NEW DIRECTIONS IN IRISH AND IRISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

IMAGINING IRISH SUBURBIA IN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Edited by
Eoghan Smith & Simon Workman

New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature

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Foreword

Sing, Muse, of Irish suburbia?

Sing, Muse, of Irish suburbia? If thus invoked, the Muse has not, or till now at least has appeared not, greatly to respond. When considering Irish literature we tend to think of wild Atlantic coasts, so important to Irish romanticism, of the squinting windows of the Irish midlands or of the tenements of Dublin, Belfast, Limerick, or Cork, sites nutritive to variant forms of Irish realism or naturalism, or of Big Houses and their parklands, landscapes hospitable to versions of sunny pastoral or grimmest Gothic. But the suburbs? They may have had their minor singers, but, mostly, they have seemed too featureless to offer much to 'literature', too stripped of distinct identity certainly to qualify as subject matter for 'Irish Literature'.

Considerations of suburbia are complicated by the fact that despite the enormous scholarship on the topic internationally there is no widely shared minimum definition of what the term 'suburb' means. The English word has been around since the Middle Ages, but to what exactly does it refer in twenty-first century Ireland? To areas of extended middle-class habitation on the outer rims of our major cities? To the winding ribbons of detached housing stretching spiderlike out in all directions from every small town, village and hamlet in the country? Are working class 'suburbs' simply tattier versions of middle-class ones or at what point do they become 'estates'? Do 'suburbs' typically take their meaning from what they possess—green lawns and smart hedges, family-friendly cars and home security systems, residence associations and

dog walkers—or by what they supposedly lack—the rooted earthiness of the real countryside, the restive excitement of the real city?

In cultural terms, the 'suburbs' seem, like the other aesthetics of place listed earlier, to offer a disposition towards modernity as much as a mimetic representation of any lived reality. In 'Glengormley', maybe the finest contemporary work of Irish literature on the suburbs—though not of an 'Irish' suburb in any comfortable sense—Derek Mahon ponders fundamental elements of the affect of suburban life.[1] One of these elements is the suburb's capacity to offer some version of the posthistorical:

> 'Wonders are many and none is more wonderful than man'
> Who has tamed the terrier, trimmed the hedge
> And grasped the principle of the watering can.
> Clothes pegs litter the window ledge
> And the long ships lie in clover; washing lines
> Shake out white linen over the chalk thanes.
>
> Now we are safe from monsters, and the giants
> Who tore up sods twelve miles by six
> And hurled them out to sea to become islands
> Can worry us no more. The sticks
> And stones that once broke bones will not now harm
> A generation of such sense and charm.

The wryly-modulated, mock-heroic cadences of these opening stanzas suggest that what the 'suburbs' really signify on an imaginary level is some Fukuyama-style sense of having reached the end of history, of having done with its antiquated 'monsters' of passion and rage, of having left behind the operatic 'sticks and stones' of religious, national, class, racial or other conflicts. In its most confident modes, this version of suburbia proffers the luxuriant lassitude of Wallace Stevens's 'Sunday Morning', where the 'Complacencies of the peignoir, and late/Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,/And the green freedom of a cockatoo/Upon a rug mingle to dissipate/The holy hush of ancient sacrifice'. Here, the suburban is secular and worldly and possesses a feminine, deliquescent ease and we glimpse the possibilities of a post-Puritan United States that might have finally left behind the 'tomb in Palestine' and the promises and perturbations of the messianic mentality. Originally published as 'Suburban walk' in the 1960s, 'Glengormley' is all the more interesting for the fact that it predates the Troubles: its droll sense of

posthistorical suburban sedation conveys a fretted undercurrent of prescient ominousness. Had a 'generation of such sense and charm' really left the history's worst perturbations behind it? The repressed of the forgotten North would, of course, soon return with a vengeance in 1968. And sure enough the two final stanzas of 'Glengormley' swerve from light into darkness, releasing slowly the anxieties that always haunt visions of the end of history and the last men:

> Only words hurt us now. No saint or hero,
> Landing at night from the conspiring seas,
> Brings dangerous tokens to the new era —
> Their sad names linger in the histories.
> The unreconciled, in their metaphysical pain,
> Dangle from lamp posts in the dawn rain;
>
> And much dies with them. I should rather praise
> A worldly time under this worldly sky —
> The terrier-taming, garden-watering days
> Those heroes pictured as they struggled through
> The quick noose of their finite being. By
> Necessity, if not choice, I live here too.

