A Farewell to Arms: the 'Greening' of American Apartment Names

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Though behavioral studies have shown that territoriality is fundamental in the animal kingdom, the attachments that render space into place are of a distinct species. The act of conferring a name upon a place remains peculiarly human—the work of *homo nominans*, Man the Namer. The names on our globe are as rich and varied as the dimensions and configurations of the places themselves, for a person can define his space as broadly as American (two continents) or as narrowly as the street name of a suburban cul-de-sac. Nor must boundaries be official: one person's interpretation of "God's Country" might be California while another's is the area of farmland in Illinois called Egypt by locals.

The density of names on the American landscape increases as place utility evolves and, as such, is subject to continual infill. Donald J. Orth, Chief of the Geographic Names Section of the U.S. Geological Survey, cites an average figure of 2.5 million American toponyms, including "natural features, populated places, and localities" and exluding commercial names such as those of dams or housing developments.²

¹ Robert C. White, "National Gazetteers of the United States," Names, 18 (1970), p. 18.

² *Ibid.*, p. 17

George Stewart, the dean of American name-callers, reports that a careful cartographic counting of place names in Kentucky by Thomas P. Field found a density of about one name per square mile: a density which if shared by the forty-eight contiguous states would result in a total of three million toponyms.³ Compared to other regions, though, the United States is "so low as to approach a desert" for the density of France is estimated at 62 names per square mile; the Ukraine, 100 per square mile; and Japan, 140 per square mile.⁵ If one were to examine the newest place names bestowed upon the American land-scape—those of apartment complexes, condominiums, subdivisions, and suburban streets newly scooped from farm furrows—the density would increase.

Density aside, scholars and foreign visitors alike have always been intrigued by the exotic ring to American place names. The New World provoked a new spirit in place-naming, not simply because of the vast expanse of lands discovered in the fifteenth century:

In the explorers and colonists of the New World we see from the start a tendency to think names important, to choose them with deliberate care, conscious art, and serious purpose, often using them to express deeply felt loyalties and ideals.⁶

Lofty intentions were often subverted, however, for planting names is somewhat like sowing seeds: those that flourish do so for a variety of reasons. Of all the names Columbus bestowed on the Caribbean islands, those commemorating saints and rulers have generally been abandoned, transposed, or truncated, while one named for the lowly turtle, Tortuga, stuck. Wilbur Zelinsky notes that American place names evidence a higher proportion of "exotica" than those of any other country. By exotica he means:

...that profusion of names plucked from distant corners of the globe without direct historical association (for example, Angola, Pekin, Valparaiso, Odessa, or Cairo); from travel accounts, published history, and imaginative literature (including the Greek and Roman classics; the Hebrew, Christian,

George R. Stewart, *Names on the Globe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 17.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ihid

⁶ C.M. Matthews, *Place Names of the English-Speaking World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), p. 163.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 166-169.

and Mormon Bibles; Norse mythology; and modern fiction and verse); and those that are simply coined on the spot.⁸

One could argue that never before have so few had to name so much so quickly and that necessity is the mother of exotica. But Canada's expansion is similar to that of the United States and their choices are dubbed "sedate" by Zelinsky and "monotonous" by Stewart.

Though previous naming practices "document the extroverted buoyancy and expansiveness of spirit that many observers identify as American," 10 recent studies of the names of cemeteries, 11 hotels, 12 subdivisions, 13 and streets 14 suggest that a new period of naming has begun. Place names are drawn from a more restricted pool of terms to match "mentally contrived" landscapes in a process one researcher has labeled "image-mongering." 15 No renter would be drawn to Floodplain Acres, but the use of Riverbend Estates renders an apartment complex more marketable! Through such "linguistic landscaping" 16 synthetic stereotypes of landscape qualities are perpetuated. Because sense of place is basic to the human experience, place names tend to reflect those quali-

Wilbur Zelinsky, "Classical Town Names in the United States: The Historical Georgraphy of an American Idea," Geographical Review, 57 (1967), pp. 468-469.

Stewart, p. 350 and Zelinsky, note 17, p. 469.

¹⁰ Wilbur Zelinsky, "Classical," p. 469.

