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The Dream in Flames: Hisaye Yamamoto, Multiculturalism, and the Los Angeles Uprising

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The 1992 Los Angeles riot broke out three months before I was to give a paper in a panel entitled "The American Dream" at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. I chose to speak on Hisaye Yamamoto's "A Fire in Fontana," not only because this memoir casts sobering reflections on the American Dream, but also because it speaks directly to current events. As in so many of Yamamoto's short stories, "Fire" has a double structure. The external plot, which juxtaposes the ruthless killing of a black family and the 1965 Watts rebellion, yields provocative parallels with the incidents surrounding the acquittal of four police officers accused of brutally beating Rodney King. The internal plot, which traces the narrator's evolving racial consciousness and her deepening black allegiance, offers insights into the meaning and possibility of what is now called "multiculturalism" — a challenge faced today by teachers and community leaders alike.

Yamamoto, author of Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories (1988), is a nisei (second-generation Japanese American) born in 1921 in Redondo Beach, California. During World War II she was interned in a detention camp in Poston, Arizona. After the war she worked from 1945 to 1948 as a columnist and rewrite person for the Los Angeles Tribune, a black weekly. She volunteered in 1953 to work for a Catholic Worker community farm on Staten Island, and returned to Los Angeles after her marriage in 1955. In 1966 she received the American Book Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Before Columbus Foundation. Yamamoto was one of the first Japanese American writers to gain national recognition after the war—a time when anti-Japanese sentiment was still rampant. Several of her stories appeared in Martha Foley's lists of "Distinctive Short Stories" and one was included in Best American Short Stories. Her reputation has been especially strong in Asian American literary circles. The editors of Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers consider her to be "Asian-America's most accomplished short story writer"; Elaine H. Kim describes her fiction as "consummately women's stories." What distinguishes Yamamoto's writing is not merely her craft of storytelling and her feminist consciousness, which are justly celebrated, but also her ability to include, empathize with, and give voice to people of different racial backgrounds long before the civil rights movement.

"Fire" is an autobiographical essay about Yamamoto's experience as a staffwriter with the Los Angeles Tribune, a job that "colored the rest of [her] life." The narrator was reminded of that experience, and specifically of an incident that she had to "report" for the Tribune shortly after World War II, when she watched the Watts riot on television. She begins her recollection by describing the milieu of the newspaper office, which was on the mezzanine of the Dunbar Hotel. People who stayed in the hotel included celebrities like Billy Eckstine, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee. Those who visited the newspaper office were less spectacular, though one character seemed timeless: "A tall young police lieutenant, later to become mayor of the city, came by to protest the newspaper's editorial on police brutality" ("F," 369).

The episode that gives the memoir its title concerns a young black man named Short, who showed up in the editorial office one day and informed the staff that ever since he had bought a house in a white neighborhood in Fontana he had been getting threatening notes from his neighbors asking him to "get-out-or-else" ("F," 370). He hoped to enlist the help of three black newspapers, the Los Angeles Tribune included, to publicize his situation and to muster support for his right to live in Fontana. Later that week his house went up in flames. Short, his wife, and his two children were killed in the blaze.

Though the fire "appeared to have started with gasoline poured all around the house and outbuildings," the police's "official conclusion was that probably the man had set the gasoline fire himself, and the case was closed" ("F," 370). Among those who doubted this conclusion was a white priest who wrote a play called Trial by Fire; after it was presented on the stage the priest was "suddenly transferred to a parish somewhere in the boondocks of Arizona" ("F," 370).
The television coverage of the Watts riot brought back to the narrator the memory of the fire, which had left her with “something like an itch [she] couldn't locate, or like food not being cooked enough, or something undone which should have been done, or something forgotten which should have been remembered” (“F,” 370). The scenes she saw on television, horrible as they were, also offered her a sense of resolution:

Appalled, inwardly cowering, I watched the burning and looting on the screen and heard the reports of the dead and wounded. But beneath all my distress, I felt something else... To me, the tumult in the city was the long-awaited, gratifying next chapter of an old movie that had flickered about in the back of my mind for years. In the film... there was this modest house out in the country. Suddenly the house was in flames... Then there could be heard the voices of a man and woman screaming, and the voices of two small children as well. (“F,” 373)

It appears that another family of four—just like the black family in Fontana—was burned to death during the Watts riot. But this time the skin color of the perpetrators and the victims might have been reversed.