Suburbia everywhere is Janus-faced, airily idyllic one side, depressively dystopian the other. If it promises a placid relaxation from history and a perpetual bank holiday weekend world of 'terrier-taming, garden-watering days', there always lurks in some souls or pysches, or somewhere recessive within us all, the 'unreconciled' imagination for whom this manicured (post)modernity seems scarcely to answer to the visions of those 'heroes' who had in earlier times 'struggled through the quick noose of their finite being' to achieve a better world. Was it really of the life offered by Glengormley and Killiney, Monetenotte or Ballsbridge that 'Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,/All that delirium of the brave' had dreamed?

There are, of course, many ways to think about suburbs that fall beyond matters of affect or aesthetic, though these latter can never easily be left behind. When scholars labour to show that suburbs are not the atomised, anomic places they are sometimes reputed to be but are in fact warmly vibrant with civic community, how do they avoid straying willy-nilly down the primrose path of suburban pastoral? When others stress the realities of massive mortgage debt, corrupt development politics, or

the ways in which the idyllic vistas of boom time advertising so quickly slide into the 'ghost estates' (never 'ghost suburbs') of the great recession, don't they simply peel back the paint of suburban pastoral to disclose the familiar dystopias underneath? All sorts of questions bristle then: Aren't the idylls of suburbia and the nuclear family incestuously inseparable? Can suburbia ever be detached from the capitalist big lie of middle-class endeavor, uplift, affluence and eventual ease for all? How environmentally sustainable are suburbs, with their sliced prairies of parcellised lawn, in an age of climate change?

Sing, Muse, of Irish suburbia? In this intelligently-curated, intellectually-spiky volume, Eoghan Smith and Simon Workman demonstrate that Irish suburbia has not, despite appearances, lacked its scholars and singers (saints and sages belong to earlier, veritably-mythical ages). That this accomplished work should appear now in Irish studies is no accident. For suburbia is currently, isn't it, general all over Ireland? As once the countryside swept or seeped its surplus into our coastal cities, with every up or downswing of global financial cycles our cities now deposit their populations into the countryside, so that who can say where one presently ends, the other begins. Before the Celtic Tiger and the Good Friday Agreement, Ireland was still too racked by conflicts between nationalists and unionists, Catholic backlashers and liberal progressives, country and city, unions and bosses, to have escaped history, and therefore it was too early for 'suburbs' to have secured some strong place in the Irish imaginary. There were, as this volume underlines, suburbs then too, of course, but, like Mahon's Glengormley, they were precarious little enclaves of posthistory surrounded on all sides by the noisily 'unreconciled' acting out their increasingly embarrassing turbulent historical rages. Irish suburbs were then still marooned islands in surrounding seas of mayhem, and Irish suburbanites were often stick figures out of place and out of time, not unlike O'Casey's comically-distressed suburban 'Woman' in *The Plough and the Stars* strayed into the inner-city tenements during the turmoil of the Easter Rising and asking Uncle Peter if he could possibly pilot her 'in the direction of Wrathmines' so that she might recover her accustomed tranquility. Have we in post-Catholic, post-Good Friday Agreement, post-class but not post-capitalist Ireland, finally tiptoed stealthily, the 2008 financial 'corrections' notwithstanding, over history's hard border into the restfully Western European solaces of suburban posthistory? Or is this merely our Glengormley dream, our momentary complacency of the peignoir, our secular suburban Sunday morning slow snooze before the next second-

coming, cradle-rocking world-crisis? Romantic Ireland and Catholic Ireland dead and gone, Suburban Ireland's hour come round at last? Maybe. Whether conceived as good-enough or false utopia, the Irish suburbs merit their volume and find it, satisfyingly, here.