Wilbur Zelinsky, "Unearthly Delights: Cemetery Names and the Map of the Changing American Afterworld," *Geographies of the Mind*, ed. David Lowenthal and Martyn Bowden, 171-195, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

¹² John Algeo, "Hostelry Names: The Generics," *Mississippi Folklore Register*, 11 (1977), pp. 151-163.

Arthur Minton, "Names of the Real Estate Developments, I" Names, 7 (1959), pp. 129-153; "Names of Real Estate Developments, II" Names, 7 (1959), pp. 233-255; "Names of Real Estate Developments, III" Names, 9 (1961), pp. 8-36; Janet Schwartz, "The Poet and the Pastoral in the Naming of Suburbia," Names, 28 (1980), 231-254.

John Algeo, "From Classic to Classy: Changing Fashions in Street Names," Names, 26 (1978), pp. 80-95.

Wilbur Zelinsky, "Nationalism in the American Place-Name Cover," Names, 31 (1983), p. 7.

Arthur Minton, quoted in David Lowenthal, "Not Every Prospect Pleases," Changing Rural Landscapes, ed. Ervin H. and Margaret J. Zube (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), p. 137.

ties of life and landscape that are revered. If placelessness has come to dominate the American landscape, as Edward Relph and others have suggested, newly-minted names should reveal this change. Though toponyms constitute nonmaterial culture, they partake of material culture when they appear on maps and signs-providing a visual index to the diffusion of naming fashions. For, as Robert C. West has observed: "Place names may be considered as significant in the cultural landscape as are house types, field patterns, or modes of transport."17

If the first recorded name in the United States was Florida in 1513. then the most recent names are those affixed (hourly, it seems) by developers to subdivisions, streets, shopping malls, apartment complexes, and condominiums. With over eleven million apartments in the United States¹⁸ these complexes can no longer be considered interim living arrangements: they are the newest places in the landscape. Relph has noted that the outsider or mass identity of a place differs from the insider feeling that is "the very foundation of the place concept" in that it is rooted neither in landscape utility or memory. 19 Any examination of the place identity of apartments through names alone, then, describes only the mass identity. Coral Gables Apartments and Seven Gables Apartments may be similar in that they offer Potscrubber dishwashers, recreation centers, and half-timbered siding, but their names connote radically different images to the outsider.

When we examine the names of apartments in ten American cities, some tentative conclusions can be drawn about what characteristics of place are considered marketable. The sample was obtained from the telephone directories²⁰ of ten cities that fell just below a population cut-off point of one million in 1980. The sampling data is summarized

¹⁷ Robert C. West, "The Term Bayou in the United States: A Study in the Geography of Place Names," Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 44 (1954), p. 63.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1981, pp. 762, 765.

E. Relph, Place and Placelessness (London, Pion, 1976), p. 55.

Apartment names were compiled from the following telephone directories: Greater Birmingham (South Central Bell Telephone Company, 1978), pp. 27-31; Dayton and Vicinity (Ohio Bell Telephone Company, 1979), pp. 31-39; Ft. Lauderdale (Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company, 1979), pp. 70-73; Greater Louisville (South Central Bell Telephone Company, 1979,), pp. 28-31; Greater Memphis Area Yellow Pages (South Central Bell Telephone Company, 1979), pp. 45-56; Providence and Vicinity (New England Telephone and Telegraph Company,

in Table 1. These cities represented the best geographical diversity available in a group of ten consecutively-sized metropolitan areas. In addition to the 2,406 total names tabulated for these urban areas, a series of city directories for a single city, Ann Arbor, Michigan, were examined at ten-year intervals beginning in 1910 to provide an historical perspective on naming practices.²¹

Naming of apartments seems to have been a relatively straightforward practice in the Twenties when apartments evolved from rooming houses in small towns and construction of highrise apartment buildings in cities mushroomed.²² Most establishments borrowed either the owner's surname or the street name. The 1930s mark some substitutions for the generic Apartment like Manor, Plaza, Terrace, and Block. This decade also offers a few instances of landscape references, as in the Elmwood Apartments. The decade of the 1940s provides the first self-conscious use of The to precede apartment names—The Elms, The Normandie-and increasing replacement of the original surname and street name monikers with classier terminology. In a 1945 study of apartment house names in New York City, Arthur Minton estimated that only one-fourth of the apartment buildings were named, while the majority were simply numbered addresses.²³ Of the named buildings, Minton found that between a fourth and a third contained the terms Court or Arms-both derived from English inn names.24 Further, the names as a whole had a definite British accent. He suggested that these classy names were chosen for mellifluous syllables and connotations of prestige rather than any sort of referential value.²⁵