I will discuss the implications of this chilling ending later. For now I would like to show how this external or surface plot of the memoir—through its juxtaposition of individual abuse and civil disorder, its revelation of the elusiveness of the American Dream, and its interrogation of the police and the media—resonates with the events surrounding the Rodney King beating. With King, the connection between the first “not guilty” verdict given the four officers and the subsequent L.A. riot in 1992 was hard to miss, though the media played down the connection. In “Fire,” the connection between the fire in Fontana and the burning that occurred during the Watts riot is made in the narrator’s mind. The juxtaposition of the two fires suggests that mass insurrection has roots in the quotidian violation of individual rights. Short and King were both victims of violence who had allegedly brought injury on themselves (though King admittedly was not guiltless). These cycles of individual abuse and group rebellion support Robert Gooding-Williams’s contention that the beating of King, the verdict and its aftermath should not be treated simply as news, “as transient curiosities that have accidently supervened on the circumstances of day-to-day life.”

Anger at injustice can spawn further injustice, however. Like Short and King, the victims of the Watts riot and the L.A. riot got what they did not deserve. Just as the fire in Fontana destroyed Short’s “American Dream,” the dreams of many immigrants who had believed in succeeding in America through hard work were also reduced to ashes during the 1992 fire. Apparently the American Dream is not equally accessible to all Americans; even individual lives seem to differ in value. Short’s right to own a house in Fontana was violently revoked; the murder of his family was whitewashed as suicide. Elaine H. Kim has noted how many Americans of color cried in vain for help during the 1992 upheaval:

When the Korean Americans in South Central and Koreatown dialed 911, nothing happened. When their stores and homes were being looted and burned to the ground, they were left completely alone for three horrifying days. How betrayed they must have felt by what they believed was a democratic system that protects its people from violence... What they had to learn was that... protection in the U.S. is by and large for the rich and powerful. If there were a choice between Westwood and Koreatown, it is clear that Koreatown would have to be sacrificed.

Unlike the fire in Fontana and the Watts riot, in which the conflict was largely between blacks and whites, the recent uprising revealed friction between racial minorities as well. Yamamoto, uncovering interethnic cleavages in “Fire,” is ahead of her time. She shows how people of color may discriminate against one another, either out of ethnocentrism or because they have internalized the attitudes of the dominant culture. The narrator recalls a Korean real estate agent who put her children into Catholic schools because the public schools were “integrated.” Yet this same woman did not hesitate to urge local real estate onto her black clients because the resulting profits made possible “her upward mobility into less integrated areas” (“F,” 375). Mutual disdain and stereotyping between African Americans and Korean Americans loomed large in the 1992 riot. As Sumi K. Cho points out, “many Korean shopowners had accepted widespread stereotypes about African Americans as lazy, complaining criminals... On the other hand, many African Americans also internalize stereotypes of Korean Americans [as] callous unfair competitors.” Cho argues that this mode of thinking is often reinforced by the media: “the media [were] eager to sensationalize the events by excluding Korean perspectives from coverage and stereotyping the immigrant community... Stereotypic media portrayals of Koreans as
smiling, gun-toting vigilantes and African Americans as vandals and hoodlums trivialize complex social and economic problems.\(^9\)

The media also played a problematic role in “Fire.” The brutal murder of Short’s family was presented by both the police and the press as suicide. The narrator, a reporter herself, though sickened by the event, was unable to vent her outrage through divulging the bigotry of Short’s white neighbors: “Given the responsibility by the busy editor, I had written up from my notes a calm, impartial story, using ‘alleged’ and ‘claimed’ and other cautious journalese” (“F,” 371). She deplores the journalistic ethics that forced her to present a partial story in the guise of impartiality, that obliged her to cite dubious “official” sources, and that prevented her from offering her own analysis of the fire in Fontana. The media coverage of the recent L. A. riot, in zeroing in on the conflict among racial minorities, similarly deflected blame from the dominant culture. Kim compares the coverage to the Chinese film Raise the Red Lantern, in which three concubines and wife plot endlessly against each other while the husband who controls and exploits them all remains very much out of the picture and outside the fray: “We only hear his mellifluous voice as he benignly admonishes his four wives not to fight among themselves.”\(^10\)

