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A Gradual Reawakening: Broadacre City and a New American Agrarianism

By Ella Wise

Abstract

Frank Lloyd Wright's utopian plan Broadacre City describes a decentralized, agrarian landscape. Post-World War II American suburbanization reflected many—but not all—aspects of Wright's vision. In response, a large body of literature on the harms of decentralized development was established and numerous alternative models for urban growth that aim to increase density, such as New Urbanism, were developed. However, the agrarian ethos of Broadacre City is missing both from American suburbia and from responses to that suburban landscape. This absence is not incidental; there is a growing literature on biophilia, biologist E. O. Wilson's hypothesis that humans require the presence of nature to live healthy and satisfying lives. The contemporary rising interest in urban agriculture is an insurgent demand for the opportunity to reconnect with the land once again. In this paper, I argue that planners must recognize this insurgence by incorporating agrarian design, not only denser design, in their models of urban growth.

Introduction

Frank Lloyd Wright's utopian model, Broadacre City, revives agrarianism, championing as the foundation of society the farmer and her freedom (Lopez 2012, 76). Although Wright's plan was never officially implemented, decentralized development of single-unit housing sprawl across America, and comparisons are often drawn between Wright's vision and current land use practices. In response to the economic, environmental, and social ills of sprawled development, recent planning efforts including smart growth and New Urbanism focus on recentralizing development. The environmental need and social reasons for more compact cities are well-researched and widely (although not entirely) accepted (Gagné, Riou, and Thisse 2012).

However, a decentralized landscape differs from an agrarian landscape. Twentieth-Century suburban growth is mistaken for the Broadacre City vision. In Wright's model, every citizen is involved in the cultivation of the land. In contrast, sprawl forces the conversion of millions of acres of land from agricultural use. Consequently, centralization is not the only antidote

for today's land use issues. Both post-World War II suburbanization and the responses to it focus on the density of the built environment, often overlooking the critical need for humans to relate to the natural world regardless of development density. Certainly, urban form influences the human relationship to the land, and parks have long been provided as convenient interventions of nature. But the lack of opportunities for urban residents to work intimately with nature, specifically through agricultural practices, unnecessarily deprives them of their innate need to establish a deeper relationship with nature.

This basic American value of agrarianism and need for a relationship with nature is being newly asserted in the form of urban agriculture.¹ The Neo-Agrarian writer, Wendell Berry, distances his theories from Jefferson's traditional agrarianism and claims that today's agrarianism "is deliberately anticonsensual, an insurgency of the disempowered," as described by literary critic Lawrence Buell (1995, 44). There is rich literature on both the benefits and concerns of urban agriculture, such as providing fresh food and exposing communities to soil contaminants, respectively. In this study I do not argue any of these points. Additionally, I do not aim to privilege the city or the countryside, and I am very aware of the potential to romanticize the incredibly difficult work of farming. I assert that providing opportunities to experience nature and land in cities is increasingly important as the American population urbanizes (U.S. Census Bureau 2012), and urban agriculture is one way to do so. From a post-colonial perspective, we can appreciate urban agriculture models from around the world (Watson 2009, 2260) and adapt them appropriately to the American context (Healey 2012, 190). But also, we can revisit the vision of America's most famous architect for its organic designs of agrarianism and biophilia.

Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City

In 1932, Frank Lloyd Wright first described his utopia in *The Disappearing City*. His vision was a landscape in which every person was to have at least an acre of land and communities were to be connected by grand highways. Wright contended that the air, light, and space afforded by decentralization away from cities—which he conceived of as "soulless machines of capital accumulation" (Wright 1958, 17)—would have salubrious effects and strengthen the nation's democracy (Lopez 2012, 78). Additionally, an architect rather than a politician would manage land ownership and state or county governmental bodies rather than federal bodies would govern public utilities (Wright 1935, 346).

1. The use of the term "urban agriculture" here coarsely refers to all non-rural food production, including a wide variety of situations such as suburban community gardens and profitable city farms.

