

Mixed

CHANDRA
CRANE

Blessing

Embracing the
Fullness of Your
Multiethnic
Identity

FOREWORD BY
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Multiethnicity 101

The Foundation of Being Mixed

“WHY DOES SHE LOOK LIKE CHINA?” stage-whispered the little boy upon seeing my younger daughter. At the age of three, she was already being confronted with the stereotype that her eyes were more narrow than “normal” and the assumption she was therefore Chinese. The boy’s dad was mortified and apologetic, but I wasn’t surprised by the interaction. I was glad to share about her ethnicity—that she has White and Thai ancestry (not Chinese). But I think what truly confused the little boy was that our daughter looked “*like*” an Asian. He had no category for her mixed features: her light-brown hair and ruddy cheeks to go along with her oval eyes. She disrupted his expectations.

As my husband and I teach our kids about themselves, the world, and where they fit into the story, we want their mixed ethnicity to be a comfortable truth that they grow into, not something to spring on them “once they’re older.” That’s a hard concept to explain, though: what being multiethnically Asian means, what features are considered Asian, why folks will probably assume she’s Chinese. The story of being mixed

is one of pain and privilege, created goodness and redeemed joy; but how do we define *mixed* as a concept? It's hard to boil down a complex idea to a concise definition, especially when the heart of the matter—being multiethnic—is that of being more than one thing.

Here's one simple definition: *being multiethnic is having two or more ethnic and/or racial backgrounds with significant differences*. But this leads us to ask, what is an ethnic or racial background? What, if anything, is the difference between ethnicity and race? Some may even ask, "Isn't race just made up? Aren't we all part of the human race?" These are important questions with complicated answers.

DEFINING TERMS, DEFINING REALITY

"Race" is indeed a social construct, as activist Ta-Nehisi Coates explains, not a biological reality.¹ While human DNA does vary, it's more by geography than by skin tone or other features, explains author Megan Gannon.² But the false biological nature of race makes it no less defining for us people of color. Race is a very real political and social reality. The modern idea of racial categories was created by those in power to keep their power (and, therefore, their wealth)—those who "chose dividends over dignity,"³ as author and historian Jemar Tisby puts it. Though race is a fabrication, it is a powerful one.

The truth is, as Coates continues, that "*no coherent, fixed definition of race actually exists*. . . . The strongest argument for 'race' is that people who trace their ancestry back to Europe, and . . . sub-Saharan Africa, and . . . Asia, and . . . the early Americas, lived isolated from each other for long periods and have evolved different physical traits." The reasons that

people with vastly different phenotypes—those distinct features usually associated with different ethnicities—can all check the same race box on the census goes “right back to the fact of race as a social construct. And an American-centered social construct.”⁴

The United States census lists the five basic race categories as White, Black, Asian, American Indian, and Pacific Islander.⁵ In contrast *Hispanic* is listed as an ethnic category. According to the US Census Bureau, “though many respondents expect to see a Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish category on the race question, this question is asked separately because people of Hispanic⁶ origin may be of any race(s).”⁷ While this appears to be an attempt to ensure that minority and vulnerable people are counted in the census, it adds a confusing distinction between race and ethnicity that isn’t made in other forms and surveys.

From a general perspective, due to our nation’s socio-political constructs, Americans understand there to be five racial categories: White, Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous Peoples (or Native American). As globalization continues to increase, and as White people do the work of looking at their own ancestry, categories like Middle Eastern, South Asian, Jewish, Pacific Islander—and even European⁸—enter and reenter the American consciousness. The idea of race changes over time, but one constant is that it affects us all.

In popular culture, *race* and *ethnicity* often are used interchangeably to describe certain people groups who share characteristics in appearance (such as skin tone, facial features, body type, etc.). But even more confusingly, when average American citizens refer to someone of a certain race or

ethnicity, they could actually be referring to a specific *culture* that has certain identifiers based on common cultural artifacts (as defined by author Andy Crouch),⁹ behaviors, and standards. While being seen as “Black” in Western culture is predicated on one’s skin tone, the descriptor is also tied to stereotypical cultural aspects, such as styles of dress, music, food, and self-expression (as well as the majority-culture judgments against them).