My intention in reading Yamamoto’s memoir against the recent upheaval is not, however, simply to furnish parallels but also to draw instructive examples from the internal plot about the narrator’s political evolution. The civic awareness and interracial empathy exemplified by the narrator run counter to the group-oriented politics that threaten to splinter our multicultural society today. While I welcome the present curricular emphasis on ethnic history and cultural knowledge, I believe a more interactive approach is needed to discourage insularity and to promote understanding among different groups. As scholars and teachers we must do more than simply focus on the history and concerns of a particular ethnic group. Merely adopting what Ronald Takaki calls the “add-on” approach is not enough: “[Educators] . . . add a week on African-Americans and another on Hispanics . . . Meanwhile, inter-group relationships remain invisible, and the big picture is missing.”\(^11\)

Such an approach cannot remedy the social fragmentation demonstrated in the 1992 upheaval. To me one of the most troubling revelations emerging from the occurrences that preceded and followed the “not guilty” verdict was the seeming inability of people to relate to and stand up for those of another race. Such an inability, as Cho argues, was responsible in part for allowing the hostility between African Americans and Korean Americans that had been building up long before the Rodney King beating to go unchecked: “Because Korean- and Asian-American academics failed to speak up and condemn the light sentence that Judge Karlin rendered in the Du [the female shopkeeper who killed a black teenager suspected of shoplifting] case before the riots forced this reckoning, we were complicit in the sentencing as well. Likewise, African-American scholars could have taken a position on the blatant promotion of hate violence against Korean Americans in Ice Cube’s lyrics but failed to do so.”\(^12\)

While it is understandable that people identify most readily with and therefore are more defensive or protective of those of the same extraction, it would promote the search for justice by all concerned, juries included, if more Caucasians and Asians could speak with moral indignation about the double standard of justice in America that is often stacked against African Americans, and if more African Americans could unequivocally condemn actions such as the battering of Reginald Denny and the burning of Korean stores. The media was perhaps again to blame in often selecting black spokespersons to defend blacks, white spokespersons to denounce them, and so forth (as in the coverage of the Denny trial). Yet this kind of media coverage can well turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy, reinforcing in the public mind that only people of the same color could and should stick together.

The alternative attitude of the narrator in “Fire” offers an effective antidote to colorfast ideology. She not only crosses racial barriers but also combats prejudice without resorting to the rhetoric of opposition, and addresses interracial conflict rationally and feelingly. Her memoir opens as follows:

Something weird happened to me not long after the end of the Second World War. I wouldn’t go so far as to say that I, a Japanese American, became Black . . . . But some kind of transformation did take place . . . . Sometimes I see it as my inward self being burnt black in a certain fire. (“F,” 366–67)

The narrator felt so incensed by the fire in Fontana that she began to identify viscerally with African Americans, grappling with both white and Asian prejudice against blacks. The “blackening” of her inward self occurred, however, even before that fire. Interned for being a Japanese American during World War II, she could readily connect the injustices she herself had encountered with the
discrimination against blacks she witnessed in the fifties and sixties. On her way back to the internment camp in Arizona during World War II, she was sitting next to a blond woman on a bus out of Chicago who, upon seeing an African American man being denied a drink at a restaurant south of Springfield, "was filled with glee." The narrator instinctively linked her "seamate's joy and [her] having been put in that hot and windblown place of barracks" ("F," 367).

Recognizing common oppression and forging alliances with other marginalized groups can prevent people of color from being caught in the "Red Lantern" trap Kim describes. Yet, like the polarization of black and white spokespersons by the media, a rhetoric of opposition based on skin color—specifically the generic whites versus nonwhites—may exacerbate divisions along racial lines and homogenize important differences within each group. The narrator indicates that "more than once [she] was easily put down with a casual, 'That's mighty White of you,' the connotations of which were devastating" ("F," 369). But outward pigmentation cannot encode political sensibility, as the narrator's black allegiance attests.