Apartment namers of the Fifties and Sixties continued to be pre-

^{1978),} pp. 33-34; Greater Rochester Directory (Rochester Telephone Corporation, 1980), pp. 39-42; Sacramento (Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, 1979), pp. 58-63; Metropolitan Salt Lake City and Adjoining Towns Yellow Pages (The Mountain States Telephone and Telegraph Company, 1979), pp. 50-52; San Antonio (Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, 1979), pp. 45-56.

²¹ Ann Arbor, Michigan City Directory (Detroit: R.L. Polk and Company, 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1979).

Discussion in this section is based on city directories for Ann Arbor as listed in the previous note.

Arthur Minton, "Apartment House Names," American Speech, 20 (1945), p. 168.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

occupied with both British and colonial American motifs, but during the late Sixties and early Seventies a new environmental approach to naming begins. This period was marked by a rapid increase in the sheer number of apartments and in names containing references to the physical landscape. The current listings of names, then, include many apartments recently constructed and incorporate units of earlier vintage that have, in some cases, been renamed to conform with prevailing practice.

Upon examining evidence from the ten cities in this study, the overriding impression of the sequence of naming is that there has been a "greening" of American apartment names. That is, names with some sort of environmental referent dominate. References to vegetation (Table 2), terrain (Table 3), the hydrosphere (Table 5), and the atmoshere (Table 6) combine to present varied environmental messages. Vegetative names (707 terms or 29 percent of the total names catalogued) present a mixed message: Wood(s) leads in number of citations, with Oak a firm favorite among uses of individual plants, yet more manicured images like Garden, Park, and Green appear to have equal acceptance. Both wild and pastoral images, then, have equivalent clout when applied to these structures sited in an urban milieu.

References to terrain reveal strong preferences for the mountainous or irregular contour (Table 3). Hill(s) is the most common term and the message of "heights"—with social connotations intact—is also conveyed by Ridge, Crest, Mont, and Highlands. Lowland imagery is rare: Valley, Meadow, Field, and Dale providing some exceptions. The popularity of terms like Glen and Hollow may stem from their suggestion of enclosure as well as their pleasant phonetic effect. In short, the wide open spaces appear to have little appeal for those who name apartments. Instead, images of "prospect" and "refuge"-possible points of stability in Yi-fu Tuan's landscapes of fear²⁶—are preferred.

Threaded through this craggy landscape are Rivers, Brooks, Creeks, and Lakes, but only single instances of other regional terms like Run. Branch, and Rio (Table 5). Stream names in apartments have no regional dimension. Mentions of Sea and other nautical terms are clustered in Ft. Lauderdale. Other motifs of town and country (Table 4) reveal a bias toward the bucolic for, though all of the apartments in the study are located in urban areas, the term City is used a scant four times.

Yi-fu Tuan, Landscapes of Fear (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).

Popular terms like *Manor* and *Village* imply a country setting. *Villa*, *Terrace*, *Court*, *Plaza*, and *Square*, though describing the built environment, imply enclosure and perhaps, by extension, the security of family and community. The popularity of *Tower(s)* assures the renter that the structure is of vertical rather than horizontal massing, but also recalls terrain descriptors that stressed prospect. The once ubiquitous *Arms* is found in forty-eight names, less than two percent of the total sample.

Though pets may be allowed in some apartment complexes, animal names are used rather sparingly (Table 8). Bird names make up about half of the fifty-four animal names, with the Eagle, Robin, and Sandpiper chosen most often. The Fox is the most popular mammal; and though he is associated with elite sport in the rural countryside, his popularity may stem less from his cunning and more from his concise spelling!