Conversely, being Asian is usually thought of less in terms of skin tone and more in terms of where one comes from (with the assumption being that it’s not America), especially in the age of the coronavirus. Regardless, those of Asian descent are still judged by appearance—eye shape, hair texture, and other physical features—and more insidiously, by what that supposedly means about moral character.

THE HAVES, HAVE-NOTS, AND HAVE-A-LOTS?

The fact remains that however many races we may claim there are (or are not), many people think in terms of only two categories: White and nonwhite/colored.¹⁰ There are “people,” and then there are “people of color.”¹¹ This is both true and untrue, both helpful and troublesome. We people of color have unique experiences that White folks do not have, but certain phrases can really limit communication, especially across different cultural groups. When everything is in contrast to and centered around the concept of “whiteness,” it can be hard to erase the lines that have been drawn.

A similar either/or category, one that avoids some of these issues (while no doubt creating others), is that of the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Power and privilege follow racial lines,

so it's important to make this distinction, not to *create* categories but to acknowledge categories that already exist. Those categories were created and are reinforced by those who want to keep power and remain the "haves." On the other hand, the nature of the two categories points out and upholds the faulty logic of "White" in contrast to everything else. Black and Brown folks aren't simply White people who have been left in the oven too long. Lighter-skinned people of color aren't just White people with "exotic" garnishes. Whiteness (encompassing White culture and norms) is not the biblical standard from which everything else is derived, despite the prevailing majority-culture sentiment.

THE GIFT OF ETHNICITY TO THE NATIONS

This brings us to personal and biblical categories of ethnicity, culture, and race. We must ask this question: If we agree to see race as a social concept with real power behind it, what about ethnicity? When it's separated out from *race*, *ethnicity* is actually a biblical category. When looking at identity, the generally accepted cultural practice is to rank racial categories as primary, with ethnicity as a subset. But I like to follow the Bible's lead and flip the script. So I often use *ethnicity* (defined by national, cultural, and familial ties) as a main descriptor. When we focus on the diverse goodness of all humans as created in the image of God, and put emphasis on family affiliation and social interactions rather than race, then *race* can become an out-of-date footnote to the main text of our ethnicity. In thinking about her identity, Cheryl, who is both ethnically mixed and a transracial adoptee, thanks "God for his creativity in making people so

unique and different . . . and what each person can bring to the world.”

In seeing ethnicity as healthy and prescriptive—not merely descriptive—the Bible sets the precedent. As Efrem Smith writes, “Although race is not biblical, ethnicity is. We see groups of people described by ethnicity, nationality, and tribe within the scriptures. . . . When we look through scripture, we see the interplay of ethnicity and the way race came to be and see how Jesus is the fruit of a long and diverse bloodline.”¹² Ethnicity is no accident. According to Sundee Frazier, “Part of God’s plan for our world seems to include the creation of distinctive people groups, each with its own language, values, practices, even physical attributes. . . . God has planted within each ethnic group an element of his wisdom and character. . . . This makes each group crucial in God’s plan to reveal his glory to the world.”¹³

Shall we say that a little louder for the people in the back? Each and every ethnic group is part of how God reveals his glory. White supremacy can take a seat, thank you very much. The variety of ethnicities is not a curse that God needs to redeem. It is God’s gift to the nations; he has revealed part of himself in the diversity of his image bearers, personified in the incarnation of Jesus.

Some folks look at ethnicity as being primarily a matter of skin tone, while others focus more on people groups. Some folks look further back, to the geography of ancestors and the significance of belonging to a place and family. Author Akemi Johnson defines *hapa* as “a transliteration of the English word ‘half’” and the “Hawaiian word for ‘part.’” Referring to an interview with Kealalokahi Losch, Johnson

says, “Because the Hawaiian kingdom was more concerned with genealogy than race, . . . if you could trace your lineage to a Hawaiian ancestor, you were Hawaiian. Mixed Hawaiian did not mean less Hawaiian.”¹⁴ Indigenous Hawaiians tend to have strong ties to the land, and this has shaped their general acceptance of mixed folks.¹⁵

As someone with White, Chinese, and Pacific Islander roots, Morgan is able to embrace the term *hapa* as being part of her story growing up in California and visiting grandparents in Hawai’i. When sharing about the importance of place and how it shapes her identity, she reminds us that her “Hawaiian and Chinese ancestors’ lives preceded the US annexation.” Similar to Latinx/Mexican folks, “they didn’t cross the border, the border crossed them.”¹⁶ Wherever we mixed folks locate our ethnicity, we can rest assured that it’s ultimately from the Lord.