New Haven, USA

Joe Cleary
Yale University

Note

1. Derek Mahon, 'Glengormley', Derek Mahon: New Collected Poems (The Gallery Press: Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 2011), p. 14.

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new video 'Manifesto', which was acquired for the permanent collection of The *Arts Council/*An Chomhairle Ealaíon. Other recent exhibitions include: 'Uncovering History', Kunsthaus Graz, 'Excavation', Limerick City Gallery, 'Making History' and Colombo Art Biennale (2014), as well as a major British Council exhibition 'Homelands', touring South Asia. His artworks and scholarly writing have been published in more than eighty publications and his artworks are represented in many important national and international public and private collections. He is an editorial advisor for the Routledge journal 'Photographies' and is a board member of Fire Station Artist Studios. He was recipient of Create 'Arts and Cultural Diversity Award' (2014). He was lead curator for a major 1916 Commemorative exhibition, 'Beyond the Pale: The Art of Revolution', Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda, and he was commissioned by Lismore Castle Arts to produce an artwork for the exhibition, 'The Museum of August Destiny' (2016–2017). He recently exhibited his video installation 'UNresolved' in Argentina, Berlin, and Paris and curated 'Forum: Transcultural Dialogues', Rua Red gallery Dublin (2018). He was recently awarded an 'Infrastructure' public art commission by Fingal County Council.

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Eoghan Smith is Programme Director of the Arts and Humanities programme at Carlow College, St. Patrick's. He is the author of the work of fiction *The Failing Heart* (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2018) and *John Banville: Art and Authenticity* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014). He has published a wide range of articles, chapters, essays, and reviews on many aspects of modern and contemporary Irish writing, including work on writers such as John Banville, Samuel Beckett, and Claire Keegan. He previously taught at Maynooth University.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Eoghan Smith and Simon Workman

This volume explores the literary and visual cultures of modern Irish suburbia, and the historical, social, and aesthetic contexts in which these cultures have emerged.

Though there is an expanding body of criticism on suburban cultures in other Anglophone countries such as Britain and the United States, relatively little has been written on the suburbs in Irish literature and visual arts.[1] In spite of the physical existence of suburbia as a space between city and country with its own set of unique cultural and social identifiers, it is not always imagined as a culturally interesting place in its own right, or as a vantage point from which to explore the inner urban or the rural. However, although suburbia is sometimes negatively depicted in literary and visual culture as a place to be escaped from, contemporary sociological research on Irish suburbia bears out the strength of historical attachment to local forms of residential conglomerations. The work of Mary Corcoran, Jane Gray, and Michel Peillon, which

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informs several of the chapters in *Imagining Irish Suburbia in Literature and Culture*, has demonstrated that attachment to place is not only an important aspect of local Irish cultures, but that many residents of modern Irish suburbs also feel strong attachments to where they have chosen to live and to raise their families. These attachments are often more substantial than are popularly recognised within Anglophone cultures, particularly within Britain and America. Corcoran, Gray, and Peillon propose that two dominant models have been employed in the study of suburbia. The first model tends to stereotype the suburbs as dystopian places of drab conformism and personal alienation, a stereotype often repeated in artistic and media forms, while the second model employs a sceptical, and crucial, reappraisal of such stereotyping.[2] *Imagining Irish Suburbia in Literature and Culture* not only reflects the form of this debate but aims to advance it. The totality of this volume suggests that while Irish suburban experience is often conceived pejoratively by writers and artists, there are also many who register and valorise the imaginative possibilities of Irish suburbia and the meanings of its social and cultural life.

Imagining Irish Suburbia in Literature and Culture contains fourteen chapters. The first three establish key historical, sociological, and theoretical contexts for Irish suburban cultures. Ruth McManus begins the book with a concise overview of the evolution and development of Irish suburbia from the nineteenth century to the present, thus establishing a vital geo-historical frame of understanding for the chapters that follow. Although the development of Irish suburbia largely mirrors the American and British experience, McManus demonstrates that Irish suburbia has its own particular character and unique cultures. These cultures can be felicitously understood within the local context; Mary Corcoran in her chapter argues that, contrary to their representation as places of social alienation, the suburbs are actually sites where engaged civic cultures thrive, creating what she terms 'social affiliations'. Although globalisation and technological advances increasingly appear to weaken attachments to the local, Corcoran argues that Irish suburbia remains a place of 'mico-civicism' where social participation is strong, binding, and important. Michael Cronin's chapter deepens McManus's and Corcoran's sense that Irish suburbia is a vibrant and socially creative space. He offers an incisive model of theorising suburban literary cultural forms, specifically in relation to Dublin. Considering works by artists of suburbia, such as James Joyce, Roddy Doyle, Paul Howard, and John

Banville (among others), Cronin explores the suburbs in four different ways: as metonymic spaces (as opposed to metaphorical) that express the geo-spatial complexity of Dublin in contemporary writing and which 'provide anchor points of identification' in a fragmented city; as culturally rich spaces that can be illuminated through 'microspection'; as places of multifarious intralingual subtleties that belie simplistic understandings of language-use; and, echoing Corcoran, historically as fertile places where 'new forms of relationships were being tested' and 'where new kinds of affinities were possible' that have given rise to a more liberal and tolerant Ireland.

Cronin demonstrates that there exist multiple Irish suburban cultures to explore, and that, contrary to its popular image, Irish suburbia contains within it an extraordinary number of productive cultures. This productivity is traced in aesthetic terms by Eoghan Smith and Simon Workman in their overview of Irish suburban literary and visual culture. Although by no means intended to be an exhaustive account, they argue that many Irish artists have been more attuned to the possibilities, and indeed, necessity, of writing out of and about Irish suburbia than has perhaps been recognised. In recent times, in particular, a significant body of literary and visual culture has developed in response to the property boom that helped drive the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' economy from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, and the fallout of the collapse of that economy. The rapid growth and subsequent crash of this economy were underpinned in a large part by mass suburban house-building projects; at the same time, many of the artists who engaged with the Celtic Tiger and the catastrophic fallout of the crash were themselves deeply invested in life in the suburbs. If *Imagining Irish Suburbia in Literature and Culture* has a strong focus on the period from the 1990s to the present day, it is because the rapid development of Irish suburbia during this time was fundamentally revealing and transformative of Irish culture, society and economic policy, the reverberations of which were and still are being registered by Irish artists across a variety of art forms.

Chapters by Liam Lanigan, Theresa Wray, Eamonn Jordan, and Catherine Kilcoyne are linked through their primary focus on literary engagements with Irish suburbia and in their shared sense that the Irish suburbs are crucial sites of cultural meaning as well as a distinctive index of socio-economic transformation. Lanigan focuses on the interrelations between geography, space, and identity in contemporary fictional representations of the south Dublin suburbs in the work of Barry McCrea, Kevin Power, and Justin Quinn. In his essay, he argues that the affluent

and culturally powerful south Dublin suburbs have always had a particular importance in the Irish imagination, dating back to the nineteenth century. During the Celtic Tiger period, the apparent economic and cultural detachment of these suburbs not only from the rest of Ireland but also from the rest of Dublin became exacerbated in the public mind, albeit in complex and nuanced ways that Lanigan argues often ironically draws attention to this same sense of detachment as 'illusory'. Echoing observations by McManus and Corcoran that Irish suburbia has its own set of characteristics, Wray considers the wider context of American and British representations and theories of suburbia, and asks important questions about the richness and validity of Irish suburbia as a space for female imagining and art, offering readings of writers such as Elizabeth Bowen, Maeve Brennan, Maeve Binchy, Anne Enright, Patricia Scanlan, Mary Morrissy, and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne. Eamonn Jordan comprehensively surveys contemporary Irish plays set in urban and suburban Dublin during the Celtic Tiger and Post-Celtic Tiger periods. His chapter considers how Irish dramatists grappled with the profound changes that the new economic paradigm was bringing about, and he explores in particular representations of class and of inter-class relationships in contemporary Irish theatre. Jordan additionally points out, echoing Wray, that the formation of identity through personal and sexual relationships is a recurrent theme of Irish suburban writing. The final contribution on suburbia in Irish literature, by Catherine Kilcoyne, examines how the work of Irish poets W.B. Yeats, Patrick Kavanagh, Eavan Boland, Derek Mahon, and Medbh McGuckian track and constitute the plethoric meanings of Irish suburbia in various locations and through different historical phases.