The weather forecast for these apartment dwellers is sunny and windy, but rain is mentioned only in tandem as Rainbow or the benign Raintree (Table 6). Few namers share the gumption of Ft. Lauderdale's Hurricane House Apartments. Color is used in sixty-three names, with Green comprising about half of the listings (Table 8). Directional references are found in 173 names, with North less favored than the other cardinal points. Additional descriptive qualities include those signalling elite status-Imperial, Luxury, Executive-and a variety of terms from Rustic to Debonnaire. Prospect is again advertised in the popularity of terms like View, Vista, and Panorama. The continuing British presence can be seen in a number of terms related to royalty, among them Royal and Royalty, but the proportion of such names is small. Perhaps more popular are the transplantations of place names from Great Britain and colonial America. Apartment names have included the use of Cambridge, Chatham, Arlington, Raleigh, and Yorktown among others in new locales. Some of these borrowings can become quite humorous in their lack of regional congruence: one can find the New England Village Apartments in San Antonio, the Barcelona Apartments in Birmingham, the Valley Forge Apartments in Memphis, the Kontiki Apartments in Louisville, Tyrolean Village in San Antonio, the Vieux Carre in Louisville, and the French Quarter Apartments in San Antonio.

The apartment naming picture is also complicated by the steady multiplication of component parts in a single name. There are few survivors with the simplicity of *Dave's Rooming House* in Ft. Lauderdale. Instead, the rationale seems to be that splicing varied descriptors together multiplies the positive associations: *Terry Crest Highlands Apartments*

in Sacramento, Foxpoint In Old Farm Apartments in Salt Lake City, Eastgate On The Trail Apartments in Rochester, L'Atriums Of Cinnamon Creek in San Antonio, Whispering Hills Country Club Apartments East in Louisville, and the Washington Manor Retirement Colony Commons Villa Apartments in Dayton.

What conclusions can be drawn from this assortment of fabricated names? The current state of apartment naming is characterized by lack of place articulation and synthetic image-building. Natural phenomena are chosen for pleasant associations rather than local physiographic reality or regional congruence. These benign landscape references reflect estrangement from the land, enshrining a bucolic past that never existed. The persistence of British-sounding or elitest names also reveals the mass culture taste for the neutrality of Anglo-Saxon terms. As John Algeo noted in his study of suburban street names in Athens, Georgia, new names seem to be "deliberately unlocal."²⁷ A fattening of the language such as has been decried by Edwin Newman, John Simon, and others, can be seen in the replacement of the generic Apartment with new terms and the multiplication of the number of terms in a single apartment name. In contrast to a verbal tradition that tends to shorten place names-i.e., Philly, L.A., Mass Ave., Comm Ave.-developers are creating unwieldy constructions that would try the skill of Demosthenes.

Though there is no national conspiracy of naming among developers leading to this standardization, the constraints of the marketing process have leveled the language. Pronounceability, legibility, and familiarity are goals in the creation of names for developments, apartments, streets, shopping centers, and individual model homes, while unfamiliar terms, foreign words, and effeminate names are avoided.²⁸ A vocabulary of increasing sameness has been spread across the land through trade literature. Circulated in many cases at no cost, these builders' journals and their advertisements are perused for ideas. A shopping center name is reused on an apartment, a subdivision name on a model home, an apartment name on a street sign, and so on across the country. A Peppertree apartment complex sprouts simultaneously in Memphis, San Antonio, and Louisville. Outside any extension of the New

Algeo, "Street Names," p. 93.

Interview: Nancy Kachel, Director of Sales and Marketing, Hines-Reaume Builders, 2 April 1980, Ypsilanti, Michigan.

England culture region, the *Village Green Apartments* beckon to renters in Salt Lake City, Providence, Memphis, San Antonio, Louisville, and Sacramento.

An interview with the director of sales and marketing for a Michigan builder revealed how names are chosen.²⁹ The firm's most recent project embedded a group of attached townhouses in an earlier subdivision called *Meadowview*. Noting that the original site offered no interesting terrain or vegetation that she could incorporate, she explained that *Meadowview* was the most positive image she could muster. Some of the names that she considered for the new townhouse project were: *The Mews At Meadowview, The Cloisters At Meadowview, Fox Lair At Meadowview*, and *The Ridge At Meadowview* before deciding on *The Clusters At Meadowview* because it has "a community, village, town square kind of appeal." The list she compiled for her project is a microcosm of the kind of naming seen in the ten cities of the study.