The allocation of one acre of land to each person in Broadacre City would allow the population to be involved in food production, and a system of roadside markets would enable the trade, sale, and distribution of personally produced food (Lapping 1979, 16). Wright makes the importance of universal involvement in agriculture explicit: “Of all the underlying forces working toward emancipation of the city dweller, most important is the gradual reawakening of the primitive instincts of the agrarian” (Wright 1958, 62). According to Wright, human rights include a right “to the ground itself” (Wright 1935, 345). But this right is not just to private property, but to a working relationship with the land: “To have and to hold! Yes—well enough when having and holding square *with* nature; but disastrous, if not fatal, unless *giving and taking* according to nature!” (Wright 1958, 203). Additionally, it must be noted that Wright unequivocally envisioned the new system benefiting all, including the poor, who would not only gain freedom by owning property but specifically from the act of cultivating land (Wright 1958, 153). This freedom was not to be asserted through construction of private “castles” representing personal wealth and grandness, but in relation to space, nature, and community (Wright 1958, 207).

“Implementation” of Broadacre City

There was an effort to persuade both the Hoover and Roosevelt Administrations to adopt the Broadacre City model: in 1943, John Dewey, Robert Moses, Albert Einstein, Nelson Rockefeller and others signed a petition in support of implementing Broadacre City. However, the Roosevelt Administration rejected their appeal, and the utopian plan fell out of political favor. The redistribution of land, liquidation of government, and eradication of cities were ideas too radical and impractical (Grabow 1977, 118). Nonetheless, Broadacre City is considered to be the most prescient planning model in American history (Grabow 1977, 120). George Washington University professor Gregory Squires claims: “In the early 1930s Frank Lloyd Wright predicted—and heartily endorsed—almost every major change in the American landscape that would take place over the next six decades” (Squires 2002, 25).

Decentralized growth dependent on cars was hugely popular, defining American post- World War II development (Jackson 1985, 7). Anti-urban growth, similar to Wright’s, occurred on a massive scale, and there are large bodies of research on how this suburban infrastructure is associated with a host of problems including: environmental harm, such as air pollution and climate change (Freilich, Sitkowski, and Mennillo 2010, 35); social ills, such as the weakening of street life and connection between neighbors (Freilich, Sitkowski, and Mennillo 2010, 79) (Sternberg 2009, 144); and health problems such as obesity and inactivity (Lopez 2012, 170).

By 1969, even before these harms were as thoroughly researched as they are now, criticism against decentralized development was well-established (Grabow 1977, 122). Squires writes, “Unfortunately, Frank Lloyd Wright’s vision of the future was all too clear and his prescriptions were followed all too carefully” (Squires 2002, 25).

Sprawl vs. Agrarianism

Squires and other critics miss an integral point of contrast between America’s sprawled development since World War II and Wright’s utopian landscape. The relationship between humans and nature, fundamental to Wright’s model, was not implemented. Planner and public health scientist Russell Lopez explains:

Rather than a new society of independent yeoman farmers, each self-sufficient and living in harmony with nature while spread thinly across the landscape, Broadacre City in practice fosters a dependence on cars, uses large amounts of land, and situates families at a distance from food and consumer goods (Lopez 2012, 78–79).

Environmental planner Philip Berke agrees that Wright’s model is not reflected by the American landscape, specifically because of suburbia’s lack of an integrated ecological system (Berke 2008). The percentage of Americans who live on farms has decreased from more than 33% in the early 1900s to less than 2% at the end of the century (Lobao and Meyer 2001, 103). Farmland continues to be converted to non-agricultural uses at a rapid pace: “every hour of every day, 50 acres of prime farmland are lost to development” (Freilich, Sitkowski, and Mennillo 2010, 35). The conversion of arable land diminishes food export and biofuel capacity, harms natural environments, stresses the fiscal health of local governments, and contributes to global warming (Freilich, Sitkowski, and Mennillo 2010, 35). Additionally, the farmland that has stayed in production has mostly shifted to large-scale farming enterprises (Hayes-Conroy 2007, 25). Thus, the opportunity to cultivate land is accessible to very few people now (Shiva 2003, 125).

Responses to Decentralization

According to the lexicon developed by the Congress for New Urbanism (Duany and Duany Plater-Zyberk, Co. 2011, 7)², the models that respond to this tension between development and agriculture generally fall into two categories, “Agricultural Retention” and “Agricultural Urbanism.” Agricultural Retention refers to supporting both the economic viability and physical land mass of existing farms. Cooperative extensions, nonprofits,

and conservation land trusts all work towards this effort through marketing campaigns of local agriculture and farmland conservation. Agricultural Urbanism refers to urban design strategies that centralize development and complement it with farmland. As explained by urban planner Andres Duany, the theoretical basis for the Agricultural Urbanism method is Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities. Howard's utopian plan described a settlement circumscribed by an agricultural belt—not to be confused with a greenbelt of parkland (Osborn 1945, 27).

The most popular recent planning theories such as smart growth and New Urbanism, reflect the Agricultural Urbanism approach. They aim to slow decentralized development and encourage denser growth according to traditional neighborhood development (Berke 2008). Not only is a more compact growth pattern better for the environment and human health, but greater density is needed for vibrancy and street "ballet," as described by Jane Jacobs (Fishman 2002, 65; Jacobs 1961). These efforts of increasing density are necessary for improving environmental, societal, and personal health.

However, the fervor behind reversing the trend of decentralization focuses on density to the detriment of other important considerations. Historically, the application of the Garden Cities model was criticized for this same reason: in the early 1900s, the modernist Leberecht Migge argued that green space should not only be located along the urban fringe, but that gardens should be integrated more directly into daily life, as well (Haney 2010, 4). True, some contemporary planning theories of compact development do acknowledge the importance of integrating nature in the form of parks and community gardens into the urban fabric. And, according to the rural-to-urban transect—a spectrum of density integral to the New Urbanism model in which the highest density is in the urban core and lessens as the distance from the center increases—the city gradually fades into the pastoral landscape. Thus, along the transect, there are zones of the built environment that integrate both the city and the country (see Figure 1). However, the very importance of the transect assumes this dichotomy between the rural and urban without appreciation for the aspects of life that transcend this spectrum. Differences between rural and urban life are legitimate and valuable. Nonetheless, agrarianism is more than ruralism. It is about the relationship between humans and land, particularly manifested through agricultural cultivation. There are instances in the New Urbanist literature in which agrarianism is explicitly relegated to the rural: "There is, in the first place, the obvious difference: agrarians focus, in the first instance, on rural places, whereas New Urbanists focus, in

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2. The term "Agricultural Urbanism" is used in various ways. In *Agricultural Urbanism: Handbook for Building Sustainable Food and Agriculture Systems in 21st Century Cities*, it refers to something more closely resembling Agrarian Urbanism as defined by Duany Plater-Zyberk and used later in this paper.

the first instance, on urban places” (Northrup and Lipscomb 2003, 201). The Charter of the New Urbanism ostracizes agricultural land by its very reference to it: “The metropolis has a necessary and fragile relationship to its agrarian hinterland and natural landscapes” (Congress for the New Urbanism 1996). The idea of an “agricultural hinterland” creates a stark, exclusionary divide. Access to the hinterland or to the agricultural belt is restricted to those who have the time and financial resources (Louv 2011, 269), and even the privileged must leave their daily urban lives to access it.

However, Andrés Duany and Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. have recently published an exciting, revised version of the transect specifically addressing this exclusion. In *Garden Cities*, the “agrarian” is not relegated to only the rural but appropriately inserted into every zone along the rural-to-urban spectrum. The “Agrarian Urbanism” model will be discussed later in this study (Duany and Duany Plater-Zyberk, Co. 2011).

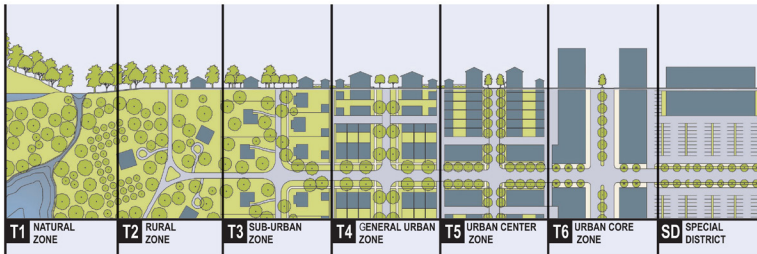


Figure 1: The Rural Urban Transect

Source: Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. http://www.transect.org/rural_img.html

Biophilia

The absence of the agrarian theme in America’s urban development is not an incidental matter. Growing evidence supports the need for Americans to reconnect with nature, for physical and mental health reasons (Beatley 2011, 4). Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson uses the term “biophilia” to refer to this innate need for humans to connect with other living organisms (Wilson 1984, 31). The idea of biophilic design has arguably been existent for as long as humans have been designing, but it has been reasserted recently by Stephen Kellert, Timothy Beatley, and others. The earliest research into biophilia evidenced the benefits of window views onto natural settings in the postoperative healing process. The literature has continued to expand, now demonstrating nature’s importance in moderating the effects of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and reducing stress, among other things (Beatley 2011, 4). Environmental planner Timothy Beatley explains that a biophilic city “recognizes the essential need for daily human contact with nature as well as the many environmental and economic values provided by nature and natural systems” (Beatley 2011, 45). Beatley writes: “I believe there is a need to articulate a theory and

practice of city planning that understands that cities and urban areas must be wild and ‘nature-ful’” (Beatley 2011, 3). Social ecologist Kellert argues that one of the reasons that European cities are both more environmentally sustainable and admired is because they are full of biophilic elements (Beatley 2011, 53).

Frank Lloyd Wright’s utopian model was biophilic. It was also decentralized, as is most development in America, and efforts to reverse this pattern are warranted. However, the focus on increasing density need not overshadow the need for a landscape that fosters a human relationship with nature. Beatley states: “Too often the green urban agenda forgets the ‘green,’ concentrating on energy efficiency and resource management (worthy and important subjects), for instance, to the neglect of the life-enhancing and wonder-expanding dimensions of nature itself” (Beatley 2011, 16). Similarly, Berke argues that focus on compact forms exemplified by the New Urbanist model often lack “spiritual renewal” and other “green community dimensions” (Berke 2008) Editor and author Norman Wirzba explains the uniqueness of our current situation: “Whether we appreciate it or not, current widespread insularity from and ignorance about our many interdependencies with the earth represents an unparalleled development in human history” (Wirzba 2003, 2).

Katherine Crewe and Ann Forsyth have framed this dynamic by identifying two different approaches in environmental design: one that prioritizes “compactness” and another that prioritizes “connectivity” (Crewe and Forsyth 2011, 267). In their article comparing the two approaches, they describe how recent planners have been concerned with efficiency and consolidating the city. In contrast to such a compact approach, they describe that the “connective approach stresses human connection to the natural world at a local scale” (Crewe and Forsyth 2011, 267). To illustrate the differences, Crewe and Forsyth compare three “eco-cities” representing “compactness” with three “eco-burbs” representing “connectivity.” They conclude that the two approaches are difficult to combine but could learn from each other (Crewe and Forsyth 2011, 286).

The Assertion of Urban Agriculture

Contemporary urban planning ought to include biophilia among its principles. Parks have long been used to intersperse greenery in the urban fabric. The benefits of urban and suburban parks are diverse and manifold including increasing property values, reducing stress, and “increasing perception of life quality” (Konijnendijk et al. 2013, 8). However, another way to incorporate biophilic design into our cities and suburbs is to integrate the cultivation of land into the urban fabric. This, of course, is also not new. Historically, food and cities have been inextricably linked,

and cities around the world provide contemporary models. Only recent 20th-century American land use patterns such as suburbanization as well as shifts in the food industry have decoupled food production from food consumption (Mendes et al. 2008). Admittedly, urban agriculture is limited and different from other agriculture; inherently, the amount of land is restricted, there is little buffer from neighbors, and soil contaminants are prevalent. However, crop scientist Sarah Lovell explains that urban agriculture should not be only evaluated for its production capacity, but for its multifunctionality. For example, a city garden may not only produce fresh vegetables, but enhance biodiversity, nutrient cycling, micro-climate control, recreation opportunities, cultural heritage, and the aesthetics of the neighborhood (Lovell 2010, 2).

Others agree. A general interest in food production has spread across the country and spawned innovative means of urban and suburban agriculture (Major 2011, 1). Small farms, farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, and backyard vegetable gardens are on the rise (Steel 2009, 142). People are also getting increasingly innovative in finding land on which to grow food. A recent article in *Mother Earth News* describes a farmer who is utilizing neighbors' suburban backyards as her farmland (Farm Aid 2013). Generally, in 1993, there were 1,755 farmers markets in America. Twenty-five years later, the number had more than doubled to 4,000 (Daniels 2009, 138). In 2008, there were 200 community garden sites in the city of Detroit, Michigan alone (Colasanti, Hamm, and Litjens 2012, 351). The benefits of urban agriculture include greater access to fresh healthy foods, promotion of physical activity, increase in property values, revitalization of neighborhoods, and development of social capital (Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response 2011, 1). Support for urban agriculture comes from a wide variety of members of society: individuals, community groups, churches, schools, entrepreneurs, public health and planning professionals, and city government officials (Colasanti, Hamm, and Litjens 2012, 348). Wendell Berry details the universality of agrarianism:

In our time it is useless and probably wrong to suppose that a great many urban people ought to go out into the countryside and become homesteaders or farmers. But it is not useless or wrong to suppose that urban people have agricultural responsibilities that they should try to meet. And in fact this is happening. The agrarian population among us is growing, and by no means is it made up merely of some farmers and some country people. It includes urban gardeners, urban consumers who are buying food from local farmers. Organizers of local food economies, consumers who have grown doubtful of the healthfulness, the trustworthiness, and the dependability of the corporate food system—people, in other words, who understand what it means to be landless (Berry 2003, 30).

In addition to the benefits of urban agriculture, discussion of its complexities and various obstacles such as land tenure, zoning challenges, and racial and ethnic inequities (Kato 2013) are essential, existent in contemporary literature, and should be pursued further. Geographer Liz Carlisle (2012) argues that questions of exactly who is the farmer and what is his or her relationship to the land should be further clarified. I do not wish to romanticize urban agriculture. It is not a panacea. I argue that urban agriculture is one way the agrarian ethos is asserted in the urban setting.

As explained by anthropologist Teresa Mares, urban agriculture is insurgent planning: “The struggles toward alternative use of space through place-making practices that promote self-reliance, community, and autonomy constitute spatial practices that are both counter-hegemonic and revealing of unplanned-for outcomes and uses” (Mares 2010, 241). Mares researches two particular urban farms in Los Angeles and Seattle and explains: “This new generation of urban gardeners sought to create insurgent public spaces, often in direct opposition to local and regional governmental interests” (Mares 2010, 243). Urban agriculture can also be understood within the framework of the “right to the city” movement, as first explained by Henri Lefebvre (Purcell 2002, 101). Social theorist David Harvey explains that the “right to the city movement” aims “to shape [the city] more in accord with our heart’s desire,” which is just what urban growers aim to do (Colasanti, Hamm, and Litjens 2012, 350). However, urban agriculture is not only a declaration of the right to the city, but the right to the land, to the agrarian life, “to the ground itself,” which Wright asserts as an inherent right of man (Wright 1935, 345). As the actual rural population of the United States begins to decline for the first time in American history, Americans’ relationship to the land and nature will change, but need not be lost (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service 2013).

Planning Response

Although some cities and municipalities have responded enthusiastically to the interest in urban agriculture, there are still many obstacles. For example, discrepancies between municipal agencies governing land use can stall projects (Kaufman and Bailkey 2000, 58). One way to strengthen planning’s role in urban agriculture is to “decolonize our imagination”—borrowing urban scholar Faranak Miraftab’s term—and look to examples from beyond our border (Miraftab 2009, 44). International models of urban agriculture abound (Redwood 2012). In Cuba, one of the main responses to threatened food security after the collapse of the Soviet Union was urban agriculture. From 1997 to 2003, the production of vegetables within the city of Havana increased by a multiple of 13 (Lovell 2010, 2504). In 2005, about 60% of all vegetables produced in Cuba were from urban cultivation. Small

plots of soil in backyards and patios as well as larger areas on vacant lots are utilized (Mougeot 2005, 154). There are numerous other international models as well. In Shanghai, China, a staggering 60% of the produce and 90% of the eggs consumed by city residents are produced by urban agriculture (Lovell 2010, 2504).³ These examples challenge the American “abstract notion of the ‘urban’” in which agriculture is relegated to the fringe (Colasanti, Hamm, and Litjens 2012, 350). Planners can work to “see from the south” and adopt these models to the American context (Watson 2009).

A variety of American cities and municipalities are already leading the charge to allow for and even support urban agriculture in their existing built environment. The American Planning Association’s recent evaluation of food system planning found that 12 of the 13 comprehensive plans studied include urban agriculture strategies (Hodgson 2012, 71). The following examples demonstrate the wide variety of efforts. In 2004, Milwaukee joined Seattle, Baltimore, Washington D.C., and Los Angeles in allowing a limited number of hens in urban backyards (Broadway 2009, 25). An abandoned industrial lot in Philadelphia is now a 1-acre profitable farm and nursery, and the roof of a factory in Brooklyn is now a 6,000 square foot farm that supplies city restaurants. In 1995, the State of California’s Education Department launched the Garden in Every School program, and as of 2009, there were 3,000 school gardens. In May 2013, California Assemblyman Phil Ting proposed the Urban Agriculture Incentive Zones Act which would provide tax incentives to urban property owners who lease their land to agricultural producers, similar to the Williamson Act which reduces the tax burden for rural landowners who lease to growers. Additionally, there is a growing literature and number of policy recommendations for residents, planners, and policymakers to incorporate agriculture within city boundaries. National research and action institute PolicyLink’s report, “Growing Urban Agriculture: Equitable Strategies and Policies for Improving Access to Healthy Food and Revitalizing Communities” is one such particularly comprehensive guide (Hagey, Rice, and Flournoy 2012).

One formal model for integrating urban agriculture into plans for new development is Agrarian Urbanism. This model, presented by the urban planning firm, Duany Plater-Zyberk (DPZ), integrates food and farming into the physical pattern of the New Urbanist model (Duany and Duany Plater-Zyberk, Co. 2011, 8). In explaining the model, Duany and his firm bring attention to the terminology used: “rather than ‘agricultural,’ which is concerned with the technical aspects of growing food, the term ‘agrarian’ emphasizes the society involved with all aspects of food” (Duany and

3. These percentages may be inflated depending on the exact definition of “urban agriculture” being used.

Duany Plater-Zyberk, Co. 2011, 2). Compact neighborhood development supporting walkability for all ages and incomes is of primary importance in the model (Duany and Duany Plater-Zyberk, Co. 2011, 35). In addition to the swath of agricultural land that rings the built environment in the Agricultural Urbanism model,⁴ agriculture is integrated into the built environment in the Agrarian Urbanism model. For example, the food market creates space for the public to interact and build social capital as the ever-important “third place,” (Ray Oldenburg’s [1997] popularized term for a public place for social gathering in addition to home and work). All residents would be expected to be involved in food production according to where they live along a transect of rural-urban density—in other words according to how much land is available and what the appropriate uses are (Duany and Duany Plater-Zyberk, Co. 2011, 40). An example of a planning project based on this model is Southlands in British Columbia, Canada. Figure 2 depicts the vision for a neighborhood within the community.

Conclusion

As the world urbanizes, the relationship of humans to nature does not have to—in fact, it must not—diminish (Beatley 2011, 152). Agrarian values must not be secluded in the spatial and temporal backcountry (2011, 8). Insurgent planning in the form of urban agriculture demands the right to an intimate connection with the land. Planners can respond by integrating nature—and specifically agriculture—into the built landscape. Although models for denser built environments address various social, environmental, and health problems, they are not enriched with agrarian values and biophilic design. There are models from around the world for integrating natural features of various scales and agriculture into the city fabric; and there is



Figure 2. Southlands, Canada as an example of agrarian urbanism. Source: Duany, Andres, and Duany Plater-Zyberk, Co. <http://www.dpz.com/Practice/0720>.

4. Duany Plater-Zyberk definition used. See footnote 42.

a growing literature on best practices for planning for urban agriculture. Furthermore, the utopian dream of America's most famous architect was partly motivated by this relationship between the human and her land. With new understanding of the benefits of more compact built form, let us revisit these foundational ideas to reawaken humans' inherent connection to the land.

Ella Wise is from the Hudson River Valley where she spent the past year milking cows and shoveling their poop. She is honored to be studying City and Regional Planning at Berkeley but sometimes wonders if she prefers sweat on her brow to coffee on her breath.

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