DIVERSITY AND DISTINCTIONS

Our multiethnicity deserves to be acknowledged and honored as we seek refuge, solace, healing, and growth. Even as we follow our ancestors in their unique ways of extending welcome, we need to draw boundaries. To use an analogy often employed when discussing race relations, our table of hospitality has seats for all, *but not for all to set the agenda*. Mixed folks, this is our space to celebrate, mourn, squabble (like any family does), rest, and break bread together. This is our multiethnic community.

This space we’re entering is foremost for us multiethnic (and thus multicultural) folk who need and deserve a safe space to be the norm—not the exception—perhaps for the

first time. So to have the right number of place settings at our table, there are two main distinctions to identify those of us who are mixed and whose stories are essential to this fellowship:

- One distinction is being *raised within a family consisting of two or more different and/or adversarial ethnic cultures* (especially as opposed to someone who comes into another ethnic culture as an adult). This unique upbringing can have both a richness of experience but also a sense of self-disconnect. These issues tend to play out more in terms of culture than of phenotypical appearance, though both are a factor.
- The other distinction is finding oneself, due to this diversity of family origins, *often in the ethnic minority within family and society*, whether in terms of appearance, learned cultural norms, or ethnically related issues of justice, etc. This experience can foster a sense of awareness and care for the *other* but also can lead to feeling like a perpetual *other*. These dynamics are often rooted in phenotype, but not to the exclusion of cultural norms.

Both categories can be fostered by a disconnect—even if only on the part of others—between the expectations of us and the reality. This can happen in multiple ways. Our physical appearance, communication styles, and experiences can leave us in the minority within many spheres of influence (whether that be family, school, church, work, or community). However, a strong sense of connection—with our own culture and with others’ cultures—can also be created due to our shifting

experiences. Just as there are many ways of embodying different family roles, ethnicities, genders, and sexualities, there is no *one* way to be multiethnic. How each of us chooses to tell our individual story depends on our temperament and situation. And while there are definitely healthy and unhealthy ways of being mixed, these are based on a universal human truth: how we relate to our mixed redeemer.

GROWING IN NUMBERS, CHANGING THE CULTURE

Although White normativity still has a stranglehold on the United States, we're living in a significant cultural shift where the group classified as "minorities" is fast becoming the majority percentage of the population, as research has revealed.¹⁷ And even as mixed children are nothing new, with mixed marriages (finally) being declared legal for more than fifty years, demographics continue to change as generations of mixed folks are having children and even grandchildren who identify as multiethnic. Actor Zoë Kravitz is the daughter of Lisa Bonet and Lenny Kravitz, both of whom are half Black and half of Ashkenazi Jewish heritage, furthering the definition and experience of being mixed. My children have known about fractions from a young age, and they proudly share with perfect strangers that they are "one-fourth Thai." (My older daughter also sometimes mentions her Black granddad, hilariously adding to folks' confusion.)

According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2013, about nine million Americans chose two or more racial categories when asked about their race. No doubt there are more multiethnic folks than those who reported themselves on that survey. A study found that the number of Black-White

biracial Americans doubled between 2000 and 2010.¹⁸ And the 2020 Census results will likely show that trend to have continued or even increased. Mixed people have always been part of our country's story; now we are no longer seen as a subculture. We are no longer in the shadows.

Professor Robin DiAngelo acknowledges this shift and the changing nature of race, saying that using “the terms *white* and *people of color* to indicate the two macro-level, socially recognized divisions of racial hierarchy . . . [will lead to] collapsing a great deal of variation.” She knows that because we multiethnic folks “challenge racial constructs and boundaries, [we] face unique challenges in a society in which racial categories have profound meaning.”¹⁹ When it comes to easy categories, there's no easy binary (*White versus person of color; or ally versus minority*) for most of us mixed folks to plug into. We just don't fit the system.

FORCED BINARY, OR CHECK ALL THAT APPLY?

The irony of trying to define the mixed experience is that we defy categorization. We know it's absurd to try to distill multiethnicity down to two distinctions; but as an initial starting point (and for the sake of sanity), we have to begin with something and then build from there. Some of us mixed folks readily identify with both categories, whereas others of us fit into only one, and others identify with every possible combination in-between.

It's a difficult distinction because some mixed folks are “simply” biracial, with one parent of one ethnic background and the other parent of another. Stu, who has a Black mom and a White dad, identifies more with descriptor one (having

diversity within his family) than descriptor two (being a minority based on others' expectations), because his childhood home tended toward a monoethnic culture.²⁰ Cass, who has indigenous heritage from both parents, identifies less with definition one (diversity in family) and more with definition two (minority based on expectations) because he has Zuni ancestors on one side and Diné (Navajo) ancestors on the other (and White ancestry on both sides). He was raised within an overarching Native culture but isn't sure where he fits. However Stu, because he looks more like his Black mom, wrestles more with questions of how his experience in his family affects his internal identity than with issues of feeling like a mixed *other*. In contrast, Cass feels the strain of the expectations placed on him to be "fully" Zuni and "fully" Diné. His parents didn't dwell much on their tribal differences, but Cass feels the pressure to figure out his mixed identity in the context of his broader community.

Even for those who are multiethnic *without* White ancestry, in addition to the "usual" stress and experiences of being a *monoethnic* minority (especially as part of a displaced people group), there may be a sense of feeling unsure how to fit into multiethnic spaces. Brennan, who has Japanese and Chinese heritage, has fewer experiences that draw out the complications of multiethnicity, so he identifies less with descriptor one (diversity in family) and more with descriptor two (minority based on expectations). Brennan feels more internally secure in his Japanese and Chinese/Cantonese heritage than in how others see him, but in mixed spaces especially, he often feels "unseen [because of his] ambiguous Asian appearance." With his Japanese last name, he is most

often assumed not to have other Asian ancestry. Sometimes he considers adding his Chinese names to better indicate his multiethnicity.

MIXED BLESSINGS

I wrestled for a while with the title *Mixed Blessing*. I wanted something as clever and uplifting as *Check All That Apply* (based on the progress from past census forms requiring “Other” or “None of the above” into the joy of being able to “Check all that apply” on the 2000 census).²¹ We multiethnic folks know that one word or phrase can’t sum us up, but *mixed* is once again gaining traction. As terms like *biracial* have necessarily given way to *multiracial* and then *multiethnic*, we’ve learned the value of affirming our dignity by choosing how to reference ourselves.

Sometimes I use the term *multiethnic* as an important way to indicate how we straddle two or more different worlds. I also sometimes refer to us as “people of multiethnicity” to honor the fact that we are indeed people of color who experience life in a distinct way due to our ethnicity. Some of us have chosen to breathe new life into the idea of multiethnicity by reclaiming previously derogatory words like *mixed* and making them our own.

Mixed has a complicated history and can conjure up images of livestock breeding and blood quantum, as author Randy Woodley explains,²² with all their dehumanizing, polarizing, and violent implications. Being mixed teaches us that matters are rarely as mutually exclusive as they may seem, and even as we struggle over defining terms, *mixed* highlights how ambiguity is a large part of our multiethnic experience. I choose

to reject the word's historical connotations. I don't allow the term—and thus myself—to uphold the false idea of the purity of whiteness, which implies people of color are sub-human animals to be bred. (I haven't met anyone who is working on rehabilitating the term *half-breed* yet!)

If you don't want to refer to yourself as mixed, that's okay too. The practice of reclamation is rooted in the right to identify our own selves, Elizabeth Sung reminds us,²³ to simultaneously humbly and proudly wear a mantle that was given by others for evil but that God intends for good. Each of us gets to choose words that best describe us and our current experiences. And our identity and story will shift over time from one thing to another, and sometimes back again.

While there are problems involved in any term, I find that *mixed* identifies my current experience best. Both in its positives and negatives, being mixed is not a perfect blending, not the utopian melting pot. It's a "mixed bag," and I often feel "mixed up." My ethnicity is indeed a "mixed blessing," and I sometimes feel like quite the pariah in "mixed company." But I do really value the ambiguity of *mixed*—the freedom to define it for myself and not to be limited to others' views of who they want me to be. I love the freedom to see myself as God sees me, in all my diversity.