Her gravitation toward African Americans notwithstanding, the narrator refrains from writing all white people off. While she gives ample glaring examples of white prejudice, she also furnishes counterexamples. Unlike Miss Moten, the African American secretary at the Tribune office who, upon hearing Short's story, "spat out the words 'I hate White people! They're all the same!'" ("F," 370), she begins her memoir with exceptions to this rule:

I remember reading a book... based on the life of Bix Beiderbecke, in which the narrator early wonders if his musician friend would have come to the same tragic end if he hadn't become involved with Negroes... In real life, there happened to be a young White musician in an otherwise Black band... His name was Johnny Otis... In more recent years he has become the pastor of a church in Watts. I suppose he, too, arrived at a place in his life from which there was no turning back. But his life, as I see it, represents a triumph. ("F," 366–67)

The narrator, as indicated earlier, also makes a point of remembering the white priest who was relocated after his play cast doubts on the police theory about the fire in Fontana. These anecdotes suggest that regardless of one's skin color it is possible to reach out to people of a different race.

To conclude on this sanguine note alone, however, is to ignore Yamamoto's trenchant testimony, implicit in her account of the narrator's inner transformation, about the depth and magnitude of racism (often aggravated by the reluctance of the dominant culture to confront or even admit the problem) and its profound emotional impact on the afflicted minorities. Isolated cases of whites who ally with blacks socially or politically are insufficient, Yamamoto implies, to allay the anger of those subject to persistent abuse or to prevent them from seeing all white people as the enemy.

The narrator demonstrates the cumulative and erosive effects of racism by tracking her own mounting indignation and diminishing self-assurance. During the early stages of her apprenticeship with the Tribune, she was puzzled by her co-workers' preoccupation with race: "The inexhaustible topic was Race, always Race... Sometimes I got to wondering whether Negroes talked about anything else" ("F," 369). However, after protracted exposure to hate crimes in the course of doing her job, which included "[toting] up the number of alleged lynchings across the country and [combining] them into one story" ("F," 368), she found herself becoming more and more like her black colleagues, to the extent of losing several correspondents because of her own obsession with race: "When one fellow dared to imply that I was really unreasonable on the subject of race relations, saying that he believed it sufficient to make one's stand known only when the subject happened to come up, the exchange of letters did not continue much longer" ("F," 371). Her initiation at the newspaper office was compounded by lessons on the street, as when she heard a white driver insult the driver of her bus, "Why, you Black bastard!" The black driver kept going, but the narrator "was sick, cringing from the blow of those words." She who had been shocked earlier by Miss Moten's wholesale denunciation of whites at this point "knew Miss Moten's fury for [her] very own" ("F," 372).

The most telling indication of the narrator's transformation appears at the end of the memoir, quoted earlier, when she describes the rampage she saw on the screen during the Watts riot as "the long-awaited, gratifying next chapter of an old movie that had flickered about in the back of my mind for years" (my emphasis). Throughout the memoir, the narrator, while revealing her growing affiliation with black Americans, has shown unusual sensitivity in chronicling race relations and remarkable restraint in expressing her own sentiment. Her use of the adjective "gratifying" (albeit qualified by mention of her "cowering" and "distress" at the
spectacle) to describe the destruction on the screen stands out as a grim reminder of the pernicious effect of racism on the afflicted psyche. In admitting to feeling “a tiny trickle of warmth which [she] finally recognized as an undertow of exultation” while watching the burning of another family of four (who were likely to be as innocent as the Short family), the narrator makes us aware that those who constantly suffer from racist abuse or bear witness to it cannot be expected to always think and feel rationally, that no amount of reasoning and individual good will can check the anger and hatred of those incapable of obtaining justice from law enforcement officials (who may, in the event, actually persecute the victims or turn a deaf ear to their grievances), that inequity will provoke retaliation, if only vicariously and even at the expense of other innocent people.

