenarios of the West that have been all-too-often sedimented in the public mind since American Westward expansion.

1. SPATIAL HETEROGENEITY OF PALM SPRINGS

In fact, the abrupt debut of Palm Springs in *Generation X* partly foreshadows the setting's unusual features. The novel begins in the 1970s as the narrator Andy recounts his trip from Portland, Oregon, to Brandon, Manitoba, to witness an eclipse of the sun:

And in that field, when the appointed hour, minute, and second of the darkness came, I lay myself down on the ground, surrounded by the tall pithy grain stalks and the faint sound of insects, and held my breath, there experiencing a mood that I have never really been able to shake completely—a mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination—a mood that surely must have been held by most young people since the dawn of time as they have crooked their necks, stared at the heavens, and watched their sky go out. (Coupland, 1996, p.3-4)

From this "sublimely disturbing glimpse of eternity" (Kateberg, 2005, p.275), the novel suddenly jumps fifteen years forward to Palm Springs, California where the 30-year-old narrator sits on the front lanai of his rented bungalow grooming his two dogs. Then, as the story goes on, a panoramic view of Palm Springs gradually unfolds—it is presented as a heterotopic location different from the middle-class working environment in terms of geographical configuration and demographic cohort.

Although California did not remain untouched by modernization and urbanization after it was formally annexed to the United States in 1848, the geographical wildness of the West does not disappear without a trace in *Generation X*. The novel's main setting, Palm Springs, as a desert resort city in Riverside County, California, is surrounded by mountains: "I retired to the lanai where I am now, [...] watching sunlight's first pinking of the Coachella Valley, the valley in which

Palm Springs lies" (Coupland, 1996, p.7). And to the east of it, the San Andreas fault "lies down the middle of the valley like a piece of overcooked meat" (Coupland, 1996, p.4). The Western mountains, as "an exhilarating region of adventure" (Smith, 1970, p.52), often signify two antithetical sentiments during the initial period of American Westward expansion: the aversion to the tedious organized society of civilization and the praise for the venturesome spirit and freedom in a limitless wilderness. Such a "region of adventure", therefore, becomes the matrix for fictional Wild Western heroes as symbols of anarchic freedom—"Names like Jim Bridger, Jedediah Smith, and Kit Carson have long appealed to the American imagination, and they have been celebrated as 'men to match our mountains'" (Durham & Jones, 1980, p.126).

But in *Generation X* which features "three restless and disaffected middle-class twentysomethings" (Forshaw, 2000, p.40) escaping from highly capitalist contemporary America, Coupland dissolves whatever imaginative connection his fictional characters may have had with the mysterious and brooding wilderness of mountains. The mountains around Palm Springs are not so much a standard symbol of anarchic freedom or venturesome spirit as a geographical contrast to the urban space, a space rife with "too much weight improperly distributed: towers and elevations; steel, stone, and cement" (Coupland, 1996, p.106). Compared with the vast open air in Palm Springs, the urban working environment described in *Generation X* appears uncomfortably cramped. Dag, the narrator Andy's friend, often complains of the "Sick Building Syndrome" that tormented him when he was an employee in an advertising company:

The windows in the office building where I worked didn't open that morning, and I was sitting in my cubicle, affectionately named the veal-fattening pen. I was getting sicker and more headachy by the minute as the airborne stew of office toxins and viruses recirculated—around and around—in the fans. Of course these poison winds were eddying in my area in particular, aided by the hum of the white noise machine and the glow of the VDT screens. (Coupland, 1996, p.22-23)

Here, Dag indignantly expresses his disappointment with the corporate career by ascribing his physical ailment to "cubicle", "office toxins", "white noise machine" and "VDT screens", items that are characteristic of a modern-day office. The metaphorical analogy between "cubicle" and "veal-fattening pen", namely the small preslaughter corrals used by the cattle industry, makes us see Dag not as the consumer and operator of the office equipment, but as himself a kind of commodity—an example of the exploited workforce mass-produced by "the almost universally commercial, fully commodified and success-oriented consumer society" (Forshaw, 2000, p.41). Consumed with depression in the industrial capitalism, Dag finally flees to Palm Springs where, in his own words, "the weather is hot and dry" and "the cigarettes are cheap" (Coupland, 1996, p.36).