MULTIETHNIC GROUPS, MIXED INDIVIDUALS

I also like that *mixed* has mostly fallen out of use to describe groups, so many of us people of multiethnicity are choosing to use it to describe ourselves as individuals. When we say something about a "multiethnic group," most

monoethnic folks assume that means a group made up of a variety of monoethnic individuals, forgetting that we multiethnic folks even exist. *Mixed* pushes back on the idea that monoethnicity is the norm.

Societally, choosing to identify as a mixed person is also on the rise. For the most part, colorblindness as a virtue is out. We've moved past the 1990s' ideal and have realized that, as theologian Sarah Shin tells us, "colorblindness, though well intentioned, is inhospitable. Colorblindness assumes that we are similar enough and that we all only have good intentions, so we can avoid our differences."²⁴ But we have to ask if multiethnicity is the new colorblindness. Mixed people are increasingly in vogue, especially in the realm of advertising. "Sex sells" is a standby of the marketing world; apparently beige sells too.

While I agree that multiethnicity can be used as a mere marketing tactic, I also believe that we mixed folks can lead the way in being "color brave," as finance executive Mellody Hobson coined the phrase in her 2014 TED Talk. Rather than trying to ignore our differences, we can face reality head on and "become comfortable with being uncomfortable."²⁵ If there's one thing that we people of multiethnicity are practiced at, it's figuring out how to be at ease in uneasy situations, often ones which are triggered by our appearance and readily apparent differences.

Popular figures like Meghan Markle, Jason Momoa,²⁶ and Halle Berry are unabashedly multiethnic and have a range of different thoughts on what that means to them.²⁷ Some folks have even chosen to embrace the "one-drop rule,"²⁸ identifying with their Black ancestors and redeeming a previously

negative structure. The beauty of diversity for us mixed folks is that everyone's multiethnic story is different.

Given our country's racial history, former president Barack Obama chooses to self-identify as Black *without* downplaying his White mother or denying his third-culture upbringing. Actor Chloe Bennet, upon realizing that her last name, Wang, was leading to her being typecast, chose to use another surname (quite common for actors). What's significant is that she chose her Chinese father's first name as her new last name, not her White mother's surname. She wanted to honor her heritage but not be limited by the stereotyping of Asians in Hollywood.²⁹

Many popular figures are openly mixed, and discuss how their mixed ancestry has formed their identity and impact. In the same vein as Jason Momoa, Halle Berry, and Chloe Bennet, actors Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Rashida Jones, Keanu Reeves, Henry Golding, Chrissy Teigen, and Cameron Diaz talk about their mixed ancestry with fans and in interviews. Along the lines of Barack Obama's lead, politicians such as Kamala Harris and Tammy Duckworth are very open about their mixed ethnicity. Singers Shakira, Mariah Carey, and Ne-Yo have mixed ethnicity that they incorporate into their music. Actor Tracee Ellis Ross has developed a line of mixed haircare products, and actor Taye Diggs wrote a children's book entitled *Mixed Me*. There are many of us mixed folks, both famous and non, who are choosing to be "color brave"—to push into our ethnicity and pursue wholeness.

BUT WHAT ABOUT EUROPEAN AMERICANS?

There will no doubt be those who ask the question, "What about European Americans? What about those with Irish,

Italian, or Jewish heritage who were once considered minorities in America?” I won’t say it’s a *fair* question, but I will take a second to address it. Looking at the distinctions I’ve offered, there may indeed be some connection to both. Such a person may feel some disconnect internally and when among others. But the lack of minority status—not even the “model minority” perpetual-foreigner status that so affects Asian Americans—is the key difference. If these mixed conversations bless majority-culture people and encourage them to look more into their heritage, wonderful. But the very real discriminations faced by many European immigrants are in the past, with little to no current repercussions.