While this haunting ending concludes the external plot, the internal plot of the memoir offers a different form of vengeance and provides a resolution which I believe is more promising and gratifying to the writer and reader alike. At the beginning of the memoir, the narrator, after judging the life of Johnny Otis to be a “triumph” because of his commitment to blacks, wonders: “But I don’t know whether mine is or not” (“F,” 367). She doubts whether her life amounts to a similar triumph (despite her own unquestionable loyalty to blacks) presumably because the “burning” of her inward self has left considerable scars. She has suffered the impotent rage and gnawing frustration of being unable to speak up on behalf of African Americans. Empathy alone cannot take away her sense of guilt for what she has not done.

The narrator repeatedly evokes this feeling of paralysis and futility. She regrets her inability to articulate the true cause of the fire in Fontana. She reflects on the way she could have reported and the way she actually reported the news by recalling two characters often seen in Little Tokyo. One was a Japanese evangelist who, before the war, “used to shout on the northeast corner of First and San Pedro in Little Tokyo” (“F,” 370). His call to salvation could be heard from a distance and, closer up, one could see “his face awry and purple with the passion of his message” (“F,” 371). The other was a boy in a wheelchair, pushed by a little girl or another boy. Dependent as a baby, this boy, who appeared regularly on the sidewalks, “always wore a clean white handkerchief round his neck to catch the bit of saliva which occasionally trickled from a corner of his mouth” (“F,” 371). The narrator sees herself mirrored in the disabled boy rather than in the ardent evangelist, though she wishes it were otherwise:

It seems to me that my kinship was with the large boy in the wheelchair, not with the admirable evangelist. For, what had I gone and done? I should have been an evangelist shouting out the name of the Short family and their predicament in Fontana. But I had been as handicapped as the boy in the wheelchair, as helpless. (“F,” 371)

She felt similarly choked after hearing the racial slurs against the black driver: “I wanted to yell out the window at the other driver, but what could I have said? I thought of reporting him to management, but what could I have said?” (“F,” 372). On another occasion, she objected to some guests’ obnoxious remarks about “edge-acated niggers,” but she “knew nothing had been accomplished” (“F,” 372).

The narrator’s recurrent failure to defend black people through speech or writing had been so debilitating and demoralizing that she quit her job with the Tribune:

Not long after [the incident on the bus], going to work one morning, I found myself wishing that the streetcar would rattle on and on and never stop. I’d felt the sensation before, on the way to my mother’s funeral. If I could somehow manage to stay on the automobile forever, I thought, I would never have to face the fact of my mother’s death. A few weeks [later] I mumbled some excuse about planning to go back to school and left the paper.

I didn’t go back to school, but ... I got on trains and buses that carried me several thousand miles across the country and back. ... I was realizing my dream of traveling forever (escaping responsibility forever) ... and most of the time I didn’t argue with anyone. (“F,” 372)

The passage, particularly the analogy to the mother’s funeral, intimates the narrator’s anguish at her lack of agency and, more specifically, her loss of faith in the efficacy of her own words. Yet stopping writing altogether and escaping responsibility forever can hardly assuage the curdling inside.

It is in the context of the narrator’s deepening silence that the memoir represents, knowingly or not, her ultimate triumph. In the very act of writing it, the narrator has effectively exposed a long-forgotten crime. Like the play of the white priest (and like the video of the Rodney King beating), this memoir disputes the police version of what happened and opens the audience’s eyes to a flagrant violation of civil rights. Though the criminals remain unidentified, the readers decidedly can tell that the black family in Fontana was murdered, can perhaps even know Miss Moten’s
fury as their very own. One is reminded of an analogy in Maxine Hon Kingston's The Woman Warrior: "The [Chinese] idioms for revenge are "report a crime."" Yamamoto, through her memoir, has figuratively avenged the Short family by reporting the hate crime, writing/righting the wrong. She has implicated the white neighbor(s), the conniving police and, to some extent, the press and journalism, as she finds she can only articulate truth and voice her protest in another medium. She has written the story that may make up for the "lame" report she wrote earlier for the Tribune; she has vindicated and reclaimed her own voice. Finally, by committing the fire in Fontana to an eponymous memoir, she has ensured that this disturbing event will never be forgotten as mere "news."