As for Andy, the geographical particularity of Palm Springs not only helps relieve the corporate boredom, but also promises a chance to re-experience the sublime moment of authenticity and eternity. This time, the scene is not an eclipse of the sun but “a cocaine white egret” silhouetted against “the burned fields”, a stunning scene Andy encounters while driving across the US-Mexico border in the novel’s denouement:

The bird was circling the field, and it seemed to me to belong more to Ganges or the Nile rather than to America. And its jet-white contrast with the carbonized field was so astounding, so extreme, as to elicit gasps audible to me from most all of my neighbors, even those parked quite far down the road. (Coupland, 1996, p.206)

Then, the bird suddenly swoops over the crowd and grazes Andy’s head, its claw ripping his scalp. This somewhat painful surprise allows Andy to feel clearly “the directness of the bird’s contact” and reminds him of his precocious philosophical mood concerned with authenticity, “a mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination” (Coupland, 1996, p.4). Such a narrative and emotional echo, reminiscent of Joycean epiphany, makes the geographical reality of Coupland’s West charged with a kind of transcendental significance that is by no means accessible in “a city built of iron, papier-mâché and playing cards” (Coupland, 1996, p.57).

Naturally, Palm Springs, with its vast and animate geography, is inhabited by unique demographic cohorts, as “spaces and geographies are deeply involved in maintaining cultures all the time” and “these cultures are not just about overt symbolism, but about the way people live their lives” (Crang, 1998, p.6). Whereas the poky little office workstations exhaust the junior staff members with “the endless stress of pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause” (Coupland, 1996, p.14), Palm Springs, a quiet and quasi-medieval town, refuses the stressful bourgeois game. It is a place peopled with old retirees who “are trying to buy back their youth and a few rungs on the social ladder” (Coupland, 1996, p.12), rich tourists who lie beside the “bubbling health pools”, get tuned up at the spas and clinics, gossip, drink, and shop, setting aside their busy lives, and unambitious slackers who choose to lead “marginalized” lives “on the periphery” by working in “low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future” (Coupland, 1996, p.6) jobs in the service sector. Among the third group are Andy and his two friends who “are jaded but not without optimism, culturally exhausted but eager for new experience” (Tate, 2002, p.328). So, they have each turned their backs on bourgeois ambitions to live marginal, low-rent yet still comfortable lives, tending bar and selling makeup in Palm Springs, an undoubtedly “quiet sanctuary from the bulk of middle-class life” (Coupland, 1996, p.12).

It is worth noting that despite all the geographical advantages of this “quiet sanctuary”, Coupland does not mean to oversimplify it as an idealistic or utopian

formation. Unlike utopias that “are fundamentally unreal spaces” and “present society itself in a perfected form” (Foucault, 1986, p.24), Palm Springs is a somewhat frustrating real terrain, a California town that is also linked with the corrupting materialism of contemporary America in the sense that it falls victim to the capitalist investments: “Hell is the town of West Palm Springs Village—a bleached and defoliated Flintstones color cartoon of a failed housing development from the 1950s” (Coupland, 1996, p.17). On account of such a commercial failure, this town is almost reduced to an apocalyptic place in civilizational decline: “In an era when nearly all real estate is coveted and developed, West Palm Springs Village is a true rarity: a modern ruin and almost deserted” (Coupland, 1996, p.17). In this light, Palm Springs approaches what Foucault terms “heterotopias” that, “formed in the very founding” of a society, simultaneously represent, contest, and invert “all the other real sites” belonging to the same society (1986, p.24). This definition also explains why the distinctive geographical features of Palm Springs discussed above always exert certain counteraction to the urban bourgeois life.

2. TEMPORAL HETEROGENEITY OF PALM SPRINGS

The recognition of Palm Springs as a spatial heterotopia necessitates an exploration into the setting’s temporal dimension, because, as Foucault states, “space itself has a history in Western experience and it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time and space” (1986, p.22). Based on this statement, he further proposes one principle of heterotopias on the temporal axis: “each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another” (1986, p.25). It is not difficult to detect the spatial differences and tensions between Palm Springs or Coupland’s West and then highly capitalist America, but what temporal heterogeneity does this geographical heterotopia exhibit when considered on a broader canvas? In other words, how does Palm Springs depicted in *Generation X* differ from the images of the West formed throughout American history? How do these historical differences help define “Coupland’s New World West” (Katerberg, 2005, p.274) against a backdrop of highly capitalist America in the 1990s? The answers to these issues depend on a substantive review of the geographical connotations of the West in American history.