For White folks who “legally” immigrated and have successfully integrated into the dominant White culture, there is no lasting legacy upon them like the weight that is on people of color in the United States today. The history of human-stealing inherent in slavery, the land-stealing from indigenous peoples, or the citizenship-stealing against Asian, Latinx, and other immigrants is why the “people of color” category is so necessary. Yes, there is grief when we think about the discriminations of the past, about cultures and traditions that were lost, and about assimilation into acceptable blandness. And there is great value for all folks in learning more about their ethnic heritage, because one of the greatest lies sown is that there are White folks and then there are “ethnic” people. As Efrem Smith writes, “The fact is that all Whites have an ethnic identity and heritage: Irish, British, Danish, German, and so on. It is important for Whites to engage their heritages to be able to find their rightful place within a post-White, multiethnic community.”³⁰ It is indeed

grievous to think about how “different White ethnic immigrant groups—Italians, Poles, Irish, and Jews—were marginalized or discriminated against because of their backgrounds” (even as they “found advantage in downplaying or even negating those identities”).³¹

As DNA tests have become popular, many people are starting to understand that their heritage is rooted in more than their US ancestors. For some White folks, learning more about their family history can lead to a greater sympathy for and understanding of people of color. This can be valuable in enhancing communication. But for others, it may further entrench the idea of something other than whiteness being “exotic,” which can further the false notion that White folks are also multiethnic. This false narrative can be uniquely difficult for us mixed folks whose experiences are directly affected by our embodied ethnic diversity—rather than being some novel footnote from the distant past.

It’s important to draw lines of distinction, not to keep others out but to ensure that there’s room for those of us who need and deserve this mixed space. It’s hard to hear the voices of the marginalized when there are privileged voices shouting a very different message.

THE OTHER OTHERS

I do want to say that we honor monoethnic siblings who are transracially adopted and those in mixed “blended” families. Those who have vitiligo and albinism can empathize with being the *other* and with fighting against colorism on multiple fronts. Those third-culture folks who grew up in other countries and cultures can also empathize with our mixed

experience. All these siblings are welcome in their beauty and joy, their tiredness and doubts. But as we invite these folks to sit at our table and rest a spell—to sit with us at the feet of Jesus—we do so in hopes that they will be encouraged to also gather at their own tables, in their own unique communities.

DEFINING TERMS, DEFINING OURSELVES

It can be wearying to not fit in. Keren, who is Black and White, says that when it comes to the “What are you?” guessing game, everyone assumes she is “everything except what I actually am!”—a lament many of us share. People ask if she’s Latina, Middle Eastern, even Filipina, which makes her feel unseen even while she’s stared at. Niki, who is Latina and White, mourns that monoethnic “people just assume that you’re one of them. I’m not. I’m more than that; I’m other than that.” Since we naturally push back against people’s assumptions, we mixed folks can really benefit from clear ways to express ourselves.

As human beings created in the image of God, we have the right to be treated as such. As believers in Christ, though, and citizens of a “first shall be last” kingdom, we give up our rights. In so doing, we’re bestowed with the right to call Jesus friend, to call God our father, and to call on the Holy Spirit to indwell us. Thus our right to dignity is anchored in Christ, not in ourselves. When we understand this, we can use things like the “Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People” by author Maria P. P. Root in a way that is honoring to the Lord. In the same ways that monoethnic folks are able to define themselves and rise above expectations, so are we mixed people.

I have the right

not to justify my existence in this world
not to keep the races separate within me
not to be responsible for people's discomfort with
my physical ambiguity
not to justify my ethnic legitimacy

I have the right

to identify myself differently than strangers expect
me to identify
to identify myself differently than how my parents
identify me
to identify myself differently than my brothers and
sisters
to identify myself differently in different situations

I have the right

to create a vocabulary to communicate about being
multiracial
to change my identity over my lifetime—and more
than once
to have loyalties and identify with more than one
group of people
to freely choose whom I befriend and love³²

As we read this “bill of rights,” we may find ourselves comforted, alarmed, confused, or even in total disagreement. I encourage us all to sit with the joy or the lament stirred up by such a bold proclamation. Though the story of Christianity is the laying down of our rights, we do have the right to approach the God of the universe on his throne and to ask him to show us what is healthy for us in seeking to be respected.

As we move from the more foundational aspects of being mixed to the nuanced stories of being mixed, we can trust that God will speak to us, no matter how still and small his voice may seem. He lovingly created us and he won't abandon us. As we see in the story of Hagar in the wilderness, who is the mother of a mixed child, it is El Roi (Gen 16:13, Heb. אֱלֹהֵי רֹאֵי)—the God who *sees*—who has created and continues to sustain us mixed folks.

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