The American Dream seems to have narrowed with time, from a dream—albeit never realized—of freedom and democracy for all to one of personal and often material success. Because this nation celebrates individualism almost without reservation, the American Dream has become increasingly self-centered. Individuals no longer look beyond their own welfare, and an oppressed group cannot look beyond its own oppression. Worse still, people may fulfill their dreams at others' expense. Without the bigger dream, however, individual prosperity may come to naught. Short's dream of living in a house of his own was snuffed out along with his life. The Korean real estate agent realized her dream of upward mobility by exploiting her black clients. The dreams of many new immigrants went up in the flames of the 1992 L.A. riot. To prevent the American Dream from turning into a national nightmare, we need a multicultural education that will not only provide us with knowledge about different ethnic groups but will also foster a sense of accountability across racial lines.

Yamamoto's memoir, through its double structure, offers two scenarios of what can happen in our multiracial society. The external plot forewarns that injustices such as the live incineration of the Short family (or, more recently, the police brutality again Rodney King) seed civil unrest that can lead to irreparable breach among peoples, that can culminate in uncontrollable social explosions not unlike the one we experienced in 1992. The internal plot, by contrast, evinces the possibility of reciprocal solicitude and personal agency. It suggests that we can take someone else's dream and grievance as our own, that even though we cannot alter the color of our skins, our inner selves can take on different shades.

Notes


Opinions differ on whether to characterize the postverdict upheaval in Los Angeles as a riot or a rebellion. I believe elements of both were present and hence use terms such as "riot," "civil disorder," "rebellion," "uprising," and "insurrection" interchangeably.


4. The Dunbar Hotel, located at 4225 S. Central Avenue, was the first hotel in America built specifically for blacks in 1928 "because prejudice made it impossible for blacks to find adequate lodging while traveling. During its heyday in the 1930s, almost every prominent black who visited Los Angeles stayed at the Dunbar." See Richard Saul Wurmman, LA Access (Los Angeles: Access Press, 1982), 90.

5. Robert Gooding-Williams observes that views presented on television after the L.A. riot suggested that the commotion had little to do with the verdict: "the conservative view saw the 'rioters' as embodying an uncivilized chaos . . . . The liberal view . . . . emphasized the social causes of the 'riots' . . . . It strains credulity to deny . . . . that the uprising in Los Angeles was part for many an act of political protest." See "Look, A Negro!" in Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1998), 169, 170.

6. Gooding-Williams, "Introduction: On Being Stuck," Reading Rodney King, 1. Gooding-Williams states that his book on Rodney King deliberately "contests the representation of the Rodney King incidents as news, viz., as new and dramatic news events, no less than it contests the remembrance of these incidents as old news. By stripping these incidents of the aura of the extraordinary, this book attempts to recover and to explicate their connections to the uneven and ordinary realities which, while ignored by the news, persistently affect life in urban America" (2).


9. Ibid., 197, 203.


“Who'd He Leave Behind?”
Gender and History in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon

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WRITING about her first novel, The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison advocates historical contextualizing. “In order to fully comprehend” the notion of “a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us” implied in the novel’s opening sentence, Morrison writes that “one needs to think of the immediate political climate in which the writing took place.”1 The immediate political and historical context surrounding Morrison’s third novel, Song of Solomon, however, has not yet been closely and critically analyzed. Most of the criticism has been concerned with the mythic dimension of the book, whether traditional Western mythic structures or particularly African American myths and folktales. Jacqueline de Weever’s “Toni Morrison’s Use of Fairy Tale, Folk Tale, and Myth in Song of Solomon” (1980) was followed by A. Leslie Harris’s “Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon” and Dorothy H. Lee’s well-known piece, “Song of Solomon: To Ride the Air” (1982). Later, Genevieve Fabre argued that, by moving “away from sociology” into the realm of “mystery, poetry and prophecy,” Song of Solomon followed “guidelines” which Alice Walker established for black women writers (1988). Marilyn Sanders Mobley, in her 1991 book, Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison, explained Song of Solomon as “a nexus of myth and folklore, magic and realism that at once draws on narratives from Greek mythology, African myth, African-American folklore, and folk tales.” And Trudier Harris, in Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison (1991) refocused critical attention on specifically African American myth and folklore in the novel. Unlike criticism directed at Morrison’s first two
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