Engagement by Irish artists with suburbia, particularly in recent times, is also prevalent in other forms of Irish culture. Chapters by Ruth Barton, Tracy Fahey, John O'Flynn, and Justin Carville address the portrayal of contemporary suburbia within forms of visual and musical culture and offer analyses of its manifestation in Irish film, art, photography, and music. Like Lanigan and, to an extent, Jordan, Barton examines how recent renderings of Irish suburbia critique the assumptions and attitudes of the middle classes of south Dublin. Focusing specifically on recent films by John Boorman, Lenny Abrahamson, and Kirsten Sheridan, Barton examines how membership of the middle classes in these films is defined by house-ownership and cultural affiliation to the south Dublin suburbs, to which is attached privilege. Yet this class privilege, which habitually appears to be linked to specific suburban detachment

and affluence, Barton argues, is not one that is always depicted in positive terms in contemporary Irish cinema, suggesting that Irish filmmakers were alert to the more destructive aspects of the Celtic Tiger economy. However, there is a sense that in the films considered here, the approach to middle class Irish suburban culture is not always nuanced, with film-makers preferring judgmental excoriation to more circumspect reflection.

Barton and Jordan emphasise the importance of 'home' in the Irish suburban imagination. The personal obsession with home-ownership became something of a national nightmare after the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy, as the aftermath of the crash saw the landscape blighted by unfinished and vacant housing estates that have since become known as 'ghost estates'. In her chapter, Tracy Fahey interprets the powerful nexus of Gothic aesthetics and the image of the ghost estate/vacant home in recent Irish art practice. Discussing several modes of visual art in the work of a number of contemporary artists, she demonstrates the remarkable prevalence and malleability of the ghost estate as signifier of Irish economic collapse along with the enduring cultural attachment of Irish people to 'home'.

Although suburbanisation is a modern phenomenon, Fahey's uncovering of older Irish attachments to 'home' in contemporary art practice reflects the capacity of Irish cultural experience to survive by translating itself into new and modified forms. In his overview of musical happenings in suburban Dublin, John O'Flynn explores the visibility and the 'hiddenness' of the suburbs in contemporary Irish musical culture, which he argues demonstrates continuity with older folk traditions. In one sense, the suburbs are highly visible in popular music; not only are many popular Dublin musicians suburbanites, but suburban experience is reflected in the form and content of their music. Yet, as Corcoran, Cronin, and Smith and Workman also allude to in their essays, O'Flynn suggests the hiddenness of the suburbs is partly caused by the discursive boundaries around suburbia, so that the fertility of suburban culture is often obscured.

The essays by Fahey and O'Flynn reveal something of the ambiguous relationship that Irish artists often have with suburbia; on the one hand, suburbs are formative spaces for identity and creative endeavour; on the other, they are not always openly and consciously celebrated. This latter reluctance may in part be attributed to inherited discourses about the imaginative limitations of the suburb. It may also be related to the physicality of suburbia, which by nature involves topographical

and ecological upheaval. Fahey's consideration of ghost estates draws attention to changes in the physical landscape wrought by suburbanisation, something which is echoed by Justin Carville's exploration of photographic representations of Irish suburbia. Carville uses the concept of *terrain vague* to offer new insights into the aesthetics of Irish suburban photography. He suggests that recent Irish photographic practices have undergone a 'topographical turn' in which landscape is not simply documented; instead, Irish photography has played a vital role in concentrating the eye on the cultural and economic forces that actively changed Ireland, and to which there has been much political and public blindness.

Like many of the other authors in the collection, Carville is focused on the striking transformations of landscape that occurred during the mass suburbanisation of Ireland during the Celtic Tiger years. His chapter provides a bridge towards the subsequent contributions by photographers Mark Curran and Anthony Haughey, who document how photography has a unique power to catalogue such transformations. Although both academics in their own right, these two essays by Curran and Haughey offer comparable artists' responses to the recent development of Irish suburbia, disclosing the process and rationale of individual photographic artworks engaged with the evolving suburban spaces of modern Ireland. Curran outlines his interest as a photographer in the suburban developments of south County Dublin, and, like many others, delineates the economic and political forces that drove the radical transformation of Ireland during the Celtic Tiger through the expansion of the built environment. Haughey, like Fahey, is interested in the phenomenon of the ghost estate, and he documents his own artistic process in photographing ghost estates, while also considering the politics of exhibition of contemporary suburbia. In this sense, both Curran and Haughey, along with others in *Imagining Irish Suburbia in Literature and Culture*, see Irish artistic engagement with suburbanisation in dialectical terms, as acts which are both critical but aesthetically productive, both sceptical and yet rich in artistic possibility.

Haughey's and Curran's work also pertains to the deficiency and malfunction within Ireland's housing sector as it is currently constituted; as this volume of essays goes to publication, Ireland is in the grip of a housing crisis of striking scale and complexity, which has resulted in steep increases in the numbers of homeless and families in emergency provision. The state's over-reliance on the private sector and flawed social housing policies have resulted in house price inflation, sharp,

sometimes exorbitant, increases in rents, and a dearth of new housing stock. And though Curran's and Haughey's work is particularly focused on these issues, the other chapters in this volume (despite variances in theoretical approach, historical focus, and thematic preoccupation) also elucidate some aspect of the forms of political economy and cultural formation that have led to the current calamity in housing. In toto, this variegated field of analysis provides a penetrating diagnosis of the systemic failures in housing provision, which were engendered by the myopic and misguided perspectives (both recent and historic) of the Irish polity and its cultures. Yet these essays not only anatomise the causes of these socio-political failures, they also hone and enrich the language through which solutions to the current crisis in housing can be articulated and implemented. It is clear that suburbia will prove a crucial site in this process and become a locus for how Irish society re-imagines itself into the future.

Notes

1. See for example Martin Dines, *Gay Suburban Narratives in American and British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Sarah Edwards and Jonathan Charley, eds, *Writing the Modern City: Literature, Architecture, Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2011); Jo Gill, *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Lynne Hapgood, *Margins of Desire: The Suburbs in Fiction and Culture*, 1880–1925 (Manchester University Press, 2005); Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Nathanael O'Reilly, *Exploring Suburbia: The Suburbs in the Contemporary Australian Novel* (Amherst, NY: Teneo Press, 2012); Ged Pope, *Reading London's Suburbs: From Charles Dickens to Zadie Smith* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Roger Webster, ed., *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000).
2. Mary P. Corcoran, Jane Gray, and Michael Peillon, *Suburban Affiliations: Social Relations in the Greater Dublin Area* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010; Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2010), pp. 3–5.

CHAPTER 2

Brave New Worlds? 150 Years of Irish Suburban Evolution

Ruth McManus

Introduction: 150 Years of Irish Suburbs

The suburb is relatively under-researched in Ireland, despite its ubiquity.[1] This chapter examines the changing nature, form, function and meaning of the Irish suburb, recognising key phases in its evolution that reflect social, political and economic change. After beginning with early suburbs and their often negative associations, the discussion then addresses the point at which the relationship between city and hinterland begins to change. Following an overview of terminology and key definitional considerations, the next section considers the nineteenth-century middle-class suburb and its importance as a means of social and spatial differentiation. The twentieth century saw the democratisation of the suburb, encouraged by major slum clearance rehousing schemes as well as improved personal mobility through increased private car ownership, while the most recent decades have seen a spread of the suburbs on such a scale that the lines between urban and rural have become increasingly blurred.

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