

Failure of the Myth: The American West as Fraud

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Abstract: *The American West has been mythologized for its uniqueness, endless economic opportunities and the decisive role it has played in shaping the American character and democracy. As a matter of fact, Western mythology since its earliest times propagandized the West, despite its aridity and shortage of water, as "The Garden of the World" where the rugged and resourceful individual could easily secure a life full of abundance and live happily. Such Eden-like descriptions prevailed throughout the nineteenth century and were even renewed when the region was officially highlighted as the future of the nation and as a "safety valve" for economically poor city dwellers. However, 1930s would initiate a mounting opposition against the West and the publication of Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* (1930) would reshape, not only Turner's regionalist and sectionalist ideas by portraying the Great Plains as a separate cultural entity, but also brand the Western topography with only one word, aridity. Eventually, the second half of the twentieth century proliferated in alternative fictional and historical representations of the West and marked the rise of a new type of Western which parodied and reversed the formula conventions for different ends. Likewise, E. L. Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), shatters the happy ending of the classic Western by re-presenting the cyclical failure of a frontier town. In addition, neither the hero, portrayed as a short-sighted coward nor the other characters, depicted as materialistic and self-centered, nor the topography, described as uninhabitable, fulfill the requirements of the genre. Furthermore, *Welcome to Hard Times*, depicts the western mythology of progress and abundance as fraudulent as it is based on "get in, get rich, get out" (Limerick, 1987: 100) economic schemes.*

Key words: *American West, New Western, Myth of the American West*

1. The Lure of the Myth

The myth of the American West or the frontier myth, as it is widely known, has been the most enlightening, debatable, violent and deceiving myth in America as it came into being with the rise of the printed word and as such, it was exploited for strictly economic reasons. Thus, the New World mythology, revived once again after the former British colonies won their independence, depicted the West as Eden on Earth and the future of the emerging nation regardless of its apparent hostile topography and aridity. Furthermore, the literary mythmaker of the West, that is, the Western, as well as Turner's thesis, in fact, the first academic attempt to deal with the region, did their best to highlight the impact of the region on the unique American character and democracy.

Therefore, Richard Slotkin in his seminal work *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600- 1860* almost exhausts the genesis of American mythology and rightfully labels it "the intelligible mask of that enigma called the 'national character,'" (1973: 3). In fact, the study of the frontier myth in America should be viewed in terms of its particularities, that is, unlike other world mythologies commonly based on oral and folk myths, the myth of the American West came into being simultaneously with the rise of the printed word: "American myths-tales of heroes in particular-frequently turn out to be the work of literary hacks or of promoters seeking to sell American real estate by mythologizing the landscape" (Slotkin, 1973: 6).

In fact, such a divine approach towards the American West prevailed well into the eighteenth century when the mythologization process took a nationalistic turn after the former British colonies declared their independence. Then, the vision of Thomas Jefferson, St. John de Creveceour and Benjamin Franklin, to mention just a few, that is, the West as "The Garden of the World" and the future of the nation, was highlighted as the new destiny and mythology. Furthermore, the recently won political independence paved the way for Jefferson to put into practice his long-conceived schemes of building a nation bordering the two oceans by materializing *The Louisiana Purchase* (1803) which added billions of unexplored acres to the possession of the Union. As Mark Reisner argues in *Cadillac Desert* regarding the deal with France: "Napoleon had no idea what he had sold for \$15 million, and Jefferson had no idea what he had bought" (1987: 18).

The Louisiana Purchase was shortly followed by a number of exploring expeditions, which, instead of keeping under control the settlement or saving it for future generations as Jefferson's intentions were, revitalized and reenacted "The

Myth of the Garden." Firstly, the Lewis & Clark expedition (1804-1806), widely accepted and labeled as "the American Epic," intended to explore more than the flora and the fauna of the region:

The importance of Lewis and Clark expedition lay on the level of imagination: it was drama, it was the enactment of a myth that embodied the future. It gave tangible substance to what had been merely an idea, and established the image of a highway across the continent so firmly in the minds of Americans that repeated failures could not shake it (Smith H., 1950: 17)

The ambiguous results of the expedition though, discouraged the American government from further explorations for some decades. In fact, further exploration of the unknown West might have been delayed indefinitely if it were not for the abundance of beavers observed by a member of Lewis & Clark expedition, which hinted at the apparently economic possibilities of the region. As Reisner puts it: "The settlement of the American West owed itself, as much as anything, to a hat" (1987: 19).

Eventually, expeditions such as the ones led by Zebulon Montgomery Pike, which explored the Southern plains, John C. Fremont's expedition (1843), down the Oregon Trail, and finally, The Powell Geographic Expeditions (1869 and 1871), down the Colorado River, aimed at discovering the puzzle of the West. However, to everyone's surprise, they all proved the dominance of arid lands in the region and forced many to believe that "the Louisiana Purchase had been a waste of \$15 million-that the whole billion acres would remain as empty as Mongolia or the Sahara" (Reisner, 1987: 23-4).

Further exploration and the settlement of the West coincided with the rise to power of Andrew Jackson, a follower of Jeffersonian ideals in the 1830s and the revival of certain New World and American myths, promoted fervently even in Europe through the publication of de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, especially one of the letters titled "What is an American" which idealized the American farmer and topography beyond recognition.

Other factors, which stirred the flood of yeomanry to move West, included: "The Irish potato famine," and "a bad drought in the Ohio Valley," to name a few (Reisner, 1987: 36). However, the driving force behind the expansion and settlement is what Alex de Tocqueville labeled the spirit of the place, that is, the monopolistic tendencies for profit:

To clear, to till, and to transform the vast uninhabited continent which is his domain, the American requires the daily support of an energetic passion; that passion can be the love of wealth; the passion for wealth is therefore not reprobated in America, and, provided it does not go beyond the bounds assigned to it for public security, it is held in honor (cited in Reisner, 1987: 48)

Tocqueville's assumption was fully realized after the introduction of the steam engine and the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 which excelled in doing "away with the Great American Desert" (Reisner, 1987: 37) as it irrevocably conquered the vastness of the Great Plains and became the first large scale land speculator in the history of the United States.

Even the Federal government and the American politics in general had their own share in the promotion of the Western mythology. In fact, they played the most decisive role in carving the West by enacting the Homestead Act (1862), which, as it is commonly known, did more harm than good. The enactment of this law, in Henry Nash Smith's words, was mainly based on "the belief that it would enact by statute the fee-simple empire, the agrarian utopia of hardy and virtuous yeomen, which had haunted the imaginations of writers about the West since the time of De Crevecoeur" (1950:170). As a matter of fact, the myth-driven practices, according to Reisner, made "Speculation. Water monopoly. Land monopoly. Erosion. Corruption. Catastrophe" (1987: 43) a reality.

And catastrophe did strike. The disastrous winter of 1886-1887 proved fatal and almost wiped out the apparently flourishing cattle business: "Eighty-five per cent of the cattle perished on some ranches, and their carcasses lay black and sticking across the spring landscape (Worster, 1979: 83). Nevertheless, the myth was hard to die. The introduction of new farming techniques, known as "dry farming," at the turn of the twentieth century revived the lost hopes of farmers beyond the hundredth meridian until the drought of 1930s "turned much of the settled portion of the plains into a dust bowl and raised the question whether the region had been seriously overpopulated" (Smith H., 1950: 174).

Yet, neither the disastrous winter of 1886-87 nor the Dust Bowl disaster, which blew across the Plains nor its recurrence in the 1950s, to name a few, could eradicate the belief in "The Myth of the Garden." The reasons vary. Henry Nash Smith argues about the irresistible power of the myth over the scientific warnings of Powell's expeditions: "He [Powell] was asking a great deal. He was demanding that the West should submit to rational and scientific revision of its central myth, and indeed that the nation at large should yield one of principal underpinnings of its faith in progress, in the

mission of America, in manifest destiny" (1950: 200). Marc Reisner, apart from the enduring power of the myth, argues about the ecological dangers created by the federally sponsored dams (1987: 51).

Whereas Richard Slotkin in *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industry* argues that the Jeffersonian agrarianism of the self-sufficient yeoman was distorted with the introduction of the Jacksonian farmer-speculator (1985: 72-73).

As a matter of fact, the mythology of the American West has been undergoing a thorough revision since the 1960s where the region ceased to be an ideal place for the resourceful, rugged and self-sufficient individual to prosper. Yet, the Western genre, at least until the 1960s when its mythology began to fade and lose its long-held appeal, succeeded in preserving the myth in a timeless and ever-present era where the virtue was rewarded and the evil punished.

2. Welcome to Hard Times: The American West as Fraud

Welcome to Hard Times presents a good example of a metafictional novel, on the one hand and an exemplary New Western, on the other hand. However, the deconstruction of the West and the Western reaches a climax in the utilization of parody as the ultimate means to satirize the erroneous and unsustainable mythology of the region:

His [Doctorow's] depiction of the 'true West' seldom resembles the romanticized country of ruggedly self-reliant men, virginal-yet-intrepid women, and utter moral clarity. On the contrary, Doctorow's frontier deflates the unsubstantiated hopes and promises that compelled its inhabitants to move West in the first place (Saltzman, 1989: 76)

As such, westward expansion or the settlement of the West is depicted not only as a futile economic venture but also as a degrading and destructive experience:

What it suggests instead is that the experience of the West was doomed from the outset, because it brought out the worst rather than the best in man, thus condemning the efforts of men like Blue to abject failure. . . Breaking through the confines of the Western as a genre engendered by the nineteenth-century conception of the West as a place of infinitive possibilities and heroic achievement, Doctorow has written a powerful novel, in a style as bare and stark as the flats of Dakota, in a mood as relentless and uncompromising as the winter that brought Blue and what was left of his town's community near the brink of extinction (Bakker, 1985: 472)

In fact, Turner's theory of the West as a "safety-valve" is distorted and rightly distorted into a "choking valve" as the region turns out to have no resemblance to the promotion brochures. In addition, the so-called "heroic" pioneer or rugged individual turns out to embody and carry West all the materialistic and monopolistic tendencies which his peers in the East apparently suffer from:

Far from being free from the limiting and corrupting institutions of the metropolis from which they were supposed to be fleeing, these characters intentionally recreate those same institutions on the frontier. . . the land in it is viewed as only as a commodity to be claimed or bought and sold for profit or used for commercial promotion. (Bevilacqua, 1989: 87-88)

As such, the novel depicts "the predominance of money, greed and force on the frontier . . . the practice of capitalism, of hucksterism and exploitation [which] underlie and belie the more noble myths of conflict on the frontier" (Gross 1980:84). As a result, the western experience in the novel becomes a never-ending struggle for survival against the unpredictable forces such as the economic interests of Eastern investors, unwelcoming landscape and climate as Blue's narration points out:

When I came West with the wagons, I was a young man with expectations of something. I don't know what, I tar-painted my name on a big rock by the Missouri trailside. But in time my expectations wore away with the weather, like my name had from that rock, and I learned it was enough to stay alive (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 7)

Above all, Doctorow's west becomes a fraudulent experience as the settlers are trapped in their own preconceived capitalistic illusions of profits and utopian idealism:

The spirit of the frontier is the sadism of the death instinct, expressed both in arbitrary machismo violence and the alienating manipulations of commercial self-interest ... the only ties among humans are those of the cash nexus. Such an assemblage-like the strivings of traditional will and virtue proves terribly inadequate in the face of the related threats of sadistic violence and economic ruin. (Gross, 1980: 84)

As such, *Welcome to Hard Times* stands as a criticism of Turner's thesis of the West. The archetypal villain, Clay Turner, could be argued to stand as an ironic reference to the historian Turner himself as the novel questions the foundations of democracy and uniqueness by depicting the demise of a frontier town in the second half of the nineteenth century. In addition, most of the characters, in fact, immigrants who have come West led by the false frontier myths of progress, freedom and the hope to strike it rich, expect to have a fresh start in the West. Thus, Molly is an Irish immigrant who could not stand saying "yes Mum" while working as a maid in New York and has come west to work as a prostitute instead. Issac Maple, the grocery store owner, has come West encouraged by a vague letter of his brother: "Come along when you can, there's room out there for two" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 79). However, Zar's argument, the Russian whoremaster and the exemplary entrepreneur, in fact, wraps up all the exploitative and monopolistic tendencies of western experience in one single paragraph:

'Frاند. . . I come West to farm. . . but soon I learn, I see. . . farmers starve. . . only people who sell farmers their land, their fence, their seed, their tools. . . only these people are rich. And is that way with everything. . . not miners have gold but salesman of burros and picks and pans. . . not cowboys have money but saloons who sell to them their drinks, gamblers who play with them faro. . . not those who look for money but those supply those to look. These make the money. . . So I sell my farm. . . and I think. . . what need is there I shall fill it. . . and I think more than picks and pans, more than seed, more even than whiskey or cards is need for Women. And then I meet widow Adah, owner of tent. . . And I am in business' (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 63-64)

Thus, *Welcome to Hard Times* traces the rise and demise of a frontier town as a fragile outpost of civilization, on the one hand and it hints at the vulnerability and the undermining forces of such constructions. In fact, the rebirth of Hard Times owes a lot to the illusions of a single person, that is, Blue, the self-elected mayor who firstly takes to bookkeeping and after being deadly wounded to history recording hoping that the town would have a brighter future and keep the evil away as long as it flourishes economically: ". . . I always had the feeling somebody had certified Hard Times as a place in the world and that's why it was happening" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 133).

Therefore, when the survivors are about to desert the already devastated town, Blue argues with Ezra Pound, the grocery store owner, about rebuilding the town: "Now I don't know," I [Blue] said. "We got a cemetery. That's the beginnings of a town anyway" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 28). From that moment on, Blue shoulders to rebuild the town single-handedly and promote its non-existing economic possibilities. One of the methods used by Blue to convince the new comers to settle down is either by glorifying the past, as in the case with Zar: "I told him-exaggerating a little-what a thriving town this had been until two days ago" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 46), or by highlighting its future prospects as in the case with Alf, the coach driver, whose favor he gains through free booze and women: "'That was just a little accident, that fire,' I said. 'The town will be up like a weed before you know it, Alf'" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 77).

As a result of such false mythology, it seems as if the town is prospering and bustling with new settlers, miners and the railroad prospects hanging in the air. That, in fact, is enough to raise Blue's hope to re-start recording the accounts: "Molly was right, I would welcome an outlaw if he rode in. I felt anyone new helped bury the past. Swede's coming even put in my mind a thought I wouldn't have tolerated before-to keep a record again, to write things down" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 123). The town now "sports" even a jail of its own with the crazy but illiterate shootist, Jenks, appointed as the town's Deputy Sheriff. It seems as if the law has been restored or has it? Blue observes the growth of the city with apprehension as more jobseekers than needed have turned up: "These people are lying around here spending their cash and they're not making any. We are grabbing everything they have" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 177).

However, it takes more than illusions or goodwill to make it in the West or build a town in the middle of nowhere as other factors, mainly economic interests, tend to be at the disadvantage of the settlers who seem to lead a parasitic life at their own expense: "Economic interests are as capricious as natural ones, and as potentially devastating; the surest

occupations on the frontier are bartending, whoring, and gravedigging. Survival is reserved for strong men and scavengers" (Saltzman, 1983: 76).

The temporary success of Hard Times, due to the mineral lodes and the railroad prospects, soon vanishes. As a result, the bulk of people remains, at large, uncontrollable. Therefore, the looting initiated by the miners and drifters makes them all potential Bad Men. In fact, the Bad Man from Bodie seems to be among the looters, as if he had never left the town, despite his distinctive features, that is, the blaze on his face and his particular stare:

Looking over the doors I could see only his shoulders and his hat. But then he raised his head and there was his dark reflection in Zar's fancy mirror behind the bar. Two Bad Men, the Man multiplied. I remember feeling: he never left the town, it was only waiting for the proper light to see him where he's been all the time.

"Hey, who's the boss here," he called out (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 194-95).

Thus, Hard Times joins the long line of ghost towns, in fact, a typical phenomenon in the West where apparently prosperous towns disappear from the face of the earth overnight due to sudden eruptions of violence which eventually scare the investors away or the failure of economic ventures themselves as Alf, the coach driver for the Territory Express Company, points out:

"Same thing happened just a few years back to the town of Kingsville, Kansas. Did you know it?"

"Never heard of it."

Alf poured another drink: "Well sir it was a good town, a railroad head. They had two, three livery stables, couple of stores, lots of nice frame houses, a jail made of brick, some dandy saloons and a two-story hotel. Bunch of these Bad Men come along one spring, stayed three days. Killed twenty people. Broke up the hotel, wrecked the stores. Bricked up the doors and windows of the jail house, make of it an oven and roasted the Sheriff alive. Town never came back."

"What about the railroad?"

"Catcher come along the following summer and they laid track right on through for another thirty miles. Pass by today you can wave at the prairie dogs"

"Them Bad Men are sure a plague, Alf. It's no use denying. Let's have another drink." (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 77-78)

However, apart from the Eastern investors' decision to withdraw their stakes and the emergence of Clay Turners on regular basis, other factors as well, bring about the death of such feeble towns and petty civilizations exemplified by Hard Times. One reason would be the economic relationship and interests which lie at the bottom of all transactions:

Every relationship we come across in the novel is based on a series of transactions rather than on emotional ties. (That Blue composes on ledgers is particularly significant, for in such a vicious, Hobbesian environment, only the most tangible system of debits and credits can be trusted). . . To make it as a man you must be rich, unscrupulous, or handy with a gun: to make it as a woman you must prostitute yourself to powerful men (Saltzman, 1983 77)

Thus, Blue, despite his noble aspirations to rebuild the town from the scratch, is aware of his personal material profits that might arise from it: "Well Molly I don't favor keeping a store. Settling Ezra's brother here puts money in the town" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 84). He even strikes a deal with the coach driver Alf "to handle the Express business for the town" and the mailing of letters at "three percentages on all monies I garnered excepting mail" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 81-82), and with the rest of the money "gained," he makes sure to invest it or lend it at a certain interest rate: "A couple I lent money to straight off at a rate of one percent, and by noon I had gotten rid of all my money except what I needed to keep the three of us. . . My mind was teeming with plans to keep the temperature down and the money fluent" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 175-176).

In addition, Zar, who epitomizes the money-conscious entrepreneur, has come west to make money by trading what is mostly needed: liquor and women. Thus, when brainwashed by Blue about the material prospects lying ahead, he reacts in the following way: "Ah, you have not the merchant's nose. You know what I smell? The money!" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 55). Once settled, he expects the town folks to keep trading among themselves, that is, to frequent his girls the way he pays for their goods and services. In fact, that is the main reason why he develops a dislike and later on a grudge

on Issac Maple, the grocery owner, for breaking the code of transactions. Even Molly, despite her aloofness and her desire to leave the town at her first chance, tries "to groom and coddle both Jimmy and the marksman, Jenks, to serve as the instruments of her revenge" (Saltzman 1983: 77) thus adding to the what-can-you-do-for-me-in-return type of relationship.

Another factor which hinders the civilization to lay deep roots in Hard Times regards the unwelcoming and discouraging vastness of the American Plains and the harsh, unbearable weather conditions: "... winter is paralyzing and seemingly endless; white ants rot out the very root wood in the buildings; vultures and rats are more enterprising than the people who hope to sustain the town against them" (Saltzman, 1983: 76). In fact, the isolated inhabitants had to survive in a makeshift dig out or tents a freezing, windy Dakota winter of never-ending blizzards and snow falls before becoming the founders of a doomed town: "A Dakota blizzard will freeze your eyes shut and drive you from your direction faster than your senses realize. I have known men to die in a drift a few feet from their doors because they had no rail to go by" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 87). Doctorow, in an interview with Larry McCaffery argues along similar lines:

With *Welcome to Hard Times*, it was just a sense of place which moved me tremendously. It was the landscape. I loved writing about it, imagining it. I had never been West. Halfway through the book, it occurred to me that maybe I ought to make sure it really was a possible terrain. I went to the library and read a geography book by Walter Prescott Webb—a marvelous book called *The Great Plains*. Webb said what I wanted to hear: no tress out there. Jesus, that was beautiful. I could spin the whole book out of one image. And I did (1999: 79-80)

In fact, Blue begins its description of the town by mentioning the vastness of the Dakota Territory: "there is nothing but miles of flats" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 3) later on arguing that "... it was weather that wouldn't let you settle" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 90), further arguing that "... to feel so lost on earth, a live creature in a lifeless land" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 107), and concluding that "There had to be an end to winter or an end to us" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 111). Issac Maple, for instance, argues of having seen no "tree in seven days" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 80). Zar, too, when told about some Christmas celebration reacts: "Wal wal, I tell you-only the spring shall I celebrate" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 102). However, none of them has suffered more than Helga, Swede's wife, a personification of climate change, who seems to have lost her mind because of the Plains' climate, obviously, the unbearable wind.

Even though, Spring brings some surplus and some apparent welfare: "And I tell you we commenced to eat good. . . and it wasn't before long the flesh filled in between the bones and we began to look human once more" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 114), they seem to be unaware of the boom and bust economy so typical in the West. Molly gets closer to the abyss lying ahead by saying: "All these fools have come like buzzards after the smell of meat" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 143). The others get the message a little bit too late.

In fact, they all seem to be aware of the risks they are running into but economic profits and future prospects keep them there. Blue, like the mine owners, unintentionally delayed the fulfillment of Molly's prophecy by keeping the expected letter, which would verify the failure of the mine, in the drawer for two extra weeks. Naturally, they all blame Blue for their bankruptcy. Issac Maple accuses him of intentional fraud: "I said it would come to this, I knew it would. I'm ruined! Ye sure sold me, ye surely traded me!" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 188). Zar laments the loss of his investments: "My hotel! My beautiful hotel! From where shall come the customers" (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 189).

Finally, most of the settlers, after being ruined economically, lose even their own lives thus leaving the deadly wounded narrator only enough time to note down the destructive events:

This morning before I started this, when the pain was too much to sit with, before my arm turned numb, I walk walked up and down seeing the fruit of the land. Isaac is dead in his store. In the rubble of Zar's Palace that Mrs. Clement is dead although I don't see a mark on her. The dealer must be upstairs. Mae is lying across a table, her dress pulled up around her neck. Her skull is broken and her teeth scattered on the table and on the floor.

In front of his bar lies the Russian, scalped expertly (*Welcome to Hard Times*, 211)

Thus, Doctorow's novel has rightly reversed the expectations of the classic genre, that is, the West as the land of harmony and progress where virtue is rewarded and the evil punished, in order to highlight the violent, fraudulent and destructive character of the settlement, in fact, essential elements of the New Western. Therefore, it can be argued that Doctorow, apart from providing an intriguing yet appalling West, gets closer to the realities of the western experience.

3. Conclusion

Welcome to Hard Times not only epitomizes the features of the New Western but it also revitalizes the novel-writing process itself through a fusion of self-reflexive and Western elements. In fact, the New Western creates real fiction by parodying the genre clichés and by questioning the legacy of the westward expansion. Furthermore, the New Western matches Hutcheon's expectations of "historiographic metafictional" by questioning the verity of the historic representations and dealing with "postmodernism's 'nightmare of history'" (1988: 88). As Hutcheon puts it, "What historiographic metafiction suggests is a recognition of a central responsibility of the historian and the novelist alike: their responsibility as makers of meaning through representation" (1989: 86). As such, the novel re-presents an alternative west (lower case) by fusing factual, fictional and intertextual elements into more revealing and intriguing entities. It further exemplifies metafictional tendencies, that is, it gets involved in the meaning-making and fictional writing process by employing self-reflexive structures and highlighting the failure of the means of re-presentation such as language, memory, time and above all, the narrative itself as the primary myth and reality maker, in Federman's words, "the world within the word" (1993: 13), to convey sustainable truths.

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