2.1 Revisiting the Western Myth of the Garden

The West beyond the Mississippi remained “shadowy and remote” (Smith, 1970, p.19) until Thomas Jefferson’s inauguration as President in 1801. Having always entertained a keen interest in the lands beyond Mississippi, Jefferson made a virtue of the presidential

power to advance expeditionary schemes. In 1802, he appointed Meriwether Lewis, his private secretary and ex-captain of the 1st US Infantry, to lead an expeditionary force. October 1802 saw Lieutenant William Clark's entry into the expedition as co-commander, and they trekked "up the Missouri and over the Rocky Mountains to the mouth of the Columbia" (Smith, 1970, p.16), finally setting foot in the shore of the Pacific in 1804. To some extent, the Lewis and Clark expedition demystified the West and envisioned a maritime American Empire that presupposed American expansion westward to the Pacific. By sending the officials to explore the Western region, Jefferson "hoped to capture the fur trade and undermine European claims to the far West. Fur represented an instrument of empire and the West a repository of resources from which to build ambitions for American sovereignty" (Jones & Wills, 2009, p.14). Thus, the mysterious West turned out to be a geographical steppingstone that would lead Americans to the shores of the Pacific and hopefully bring them across North America.

However, expansionism reached the natural boundary of the ocean with the formal acquisition of Oregon in 1846 and California in 1848, and a subsequent transition began "from an outward-looking to an introspective conception of empire" (Smith, 1970, p.29). The agenda now shifted from imperial expansion to "federal policy concerning the development of the vast new area which had been added to the national domain" (Smith, 1970, p.29). Faced with the enterprise of developing new states in the bleak solitudes of the West, Jefferson and his political followers such as Thomas Hart Benton and William Gilpin turned to "agricultural expansion into an empty, fertile continent" (Smith, 1970, p.12). Accordingly, a series of policies including Western agrarianism and the Homestead Act were propagated, attracting American yeomen to the West in the hope of "realizing their Jeffersonian dreams of establishing a successful farm and living under their own vine and fig tree" (Deverell, 1996, p.42). Hence the iconography of the West as "an agricultural paradise" (Smith, 1970, p.124) and a safety valve "to skim off both eastern laborers and class discontent" (Deverell, 1996, p.37) long survived as a momentous force in American thought and politics.

This Edenic vision of an agricultural West is aptly termed "the myth of the garden" by Henry Nash Smith, with the master symbol of the garden embracing "a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth" (1970, p.123). So powerful and vivid is the mythic image that its impact radiates widely outward, far across the centuries and disciplines and schools of thought, and even makes itself felt in Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X*, in which the narrator Andy claims his bungalow in Palm Springs as "a strange and forbidden garden" (Coupland, 1996, p.150). However, Coupland's mention of the myth of the garden is not so much a nostalgic look back at the simpler

and happier state of agricultural society as an implicit revelation of the way too idealized agrarian utopia. Much like Andy's rented bungalow, a synecdoche for Palm Springs that, as I have argued, is unmasked as a somewhat frustrating heterotopia, the time-honored "garden" is also demythologized as a failure to fulfill the American promise of utopian success and upward mobility. Firstly, the foundation of the myth of the garden, namely the West as a perfect terrain for agricultural development, does not stand up to scrutiny. The so-called "Rain Follows the Plow"¹ theory is merely an imaginative construction working on meteorology that can never eradicate drought, dust storms and grasshoppers confronting the Western farmers. Secondly, there is "a greater and greater disparity between the agrarian ideal cherished by the society and the changing facts of its economic organization" (Smith, 1970, p.156). Not only is the pattern of small freehold subsistence farming endangered by the advent of steam-driven tractors and threshing machines, but also the Western farmers cannot "stand his ground against the developing capitalism of merchant and banker and manufacturer" (Smith, 1970, p.156). Hence the single, all-powerful conceptual model of an agrarian utopia encounters its inevitable eventuality—the Western farmers are "battered and defeated by nature and ruined by economic conditions over which they ha[ve] no control" (Deverell, 1996, p.42-43).

