

AFSAAP 2016
KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Re-imagining a Lexicon for Bridge-makers in a Kardashian World?

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I ask your permission to confine my remarks to generalities on the theme, *Africa: Moving the Boundaries*, while touching on a few questions that also inform my literary quests. To begin, I acknowledge, in the same way you acknowledge the ancestors of this place, that there are infinite ways, experiences and frontiers of Africa and being African, and how essential it is to defang the “one Africa” notion with its boring single note. I state upfront that I do not know Africa. I, however, do have an experience of a few of the facets of this immense geographical space (and idea). It is these that inform this presentation.

This reflection is in three parts: (1) an overview of a world into which African metaphorical boundaries propose to move; (2) a painting in/of a world context of which Africa is a part; (3) an offering of the ghastly Kardashians to provide a sound going; and (4) a brief commentary on some literary impulses that drive my quest and connect with the theme.

The human body and person has been and is the locus of my artistic quest. It is around this that the address is structured as I explore, with you, this imagination of mobile and wandering African boundaries in a world that is suddenly crying out for larger walls and fences: Mexico, USA, Hungary, Israel, the UK, Kenya, visions of new ways of fortressing an already fragmented world with the aim of keeping humans out.

Although the paper’s title refers to the symbolic Kardashians, I put it together before The Donald won the presidency of the US. He would have been the masthead. Allow me to be one of the first to welcome you to our freshly hued orange world—it is the miasma of the era of Trump engulfing us. Mr. Trump, though, also serves as our figurative canary in the mine shaft of history. Interesting days ahead, I promise you. The frontier lines of all things are blurring. President elect Trump is just one element in an awfully seething world for which there are no adequate responses.

Welcome, friends, to a world that has now included “*Post-truth*” as a word in the Oxford dictionary—*Post-truth*—what does that even mean? Or perhaps that is its point, its meaninglessness. And it is in this post-truthiness that our boundary beacons and markers are embedded, it is this world that I roam with you a little. This is a world where our certainties, including lines in the sand, the imagination of our boundaries, are crumbling. What remains? We are in a season of the world where one of the most significant struggles is that of giving a name to the realities of our now. You know the landscape through which your metaphorical boundaries intend to creep: the rise and re-entrenchment of global tribalism—euphemised as alt-right...isn’t that the new non-word being bandied about.... nationalism, Brexit, regionalism, partisanship, supremacy, whatever--tribalism, and its evil sister, the extensive, thorough, strategic demonisation of “the other”. Naturally, history repeatedly tells us how this will end. A human frenzy that

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accelerates into an unstoppable, diabolic rage that will result in some horrendous mass blood-letting which will lead survivors to another round of shame, guilt, regret, outrage and the promise (again) of ‘oh no, never again’.

Here is a world where an unrepentant sound-bitey demagogue is to take the seat of authority in the United States, his pointing finger just a breath away from an Armageddon nuclear holocaust button. He got there through a democratic process, a free and fair election fairy tale. Well, in this we can read how the boundaries of “civilisational” paradigms now reveal themselves. This, friends, is supposed to be the apex of democracy, the great adventure our nations are walking towards. Incidentally, watching that man gloat and heckle his way across the United States to the roaring approval of enraptured masses beggars one’s previous notions about America. The more things change, the more they are the same. Adolf Hitler would have been impressed. For an African person of Africa, the scene unfolding is uncomfortably familiar. As much as I admit to enjoying –yes, it is petty – the current discomfort of a few American acquaintances struggling to embrace the consequences of their choices—that orange hued leader of their free world—the world will still have to contend with a Trumpian-led earth, at least for next four years. Look, it may all prove wonderful anyway. There is also Teresa May and Marie le Pen on the side-lines, mind you.

What the American election process gestures to is the reality of our limits. It indicates how dogmatic insincerity couched under political correctness and glossy branding will still collapse under the pressure of the actual choices of the human heart. The fact that a tribal supremacist wins precisely because he is a tribal supremacist implies that there are far more hidden worlds within the imagined, idealised America, and indeed our world, and indeed the African continent. The questions that traverse the heart find answer one way or another, whether we want to hear the truth or not, even if, in the USA’s case, the truthful answer is Mr. Donald Trump. Let us gesture to some of the questions that may be lurking within these present boundaries of the human heart, given the theme of the conference. None of these questions is ever likely to be answered because to do so would demand that the myths and brands by which we insist on defining our worlds would have to be dismantled. Few are ready to do this. Here are some of those questions:

Would there have been an immigration surge and an ISIS if the USA had not moved boundaries, defied international protocol, manufactured lies to invade and destroy Iraq and Afghanistan and then continued blithely with the annihilation of Libya? Today, why is there such a massive building up of war tools right now in so many corners of the world including the Caucasus and Eastern Europe? Is the world preparing for a gigantic scale war? Why is Russia being turned into a global pariah using the same format that was created to justify war in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria (which failed)? To what purpose? Who benefits the most from the wars in the world? Since all weapons carry serial numbers if the United Nations is truly desirous of ending wars why are they not able to sanction the sources of these boundary-less weapons which are also the countries that are its main funders?

What we prefer to do instead as a human race is to bury those questions with our hysterical laughter at the antics of the gruesome Kardashians, who have been turned into a signal icon for human regeneration, aspiration and forgetfulness. We prefer Pollyanna-

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ish and Orwellian newspeak, with tinker-bell descriptions, “collateral damage” to disguise and deny the reality of our fears, discontent, terror and confusion. Meanwhile, the earth is reeling. If it is not from angry persons plotting doomsday scenarios, then it is a climate wounded-ness that sees a never-before-experienced scenario of the melting of the north and south poles. The seas are rising. I understand that here, your particular thing is to loudly deny the disorder. Fortunately for the rest of us, you are also probably going to be the first people to be able to announce the fate of our planet in bubbles from within the depths of the deluge.

As a response to existential global uncertainty, the UN, in its wisdom, a few months ago, in October, appointed Wonder Woman, this pneumatic-bosomed illusory white female caricature with a wasp’s waist, who wears the American flag as underwear, as the Honorary Goodwill Ambassador for something called the Empowerment of Women and Girls. It was a solemn ceremony. When this happened the world should have realised that, to extend use of one of the most satisfyingly descriptive Anglo-Saxon expression, our world was truly and royally ...buggered.

We are living in the eye of the storm of that popularised curse/blessing wrongly attributed to China: *May you live in interesting times*. The closest Cantonese expression refers to a clown in and of current time. Clowns. Rather apt. Still, the forces of nature, space, time and whatever else seem to have unleashed a whirlwind that is driving the world as flotsam and jetsam. We feel it, we see it, we read the signs, but do not dare construct a lexicon for this, do we? And with all this, here you are, proposing to move boundaries. To what purpose? To where? Why? How? When? What? Admittedly though, evolution and theology suggest adversity is good for the human soul. If that is the case, when whatever *this* is is done with the planet, its survivors shall be supermen and superwomen. In a season of such terrifying flux, borders are a moot point. Frontiers will have to be re-imagined and probably called something else. The human person will also have to reconsider who or what it is. Pope Francis has dared to call this time as that of a piecemeal World War III. We freak out. Yet the possibility that an apocalypse has erupted beneath our living room couches while we keep up with the Kardashians is real.

Boundaries are already in movement; the future is in a state of uncertainty. You have already witnessed (the edited versions) of millions of humans escaping historical homes out of existential distress; they walk deserts, they cross boundaries, crash through frontiers, tear down electric wire fences and sail across wild seas in rubber dinghies seeking safety, hope and a home. The last mobilisation of this kind was in the period of World War II. These humans journey into harbours that are throwing up gates against them. But they keep moving. To what? Where? Transcending boundaries? You have seen the pictures of some of our Africans who have sought to leave for the imagined nirvana of elsewhere now turn the Mediterranean Sea into a cemetery. Meanwhile the African Union, among other African institutions, sustain their impeccable record for profound silences about matters that truly matter to their citizens.

There are other boundary movements that slip off the radar. I am not sure why this is the case considering that these are bigger than any other migration taking place in the world right now. I refer to the massive Chinese influx into Africa—official figures are one million, unofficial figures double that, persons now spread throughout the African.

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Continent. Mandarin is now a factor of African social and linguistic realities. The blend of cultures and the fruits of such union through Sino-African children is more apparent now. I ask you then, is the next African decade a Chinese one? Anyway, if anyone wants to explore African boundaries, look to China. (I am being facetious). Great resource finds on our continent coupled with an awareness of lack in other parts of the world have increased the populations of persons of Caucasian descent, the numbers are always disputed and minimised (the IOM have no figures for current European migration into Africa) because this sort of human movement does not subscribe to a favoured mythology. The figures for these are also in excess of a million, with Angola and Mozambique, in the time of the European economic crisis receiving together over 700,000 young European economic migrants who settled there to start new lives. Refugee crisis anyone?

Back to the context of this season of the world and its wordlessness.

We feel, see, and hide from what we are most uneasy about. We prefer to draw a line across what does not conform to our delusion or brand of the world. We are silent before the unceasing bloodletting. We skip past the news of the slaughters in Uganda, Congo, Central African Republic, Myanmar, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, entire communities living within the Amazon: the water wars in the US, the soul-destruction in detention camps worldwide, including that generated by Australia's own Faustian pact with Nauru, and more significantly the Auschwitz-like American concentration camp in Guantanamo bay, that grotesque giant stain on human conscience that good men and women, including many of us here who proclaim, study and articulate human rights, still ignore.

How is this even possible?

What is the reality of lines drawn out in a world where the best resources available are dedicated to renewing, reinventing and valorising tools of human violence and destruction to which we have acceded power, and now, with reference to drone warfare, handed over a moral impetus to? A boundary-less machine can be directed to choose whether a human being anywhere in the world lives or dies. Is this the pinnacle of civilisation? For a long time, the greatest threat to civilisation was imagined as an invasion from a powerful galactic force, aliens. Yet all this time the alien was us; a strange race that has devolved to both cannibalise and worship itself. The only ones capable of and willing to and particularly invested in destroying the earth in a cataclysm is us.... And we are willing to do so for the most spurious of reasons: to prove the primacy of our pitiful ideologies so that we can be emperors of a swamp. Exceptional? *Ha!*

The world's latest atavistic impulse is one that is imbued by a virulent Islamophobia. It is unbelievable and unconscionable that the same world that not too long ago experienced that an abhorrent depiction and dehumanisation of a peoples could lead to the slaughter of the human soul, the bestial behaviour of human beings and the destruction of the core of human decency can now regurgitate that evil to visit it anew upon others. Friends, if 45% of our African population is linked to Islamic mores, how can even you allow this repugnant paradigm to take root unquestioned by our individual and collective sensibilities? To you, the Africans here, with your endless silences—as still as yoghurt –

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do you even comprehend what this means for your cultures and identities? What happens to being and belonging when by virtue of your facing Mecca in prayer you become defined as a “terrorist-in-waiting” by a culture and paradigm that prefers and perpetuates a most idiotic and ignorant lens to explain away actual human and existential crisis? The primary purpose of which, as you and I well know, is the sustenance of a lucrative war and suffering ecosystem. You and I have experienced the progressive and strategic framing of this horrible lie until it has acquired the semblance of truth—a post-truth that becomes a post-reality reality. And in this matter, not once have I heard an African reframing, an African reactiveness. Not once. Africans, your boundaries of existence are receding and you are blind, deaf, dumb and stupid to it. Your governments have even designated your own soldiers to blow up a portion of your own population, to hold them in suspicion only because 45% of them proclaim “Allahu Akbar”.

The consequences of such extremes of human foolishness manifest in weird new cultural practices: allow me to regale you with the tale of a rather senior World Bank official who last year, arriving in Johannesburg, her first visit to Africa, showed up surrounded by six, giant, heavily armed, helmeted like pumped up black beetles on steroids, security contractors hired to protect her from the violence of her vivid imagination. I would have done anything to enter into her senses as her plane door opened to a view of the African city. She proceeded to painstakingly sustain her delusions even as she trip-tropped, trip-tropped all over Sandton Mall like billy goat gruff, needing to justify the expenses of a psychosis created by a cultural commitment to wallow in profound benightedness. What is the language for these new modes of human strangeness?

This, our amputation from both reality and humanity are the consequences of an investment in an unsustainable idea of the world and its humanity, this gross alienation from what should bond, bind and build. You speak of boundaries and bridges, tell me, what types of structures have you called forth to overcome a refusal to experience even in difference, the humanity of another? What kind of boundaries are you proposing to transcend, the now embedded human fear of other humans? We are pleased to invest in propaganda infrastructure to peddle dis-information. We define phrases like “collateral damage” to sanitise and conceal the reality of millions of wilful, innocent murders and destruction of hospitals and homes for which there are no Nuremberg trials.

Listen, Donald Trump is appointing as Pentagon head, a man, who if the principles of Nuremberg were to be applied, should be hanging at the end of noose, until dead. But he is about to oversee the largest war arsenal in the history of humanity under the leadership of an erratic being. Behold, your world. With this in mind, what does it mean for you and me to be a human being now? Even in front of the awareness of enhanced consciousness of the cosmos and the universe, why are some more still more human than others? Nothing speaks so much of this than the visa application process to which most Africans are subjected. Name of grandmother? Bank account details? Are these people insane?

Even with new revelations shared with us by those seekers, in say, the world of quantum physics or cosmology, why is the prevalent operating mythology still epitomised by the vacuous Kardashians? Why do we prefer that? Even with what we have heard about the awesome wonders of human possibility, why is the inclination that of a willingness to be hypnotised into forgetting reality, to persist in the visiting of such gross wounds on an

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already suffering world today? It is no secret that “human rights” is enforced by one set of people, and directed at select others. Its interpretations vary, of course. It does not stand a chance when confronted by the phrase “extraordinary renditions”. In October, woman-crushing, human beheading, Yemen invading Saudi Arabia was voted into the human rights committee to replace newly designated pariah of the Occident, Russia. All I will say about that is that it is only a matter of time before the collective human soul gets weary of its own hypocrisy and calls a time out. Wither your boundaries now?

To you who live in these extraordinarily conflictual times, what language have you created to match its demands? What does “boundary” actually mean for a time such as this?

Language is a road map and a blue-print, a provider of impetus, a prophetic vessel. Yet we seem to either be too paralysed or far too implicated to try to generate an intimately truthful lexicon that might transfigure this present, or at least allow us all to cross out of our present limits. Without language, how do we intend to enter the depths of our present reality in order to even understand it? The Kardashians are a colourful and hypnotic screen that shield us from reality, no? They are not alone. The latest poster child for our condition is poor Boris Johnson—I hear he went to school and studied – British Foreign Secretary. In October 2016, he declared, ‘that Africa (the country) could do with some British values’, so that the country Africa might join the league of humanity as structured by the vacuum of his imagination. I emphasise this, for in the delusional man’s version of the story of English incursions into other lives and cultures, there are no shadows, no demons, no hollows, no genocides, really no messy bits. His eternal soundtrack is Elgar’s Pomp and Circumstances No 1 in D minor.

He no doubt keeps up with the Kardashians.

Against this backdrop, now let me touch on aspects of my literary life, focusing on the parts that connect with your theme.

I am a citizen of an imagined space called “Kenya”, whose frontiers were created by an English cartographer when Kenya, the colony, was a British project. What changed in 1963, on the day those who became “Kenyans” call Independence Day? I stated in a different forum how my experiences of the nation only assert to me that the infrastructure and edifices of the colonial state established after the genocidal invasion designed in 1884-5 in Berlin (purists get irritated when I persist in referring to this as the first world war), are still intact. The colour of the skins of taskmasters may have changed, but everything else progresses as it has for over a hundred and fifty years. For example, there is no day that trains taking Congo’s mineral resources towards the sea to the waiting ships of many foreign nations, not once even in the throes of serious bloodletting have those trains stopped moving. Remarkable, isn’t it?

The people who receive the money are in former colonial capitals, while we waste time and energy asserting... what? Independence? From what?

I live in an Africa experiencing a second wave invasion in a massive resource grab enabled by our many amoral leaders who are mortgaging bounteous landscapes, and

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signing up to massive unpayable loans with strangers. It is likely that within fifty years the great underclass on the continent will be, again, Africans themselves, newly bankrupted vassals of a new set of foreign overmasters deliberately invited in under our bemused gaze. It is said that history repeats itself especially when lessons first offered remain unacknowledged, unlearned and unresolved. The problem is not with the stranger. It is with us.

Anyway, given these, what moves storytellers of Africa? I don't know about the others, but I shall tell you something of my own compulsion to search dim lit places of the world and my continent; to live and then walk through the valleys of peoples' shadows in order to try to make sense of the time in which I find myself; our framing, our place, our future in the face of so much. I love the gift of being human and sharing life. I love humanity. I love ideas that challenge, invite, inspire and grow life. I also wonder about, worry and want to fix life's fragile and broken places, because something of this time inhabits me and sheds pieces of its ghosts upon my own story. I have a very Catholic urge to name demons, and stare at faces of the enemies without and within before seeking, as part of a collective, to exorcise these. I love the earth. It is a privilege to live here. I love the continent of my heritage. I love my country. The bigger arc of my literary life is a love story that craves a "happily ever after". So I roam the disciplines, a bit like a pickpocket. I eavesdrop into the thinking from everywhere; silos bore me. I work with words as a mechanic tinkering with leaky places in a marvellous machine. I am a bit of a pathologist, diagnosing a corpse for its cause of death imagining I might prevent a similar fate for myself and what I love. I have wondered why post-colonial Africa became stunned and inarticulate about its world and stopped writing itself into the world with pens of fire. I try to witness to those silences—a place filler—I want the silences to give up ghosts and names so that I can write them as stories and offer them to light, and then with them, find the treasure of peace. My works also interrogate the notion of the nation. I do not believe it exists. In this post-truth world does that even matter, given the reality of the march of super companies and the fetishisation of money? More seriously, I often also wonder if a nation like Kenya and its people suffer a grievous moral injury in their core and memory. Do societies experience collective post-traumatic stress that is not yet framed in a socio-political lexicon? In some of the frameworks of holocaust studies, I have found profound resonance to much of Africa's secret angst, all the things of shame, guilt and grief that remain unspoken.

The book '*Dust*' set me on that path when after Kenya's descent into hell in 2007-8, I needed to kick open painted over tombs where we had nurtured our demons. It led me to wonder if ancestral trauma caused by a violence inflicted on the humanity of another live out its irresolution by haunting succeeding generations? For most African nations, a horrible war was consolidated in 1885 in Berlin, and imposed itself upon them. It has never really stopped, despite the theatre of changing flags. How do you move when all your energies are expended in circling, hiding and avoiding a grievous and existence-questioning wound? Do we imagine that the resonance of horror embedded in memory simply fades away? What do you imagine was and is the state of the soul of a man of old Africa experiencing the crushing deceptions, the betrayal of his hospitality by strangers? