

Reconsideration of the Rise and Fall of Detroit Through the Lens of Non-Place

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Detroit

The name is unique to itself, having been appropriated from the original French *détroit*—meaning, “of the strait.” Thus, worldwide, when the word “Detroit” (*dī'trɔɪt*) is spoken, it can refer to only one place. And Detroit *is* known worldwide. It is famous, mostly, for its failure.

It has been known for other things: the mighty American automotive industry, and Motown, for instance. But these are glories past. The retreating auto industry has left the region gasping for employment and identity. Motown moved to L.A. The most noteworthy feature of contemporary Detroit *is* its decline. A 60-year exodus of over a million residents has left the city in an unparalleled state of abandonment. The abandonment is widespread, but for many, life goes on. The tattered remnants of the city reveal an astonishing diversity of character. Vibrant and tenacious neighborhoods dot eerily desolate expanses of urban wilderness and industrial wastelands, loosely strung together by an intangible historical force. The strange meta-landscape and the emotions it evokes are difficult to describe to those unfamiliar with the city. The remnants of Detroit are often dilapidated and depressing. Occasionally, they are heartbreakingly beautiful.

Detroit is not unique in its post-industrial struggle with urban blight—many cities have dealt with their respective crises. Detroit, however, is peerless in the extent of decline since its mid-century peak. Popular narratives regarding Detroit tend to be subjective or anecdotal. Various narratives distribute blame of Detroit's collapse in various ways, but a common thread is that Detroit was once a great city, and had the potential to remain a great city, but then something went wrong. There is plenty of blame to spread around: racism, classism, over-dependence on a single industry, labor relations, the failure of The Great Society, etc. Such discussions have merit, but tend to *feel* incomplete. The summation of Detroit's economic, political, and social history does not seem to adequately explain the resulting crisis.

The collapse of Detroit *cannot* be explained solely as the sum of its parts, and was *not* a result of external forces. Detroit's fall was built in to its ascension. Moreover, the qualities of the city that preordained its failure were

generally the same qualities that allowed its initial success. In happier times, Detroit was glowingly referred to as “the Paris of the Midwest,” “the Arsenal of Democracy,” and “the Motor City.” That city was a decoy - a temporary facade. The benevolent planners and engineers of the early cityscape believed they were constructing a model city. In reality, they were creating a *non-city*, comprised of *non-places* as would be described by French anthropologist Marc Augé decades later. Hidden beneath the sparkling surface of the Motor City was the city it was destined to be: the failed metropolis, the murder capital, the city in ruins.

Non-Place:

“The Real Measure of Our Time”

In his 1995 book, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, French anthropologist Marc Augé introduced the concept of “non-place” as distinct from anthropological place. Anthropological places, what we think of as *real* places, are “relational, historical, and concerned with identity,” and are formed by social constructs of “language, local references and the unformulated rules of living know how” (Augé 1995).

One way to conceptualize this is to consider anthropological *space* as one-dimensional. Space, in this sense, is essentially a calculation of the area available for human activity to take place. *Place* is the result of two additional dimensions on this anthropological space. The second dimension of place is *time*. A space can be drastically different places at different times: this can be easily observed by walking a downtown street during daytime activity, and again when it has been deserted late at night. The third dimension of anthropological space is difficult to measure: it is essentially the interaction between people and place, embodied by the psychological idea of *human affect*. This construct is shown in Figure 1.

Augé employed the concept of non-place to attempt to describe the spaces in which the activities of contemporary western society take place, and why such spaces are historically unique. Augé writes that “if a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.”

There is a direct relationship between the definition of place represented by Figure 1, and the Augéian conception of anthropological place, as shown in Figure 2.

Augé hypothesizes that the increasing amount of time that we spend in non-places represents a break from the modern age and places us in an age of “supermodernity.” In this age,

“transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhumane conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity); where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary, and ephemeral.”

Augé laments that such non-places “are the real measure of our time” (Augé 1995).

The Nature of Non-Place

Considering the dehumanizing effect of non-place, it is crucial to consider this comment on Augé’s work:

“It is not the non-place that displaces the local or creates asocial facelessness inasmuch as the theorist of such places erases the local in these accounts of non-place. This condemnation of place is endemic of a specific type of gaze into non-place... What is forgotten in such conclusions is that the experiences of alienation are a direct result of certain people’s labor and also by the consumptive and cultural practices enacted by the customers—and theorists alike” (Sharma 2009).

In other words, in measuring, observing, and criticizing non-places, theorists often fall in to the trap of subjugating the spaces to their personal biases. Augé himself qualified that the non-place “never exists in pure form.” The affective characteristics of a place (or

non-place) certainly impacts its human inhabitants; but the place itself is subject to the affective projections of the individual users. Non-place can be, and usually is, a combination of objective and subjective non-place. Non-place is also linked to the *economic* environment:

“Within the non-place, the forces of global corporate capital have found an amiable place to both invest and reduce human life to maximize and optimize its power. A highly commodified lifestyle is offered as a means out” (Sharma 2009).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, utilizing the region’s untapped natural resources, Detroit’s accumulating capital sought to enshrine itself in a modernist utopia of industry and infrastructure. Factories, high-rise offices, and shopping centers multiplied and expanded, serving and served by throngs of plentiful migrant labor. The city was not built to be home to people—it was constructed to house and serve the growing industrial-capitalist economy. Concurrent to the physical construction, within it and around it, a shadow network of non-places quietly crystallized into an invisible non-city, the primary purpose of which was to subject the residents of Detroit to the service of the economy. “The non-place is the opposite of utopia: it does not contain any organic society” (Augé 1995). The extent of the infiltration of the dystopic non-city into the city was such that many residents were unable to escape non-place. Some spent their entire lives in this parallel world, becoming *bare life*. A person trapped in non-place “is relieved of his usual determinants; he becomes no more than what he does or experiences. The space of non-place creates neither identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude” (Augé 1995). It is no wonder that so many left.

Also essential to the concept of non-place are the features of *impermanence* and *transit*. Augé focused his initial descriptions of non-place on such spaces as “air, rail, and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called ‘means of transport’ (aircraft, trains, and road vehicles), the aircraft and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets,” and even cyberspace (Augé 1995). Given this breadth of definition attempting to capture those spaces “formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces” (Augé 1995), it is not extrapolation to explore the *entire city* of Detroit within the framework of non-place, beginning with its founding and continuing to the present day.



Figure 1. Anthropological Place as a construction of space, time, and affect



Figure 2. Augéian Anthropological Place

The City of Non-Place

During the industrial revolution, the natural resources of the Great Lakes area (fish, game, lumber,

copper, iron, etc.) drove economic expansion of Detroit and the surrounding region. Economic growth drew throngs of migrant and immigrant labor, but many of the new arrivals had little interest in the city beyond their employment. They were in Detroit to work, and only to work (Thomas 1992). The place they inhabited was not a *home*; it was a factory. It was not a community; it was a camp. It was not a city; it was a non-city. The non-place never allows a person to relax, to feel *at home*. “What reigns there is actuality, the urgency of the present moment” (Augé 1995). Non-place is certain to exist to varying extents in any modern city, but areas of concentrated non-place define a population of perpetual urgency and tension—a perpetual state of exception.

Tension and unrest in the city surfaced in 1863 when Detroit experienced its first race riot. An increasing number of black migrants brought competition for jobs against Irish and German laborers. Though the black population was only about 3% of the city (McGraw 2000, 289), the racial powder-keg atmosphere that would continue to plague Detroit was already evident. The 1863 riot was sparked when an angry white mob was restrained by federal troops from lynching a black man convicted of raping two nine-year-old-girls: one black, the other white. The troops diverted the mob into a black ghetto neighborhood, where it torched homes, beat bystanders, and killed two black men. The girls later admitted perjuring themselves regarding the rape. (Woodford 2001, 71) Black migration to Detroit between the 1863 riot and the end of the nineteenth century was minimal. However, population growth accelerated, due mostly to the arrival of foreign-born immigrants (McGraw 2000, 289).

By 1900, Detroit was a manufacturing center, a transportation hub, and the nation’s 13th -largest city by population with 286,000 residents. About a third of the residents were from abroad (McGraw 2000, 289). Detroit’s access to raw materials and labor made it a natural location for industrial expansion. The eventual concentration of the *automotive* industry in Detroit, however, is largely due to happenstance. In 1904, the industry included hundreds of small manufacturers scattered across the nation with Metro-Detroit’s share of the automobile industry employment at only 17%. The seed-crystals of eventual automobile manufacturing agglomeration in Michigan were two early successes: Ransom E. Olds and Henry Ford. By 1920, about 40% of the auto industry (200,000 laborers) was located in metro-Detroit (McGraw 2000, 162). The population of Detroit-proper at this time was pushing one million (McGraw 2000, 289).

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Henry Ford revolutionized the automotive industry. It is cliché to state that he changed the world—but it is accurate. Ford’s Model-T was produced with a new manufacturing process: an *assembly line*. The efficient mechanized labor of the assembly line enabled the Model-T to be mass-produced and affordable to the American middle-class. The automobile—specified by Augé as a prototypical example of a non-place—was suddenly available to the majority of Americans. The symbiotic birth

of these remarkable innovations (the Model-T and the assembly line) is saturated with irony; the assembly line not only has in itself the defining qualities of non-place, but its

primary function was to discretize and export units of non-place (automobiles) for public consumption – non-place had achieved self-replication technology! As the economy and society developed, automobile ownership quickly transitioned from novelty to necessity. Automobiles and assembly line technology streamed out of Detroit and around the globe.

After World War II, industrialized societies refocused their concentration on lifting their populations out of poverty. Newly famous Detroit, “the Arsenal of Democracy,” provided an obvious template. By 1950, this birthplace of Fordism had become a modern metropolis of nearly 2 million residents, with another 1.5 million residing in the surrounding metro area. Fordism offered a blueprint for putting Keynesian economic theory into action. The incorporation of mechanized control and unskilled labor into the production process drastically reduced production costs. The relatively high wages paid to the workers empowered them as consumers of the commodified products of their own labor. This positive feedback loop resulted in skyrocketing production and consumption. At one point, the Model-T accounted for over half of U.S. car sales, many of them purchased by Ford assembly line workers.

The Fordist system was superficially simple but internally complex. The system’s obvious function was to “organize mass production through a blend of scientific management and machine-dictated pace of work” (Pizzolato 2004). When coupled with Keynesian demand-side economics, economic growth was possible at unprecedented rates. To successfully implement Fordism on a societal scale, a paradigm emerged that “the state had to take on institutional powers to organize redistribution; corporations had to constantly innovate to keep a high productivity and accept the system of redistribution; organized labour had to cooperate in keeping in check the

labour force, whose reliable performance was the most important component”(Pizzolato 2004, 420). This vast maintenance structure was needed, primarily, because even highly paid laborers were often restless and unhappy, and thus prone to be disruptive and unproductive.

The assembly line laborer works in a state of exception. The system requires that the laborer seamlessly integrate into the industrial production machine. The pace of the work is dictated by the system. The task is monotonous, repetitive, and thoughtless. That the assembly line is a non-place as defined by Augé is obvious; the laborer “is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences” (Augé 1995).

Fordist theory and practice spread. Automation in various industries increased productivity and drove unprecedented industrial and economic growth. A key tenet of Fordism spread across America and the world: *The most essential function of a society is the enabling of the optimization of economic growth and accumulation of material wealth.* As [non-place] assembly line production spread throughout and beyond the auto industry, Keynesian-Fordist society pulled the tendrils of non-place outside of the factory walls and into the surrounding cities. Societies co-evolved to serve the economy. The United States, a young nation with vast natural resources and room to grow, was quickest to adopt this modus operandi. Though never officially criminalized in the U.S., it has become widely considered despicable and disgraceful to *contribute nothing to the economy.*

As the birthplace of Fordism, Detroit was at the forefront of this industrial and societal revolution. Migration to the area was historically driven by fulfilling industry’s need for labor. As labor’s value increased, it became more than a reason to relocate—it became a reason to live. Migrants stayed and built families. The perceived promise of escape from non-place through accumulation of material wealth enabled much of the labor market to tolerate the increasingly non-human aspects of labor and daily life.

As the Fordist economic growth machine developed, society evolved such that serving the economy became an abstract motivation. A unique pride underlies such statements as: “My father worked for 30 years on the assembly line.” It is a pride that unconsciously acknowledges the state of exception that must be tolerated in this particular service to the economy. The implied heroism is comparable to references of employment that are more physically demanding (“My father was a carpenter...”), more mentally demanding (“My father was an engineer...”), or even more dangerous (“My father was

a police officer...”). The factory worker, in his tolerance of non-place in service of the economy, commands a unique respect in American society, and in Detroit especially.

The Inherent Instability of Accumulating Non-Place

The dehumanizing effect of non-place is unavoidable in modern life, and tolerable to somewhat remarkable extents. It is unsustainable, however, to live an entire life in non-place, in a perpetual state of exception. Detroit’s industrial upbringing (objective non-place), coupled with a diverse and unassimilated population of migrants (subjective non-place) likely resulted in the highest concentration of non-place ever amassed. Detroit’s inertial growth continued for about a decade after the end of World War II, peaking near two million residents of the city-proper. In 1955, a Ford executive claimed that the city had the “highest standard of living in the world” (Sugrue 1996, 130), and he may have been right—but by then, the population had already begun to leave the city-proper for the rapidly expanding suburbs.

Racial tension is likely the most common culprit in popular narratives of Detroit’s “white flight.” Racial tension was certainly a factor in the *eventual* exodus

of the city’s white population, but this view does not adequately explain the timeline of white outmigration, with its beginnings around 1950. At this time, the black population was relatively small at 16%. Additionally, it was almost entirely crowded into segregated ghettos. Formal and informal segregation had actually kept the city so divided that even the increasing number of economically successful blacks were unable to relocate out of dilapidated ghetto neighborhoods (Thompson 2001, 16). In the 1950’s, the overwhelming majority of the white population of Detroit-proper still resided in all-white neighborhoods and sent their children to all-white schools. It is difficult to attribute the initial flight to racial tension.

Another explanation is that industry left the city, and the population followed employment opportunity. In this narrative, blame is placed on corrupt city government and high taxes for chasing business and the auto industry out of town. There may be elements of truth to this explanation, but again, this does not wholly correlate to the timeline. The local economy was moderately tied to the fate of the auto industry, but was more diversified than current perceptions would indicate. Many of the large auto plants were located outside of the city limits throughout the early 20th century. This *did* lead to growth outside the city-

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proper, but industrial, commercial, and residential growth continued within the city limits regardless. The initial white flight did not correlate to any significant outsourcing of employment. The original urban sprawl was a residential phenomenon, one of classic bedroom communities. Many of the pioneer suburbanites initially commuted back to the city to work.

As a supplementary explanation for the initial outmigration, it is worth considering the repellant force of non-place. As discussed, it is plausible that by 1950, industrialized Detroit had amassed the highest concentration of non-place in human history. The city was built for industry, not people. It was built for capitalism, not community. Under these conditions, neither community nor capitalism can succeed.

Non-place is partially subjective, however, and much of the population had truly come to think of Detroit as their home. The Fordist growth machine had provided the [white] Detroit population with the accoutrements of modern life: automobiles, televisions, and an infrastructure to optimize their roles as producers and consumers of the expanding economy. For some of the population, however, finding a place to feel at home was difficult. The city still had some characteristics of a temporary camp, in that a person could consider himself surrounded by *others*. 1950's Detroit remained ethnically divided, even among its whites. In addition to black and Jewish ghettos, there were Polish,

German, Greek, Irish, and other ethnic neighborhoods. Churches, bars, and social institutions were often ethnically distinct even when neighborhoods were not. A German family was likely to be aware of the other German families on the block, as well as which families were not German (Zunz 2000). In this environment, a significant percentage of the population found themselves unwelcome and uncomfortable—residing in a neighborhood of non-space. For these people, unable to leave the employment opportunities in the area, the allure of the expanding suburbs is understandable. Away from the “hustle and bustle” of city life, they could have their own *place*. A *large* house surrounded by a *large* yard, surrounded by fields and parks and *open space*. If they had to work in a factory, at least they could relax at *home*.

The Keynesian-Fordist society was willfully complicit in the relocation of the middle class to the suburbs. Federally funded highways rolled out of the city to the surrounding suburbs where federally backed home-loans fueled a decades-long boom in residential construction. Considering that the genesis of Detroit's white flight preceded racial struggles and capital flight, the repellant forces of non-place and allure of consumerist escape are perhaps the best explanation of the *initial* out-migration of Detroit. Unfortunately, urban sprawl incorporates a multiplier effect. The initial population seepage precipitated into a full urban crisis.



Detroit, Michigan Photo: Grant Weaver, 2011

By 1960, the city population had already retracted some, but Detroit remained the nation's 5th largest city with about 1,700,000 residents, about 30% of whom were black (McGraw 2000, 289). By 1960, blacks were only beginning to see a glimmer of the equality they had hoped for upon leaving the South. For the black population, the non-place characterization of most of the city may as well have been official. Segregation was institutionalized in multiple ways and informal in most of the remaining aspects. Real-estate agents who showed homes to blacks in white neighborhoods were threatened and harassed. Conservative white activists worked to maintain segregation. Crosses were burned (Sugrue 1996, 249-258). It was made very clear to black Detroiters that segregated white neighborhoods were no place for them—*non*-place for them. Leaving the city was not a viable option; the suburbs were even more hostile.

Regardless of oppressive segregation, many blacks were able to settle comfortably into segregated neighborhoods, and were able to make a home of anthropogenic place within the larger matrix of non-place. Detroit had even become a center of African American culture. Yet the black community was often under siege. Urban renewal and slum-clearing programs in the 1940's alone displaced over 6,000 black residents, precipitating a race riot in 1943 that led to the Detroit Housing Commission adopting a policy of formal residential segregation (Thompson 2001, 16-17). Many of the neighborhoods that escaped those programs were razed by the highways that sliced through the city to accommodate suburban commuters. By 1970, over 20,000 homes had been demolished for the construction of freeways (Woodford 2001, 164). Highway construction displaced mostly blacks, but also decimated established and vibrant Mexican and Chinese neighborhoods (Lin and Suzuki n.d.). For many Detroiters, it must have seemed as though there was a vast conspiracy to force them to live their entire lives in non-place—to become bare life. Detroit professor, attorney, and poet Harold Norris is quoted as saying in 1951, "the city is creating refugees... There will be a price to pay for this inhumane eviction policy" (Thompson 2001, 18).

Racial tensions grew as displaced blacks moved into historically white areas, replacing the out-migrating whites. Many whites felt that they were *losing the city* (Clemens 2005). Economic hardship and racial tension amplified the surrounding matrix of non-space and precipitated an unsustainable social situation. The social change movement in the United States of the 1960's and 1970's had an especially militant nature in Detroit. Some have attributed this to the concentration of the black

population or to "new-left" conspiracies (Spren and Holloway 2005).

As a competing theory, the era should be considered with regard to the concentration of non-space and the active reduction of the population to bare life. The auto industry (and other industries) further automated production lines to reduce the reliance on human labor. In Detroit, capital investment began to follow the white population out of the city-proper. In 1960, black unemployment in Detroit was 18.2%; the overall city rate was 7.6%. Blacks who did obtain employment were usually given the most undesirable jobs and shifts, and were subjected to extensive mandatory overtime (Sugrue 1996, 143-152). Jobs on the line required minimal thought and training due to their repetitive monotony. The auto companies fired thousands of employees per week, creating a "rotating and permanent pool of insecure job seekers" (Georgakas and Surkin 1998, 28). A profitable venture on its own, the United Autoworkers Union (UAW) was essentially complicit in many of the discriminatory and dehumanizing working conditions (Pizzolato 2004).

As the 1960's progressed, regardless of various mitigation efforts by Detroit city leaders, social tension continued to build. Segregation and discrimination in housing and employment strained race relations in the city. White flight accelerated. Joblessness grew. The city's tax base began to shrink, resulting in disinvestment from infrastructure, education, and social programs. As the actively maintained places of the city disappeared, non-place crept in to the voids. Detroit's residents increasingly found themselves in a state of exception. Growing crime rates were targeted with an interventionist police force, which was 95% white and notoriously racist (Spren and Holloway 2005, 80). Police departments in the suburbs were worse, sometimes officially tasked with harassment of black interlopers. White Congressman John Dingell requested FBI protection in the wake of his support of civil rights legislation, saying that he had no confidence in the police (Spren and Holloway 2005, 32).

The Riot

In 1967, a massive riot erupted from the black ghettos of Detroit. The riot of 1967 is generally considered within the context of the civil rights movement and similar race riots in American cities such as Los Angeles and Cleveland. Less-often referenced is the similarity of Detroit's discontent and militancy to de-industrializing cities around the world—though the foreign locations were devoid of racial strife (Pizzolato 2004). In fact, though the overwhelming majority of rioters were blacks,

"If a community is to grow, it must grow organically. If you build it, non-place will come."

the police and fire departments often found themselves battling entrenched snipers, most of whom were white Appalachian migrants (Georgakas and Surkin 1998, 30).

The 1967 riot is often seen as having sealed Detroit's fate. Many of the city's whites no longer felt safe in the city, and could no longer feel *at home*.

Subjective non-place in the white population skyrocketed overnight. White flight and capital flight accelerated. Within a decade,

Detroit had become a majority black city. A new set of city leaders emerged to run the now shrinking city of non-place (Clemens 2005). The legacy costs of maintaining an aging metropolis with a fraction of the previous revenue were insurmountable. Infrastructure crumbled. Schools and social institutions faltered. Soon, the desegregation of inner-ring suburbs allowed middle class blacks to leave the city. The decline was unstoppable.

Missing from popular narratives regarding Detroit's decline is the multiplying effect that sociological dissonance associated with non-space had on the more tangible forces at work. In 1967, the year of the riot, over 1.5 million people were Detroit residents. Yet, due to the omnipresent dehumanizing influence of non-place, very few of them regarded the city as their home—they left as soon as they could. Many people were likely no more at home in the suburbs. Some probably were. Non-place lends itself to subjectivity—there are those who never find a home, and those who can find a home wherever they are. This is the power of human affect.

Today

The legacy of the former Fordist metropolis still haunts Detroit. The specter of the non-city is omnipresent. Over 700,000 people still live in the city; many of these residents are residuals of super-scaled non-place. Unable to leave, unhappy to stay, a significant fraction of the city's population is hopeless, helpless, and defeated. The crime rate and murder rate are near the top of American cities. Drug abuse is common. Regardless of the massive structural, functional, and aesthetic blight left behind by the former metropolis, it is this blight on the human condition that will be most difficult for Detroit to overcome.

Detroit continues to suffer, but there is cause for optimism. The city has appeared to stabilize within the last few years. The population is still trickling outwards as deindustrialization continues, but has maintained a core of dedicated residents. Most importantly, the city leaders appear to realize that the path to sustainability includes accepting that Detroit is not destined to recapture its former industrial glory (MacDonald 2010). This evolution

of thought in urban planning complements the theory presented in this paper: Keynesian-Fordism produced an unsustainable amount of non-place in the ascension of the city of Detroit. If a community is to grow, it must grow organically. If you build it, non-place will come.

One of the few positive aspects of the residential exodus is that when the unhappy residents left the city, subjective non-place left with them. When examined through the

lens of accumulated non-place, Detroit may be in the best position in its history to build a better future. Vibrant, organic communities are sprouting within the ruins of the former metropolis. Many residents have the opportunity and resources to leave, but they stay, regardless of difficulties associated with living in the midst of an urban crisis. They have made Detroit their home - *their place*.

In 1805, the young American city of Detroit burnt to the ground. A Catholic Priest, Father Gabriel Richard, gave Detroit the motto that remains until this day: "*Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus.*"

"We hope for better days ahead; it will rise from the ashes."

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