Then, what is the point of Coupland's allusion to the failure of the myth of the garden in his 1991 novel? After all, Coupland's West, more than a century after the surge of westward advance following the Civil War, has changed beyond recognition: "it is the West of Palm Springs, Las Vegas, Hollywood, and Silicon Valley. The West of military bases, atom bombs, trailer trash, dysfunctional families, designer kitsch, TV preachers, cookie-cutter suburbs, Microsoft, and plastic surgery" (Katerberg, 2005, p.274). Coupland's purpose, as far as I am concerned, is to add historical weight to Palm Springs by evoking the fall of the old Western mythology, thereby intensifying the apocalyptic tones of "a new atomic frontier" (Jones & Wills, 2009, p.285) in the late modern era.

2.2 Insinuating the Cold-War Nuclear West

To comprehend the so-called atomic frontier described in *Generation X*, we should know what happened to the West around the time when the novel came out. In the early

¹ In the decade following the Civil War the pledge of the victorious Republican party to develop the West was an uncontrollable force urging the agricultural frontier onward. To destroy the prevailing impression of the West as "a stubbornly arid landscape" (Wright, 2003, p.87), the politicians had to give a "scientific" demonstration that rainfall was bound to increase on the trans-Mississippi expanse. The first and the most convincing one, which happened to be furthered by a series of unnaturally wet years after the Civil War, was carried through with an elaborate array of pseudoscientific notions and eventually summarized by Charles Dana Wilber in the succinct aphorism, "Rain Follows the Plough".

1980s, the 40th U.S. President Ronald Reagan supported an escalation in the Cold-War nuclear arms race as an effort to defend “the capitalist West from the ‘red peril’ of Communism” (Jones & Wills, 2009, p.284). Three hundred military bases and installations were deployed in the West, transforming considerable swathes of territories into “virtuoso military playgrounds, with thousands of square miles of Nevada set aside for training” (Jones & Wills, 2009, p.284). In fact, ever since the Second World War, the West has become “the weapons factory for the prosecution of wars hot and cold and the dormitory for millions of weapons makers and weapon users” (Deverell, 1996, p.40). Out of the nuclear component of Cold War technologies a new atomic frontier or the Nuclear West is born: “part science, part technology and part pioneer mentality” (Jones & Wills, 2009, p.285).

Remarkably, Jones and Wills draw a parallel between this atomic vision of the West and the mythic Old West: both ostensibly promise “the American dream of freedom, prosperity and progress” (2009, p.289). The mythic Old West in the nineteenth century, as I have discussed above, with its “fertile soil” and meritocratic rewards cajoles the Western farmers into “blissful labor”. Likewise, the American nuclear industry in the late twentieth century is “shrewdly linked with the attainment of an affluent lifestyle predicated on consumption, recreation and travel” (Jones & Wills, 2009, p.289). More than merely silent military deterrents, the nuclear sites stretching across large expanses of Western territory function as a boost to the emerging nuclear tourism and a promise for wholesome living: the breathtaking view of the mushroom cloud rising over “nothingness” transfixes a captive audience, and the cutting-edge atomic energy feeds off “contemporary fascinations with suburban, high-tech homes and comfortable living” (Jones & Wills, 2009, p.290). The coalition of the media and some capitalist corporations further instils the modern “homestead” dreams into the public. For example, on 15 April 1951, *The New York Times* in its headline article “Atomic-Age Sight-Seeing Way Out West” hails the West as “a wacky tourist haven, a potent mixture of historic and futuristic realms” (Jones & Wills, 2009, p.286); in 1950, the A. C. Gilbert Corporation announces plans for a child’s toy allowing “children to play with atomic energy at home”, as an effort to underscore “the peaceful atom as fun and family-friendly” (Jones & Wills, 2009, p.290). Such media hype and commercial advertisements culminate in the favorable image of a modern West known for technological progress and bright prospect.

The disillusionment with this new myth of the atomic frontier is less implicit in *Generation X*, largely because Coupland, as a witness to the construction of the Cold-War nuclear West, has a truer feeling about its falsity and dark sides. Although George H.W. Bush merrily expressed his emotions after the Soviet dissolution in 1991: “The

biggest thing that has happened in the world in my life, in our lives, is this: By the grace of God, America won the Cold War” (Ambrose & Brinkley, 1997, p.XVI), it is palpably clear that such a victory was also accompanied by great loss. The images of the new atomic frontier that combines the mythic Old West with utopian visions of a “Future West” begin to pall as the threat of nuclear war recedes, and the popular expectations of the nuclear West have been transmuted into nuclear fear. Coupland delineates these subtle shifts in his novel. Firstly, the once-imposing military facilities and nuclear installations emanate a forlorn ambience with the ending of the atomic frontier in the 1990s. In *Generation X*, the “unbeautiful desolation of Nevada”, a place that witnessed the first nuclear explosions at its Nevada Test Site in January 1951, makes Andy “feel lonely” (Coupland, 1996, p.77).

Secondly, the technological merits of atomic energy that promise healthy futuristic living are overshadowed by the growing discomfort over the effects of radiation on human life. The novel presents a somewhat hilarious episode when Dag brings Claire a souvenir from Mojave Desert, Nevada, i.e. “a de-labeled Miracle Whip mayonnaise jar filled with something green ... [that] looks like olive-colored instant coffee crystals” (Coupland, 1996, p.86). When Claire finds out that the green substance is Trinitite², the curtain of a farce rises:

“Radioactive!” Claire shrieks. This scares Dag. He drops the jar and it shatters. Within moments, countless green glass beads explode like a cluster of angry hornets, shooting everywhere, rattling down the floor, rolling into cracks, into the couch fabric, into the ficus soil—everywhere. (Coupland, 1996, p.86-87)

Here, Coupland plays a neat trick to show the atomic element behind the “olive-colored” substance: the “green glass beads” are a metaphor for the microscopic atoms, and the verbs “explode” and “shooting” resemble the violent reaction of nuclear fission. Claire’s frightened shriek and her ensuing volley of abuse calling Dag “You are such an asshole... You are such a victim, you pea-brained dimwit” (Coupland, 1996, p.87) to some extent reflect the decreasing atomic optimism and the increasing nuclear panic between the late 1970s and the 1990s.

Thirdly, since the enactment of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty in 1996, the dazzling mushroom cloud emblematic of technological sublime has been consigned to history and becomes simply “1950s”. Throughout *Generation X*, Andy and Dag always harbor an obsessive fancy to the mushroom cloud: Andy has been dreaming of it steadily since he was five, and Dag frequently interpolates it into his bedtime stories. In the

² Trinitite, also known as atomsite or Alamogordo glass, is the glassy residue left on the desert floor after the plutonium-based Trinity nuclear bomb test on July 16, 1945, near Alamogordo, New Mexico. The glass is primarily composed of arkosic sand that was melted by the atomic blast. It is usually a light green, although color can vary. It is mildly radioactive but safe to handle.

novel's last section titled "Jan. 01, 2000", Andy finally encounters the long-dreamed-of cloud on the horizon over the Salton Sea:

it was a thermonuclear cloud—as high in the sky as the horizon is far away—angry and thick, with an anvil-shaped head the size of a medieval kingdom and as black as a bedroom at night. [...] The cloud was so enormous that it defied perspective. [...] Finally I got so close that its rubber-black stem occupied the whole front of my windshield. Mountains never seemed this big, but then mountains, in spite of their ambitions, can never annex the atmosphere. (Coupland, 1996, p.204)

However, this magnificent "cloud" that evokes Andy's visceral admiration and poetic imagination turns out only to be smoke from burning the stubble of the fields. Such a "mirage" not only disappoints Andy's long-term expectation of seeing the real mushroom cloud, but also obliquely reveals the illusory nature of the promising prospects related to the nuclear West. And the section title "Jan. 01, 2000" lends certain apocalyptic tones to this "mirage" as the date, while ushering in a new century, also marks the end of the mythology of the Western frontier, the mythology that once flourished but now perishes.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this article discerns the anti-capitalist ethos and the apocalyptic tones of Palm Springs, a geographical heterotopia in Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*, at both spatial and temporal levels. Spatially, with the unique geographical configuration and demographic cohort, it exhibits certain counteraction to the urban bourgeois life characteristic of contemporary America; temporally, it partakes of apocalyptic tones by insinuating the collapse of the mythic Old West and the Cold-War nuclear West. The recognition of Palm Springs as a geographical heterotopia indicates Coupland's disappointment with and resistance to the highly capitalist American society in the 1990s.

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