Does the onomastic amelioration in current naming practices reflect homogenized popular culture and resulting placelessness or does such naming hark back to the boosterism that characterized early town platting in the United States? Are today's "projective" place names³ the legacy of those anticipatory designations³ that enabled town fathers to look at a muddy crossroads and see an Athens? As historian Daniel Boorstin has observed, such booster naming confused present and future tense, enabling proper nouns to take on "an active, fluid aspect"—not exactly braggadocio, but clairvoyance.³ Further, the greening of American apartment names may be the culmination of a democratic impulse to use value-free terminology which is evidenced by the use of tree names on cross streets in grid pattern towns in opposition to the neutrally-named First, Second, Third, and other numbered streets.

Nevertheless, by eradicating distinct and diverse geographical experiences, apartment naming intensifies placelessness on the American

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ihid

³¹ Zelinsky, "Unearthly Delights," p. 174.

Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The National Experience (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 296.

³³ Ibid.

landscape. If, as Wittgenstein has pronounced, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world,"34 the world of American toponyms grows increasingly bland and standardized. Yet the image-mongering ascribed to these most recent names on the land is not without precedent. About a millenium ago (c. 985 A.D.) Eric the Red found an icy new territory as he sailed west and called it Greenland: "Because men would the more readily go there if the country had a good name."35 American apartment names echo Eric's choice in both form and motive.

Table 1: Number of Apartment Names and Population Totals for Selected Cities*

	Rank		No.
City	Size	Population	Names
San Antonio, Texas	37	996,100	403
Rochester, New York	38	978,000	220
Sacramento, California	39	907,900	481
Louisville, Kentucky	40	887,000	192
Memphis, Tennessee	41	876,600	235
Providence-Warwick-Pawtucket, R.I.	. 42	855,500	75
Ft. Lauderdale-Hollywood, Fla.	43	846,600	356
Dayton, Ohio	44	836,900	179
Salt Lake City, Utah	45	799,800	123
Birmingham, Alabama	46	799,700	142
		Total	2,406

^{*}Source: The World Book Almanac and Book of Facts, 1980. New York: Newspaper Enterprise Associates, 1980.

L. Wittgenstein (1922), quoted in A. Pred, "Social Reproduction and the Time Geography of Everyday Life," Geografiska Annaler 63B (1981), p. 19.

³⁵ George Stewart, Names on the Land (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 36.

Table 2: Vegetation References Used in American Apartment Names, by Number of Occurrences*

Generics:			
Wood(s), -wood(s)	149	Forest	6
Garden(s)	120	Arbor	4
Park	104	Leaf, Leaves	3
Tree(s)	29	Vineyard	1
Meadow(s)	28	Grassland	1
Green	11	Moor	1
Field	9	Arboretum	1
Timber(s)	8	Hedge	1
Grove	6	Ü	
Specifics:			
Oak, Oaks, Oakes	67	Lemon	2
Pine(s)	21	Pecan	2
Willow	14	Linden	2
Cedar	10	Larch	2
Palm(s)	9	Hackberry	2
Birch	7	-berry	2
Briar, -briar, -brier	7	Magnolia	1
Rose	7	Mulberry	1
Walnut	6	Orange	1
Elm(s)	5	Locust	1
Laurel	5	Lime	1
Evergreen	4	Sunflower	1
Olive	3	Fern	1
Cherry	3	Chestnut	1
Pepper	3	Ivy	1
Holly	3	Coconut	1
Sycamore	3	Almond	1
Camellia	3	Catalpa	1
Poplar	3	Heather	1
Aspen	2	Iris	1
Hickory	2	Spruce	1
Clover	2	Redwood	1
Cottonwood	2	Cypress	1
Plum	2	Vine	1
Maple	2		
		TOTAL	707

^{*}Sample of ten American cities drawn from telephone directories for 1979-1980.

Table 3: Terrain References Used in American Apartment Names, by Number of Occurrences

Heights-				
Hill(s), Hillside, Foothills, Hilltop	78	Alpine		1
Ridge	36	Incline		1
Crest	35	Pinnacle		1
Mont, Mount, Mountain	22	Ledge		1
Highland(s), Highlander	16	"		
Heights	11	Hollows:		
Cliff	6	Meadow(s)		28
Knoll	4	Glen		21
Summit	2	Valley, Vale		17
Overlook	2	Dale, -dale, -dell		17
Mesa	1	Field		9
Moraine	1	Hollow		4
	1	Canyon		1
Upland	1	Moor		1
Bluffs	1		TOTAL	210
Mound	1		IOIAL	319

Table 4: Additional Town and Country Motifs in American Apartment Names, by Number of Occurrences

Manor	150	Farm(s)	5
Village	128	City	4
Villa	65	Patio	4
House (when not preceded		Rock, Rocky	4
by Town)	58	Cottage	4
Terrace	56	Plantation	3
Square	56	Trace	3
Tower(s)	52	Downs	3
Arms	48	Hamlet	2
Court	35	Downtown	2
Plaza	31	Ranch	2
Place	28	Cobble	2
University/College/Campus	18	Acres	2
Town(e) (when not followed		Gateway	2
by House)	13	Broadway	2
Casa	12	Street	2
Estates	11	Way	2
Stone, Stony	10	Boulevard	1
Arden	8	Drive	1
Country	8	Trail	1
Lodge	7	Penthouse	1
Parkway	7	Chalet	1
Lane	7	Hometown	1
Mill	6	Brick	1
Commons	6	Pebble	1
Avenue	6	Gables	1

TOTAL

890

Table 5: Hydrology and Related Terms in American Apartment Names, by Number of Occurrences

River	37
Brook(e)	37
Creek	35
Lake	28
Sea	18
Shore(s)	14
Ocean	9
Spring(s)	9
Coral, Coral Reef	8
Beach	7
Bay	6
Harbor	6
Cabana	6
Water	5
Isle, Island, Islander	5
Commodore	5
Cove	4
Pond	3
Surf	3 3 2 2 2 2
Bayou	2
Key	2
Pool	2
Stream	2
Oasis	2
Rio	1
Loch	1
Fountain	1
Branch	1
Run	1
Falls	1
Marsh	1
Cay	1
Additional Nautical Terms	29
TOTAL	292

Table 6: Atmospheric Terms in American Apartment Names, by Number of Occurences

Wind(s) Sun- Sunrise Spring Four Seasons Sky Tropic(al) Sunset Sundown Star/Stardust/Starlight Moon, Crescent	16 12 9 7 6 5 4 4
Rainbow Raintree	4 4
Summer	3
Sundance	3
Sunshine	4 3 3 2
Winter	1
Autumn	1
Additional Miscellaneous Time of	-
Day and Atmospheric Conditions	20
TOTAL	121

Table 7: Selected Examples of Descriptive Terms or Qualities in American Apartment Names, by Number of Occurrences

View	46
Royal, Royalty	20
Fair-, -fair	15
Vista	14
King, King's	12
Imperial	9
Regency, Regents	8
Haven	7
Camelot	7
American(a)	6
High	6
Governor(s)	6
Continental	5
	5
Heritage	
Old(e)	5
Hallmark	4
Luxury	4
Hidden	4
Whispering	4
Capital, Capitol	4
Executive	3
Community	3
Rolling	3
Long	3
Central	3
Twin	3 3 2
Little	2
Panorama, Panoramic	2
Swank	2

Table 8: Additional Categories in American
Apartment Names, by Number of
Occurrences

Colors: Total	63
Green	(28)
Compass Direction: Total	173
North	(29)
South	(45)
East	(54)
West	(43)
Northwest	(2)
Biblical, Ecclesiastical	21
Presidential	19
Numbers	34
Objects	63
•	
Proper Names, Male	44
Proper Names, Female	37
Nationalities	26
Foreign Words, Spanish	95
Foreign Words, French	54
Foreign Words, Indian	10
Foreign Words, Other	15
Animals: Total	54
Birds	(25)
Fox	(10)
Transplantations	129

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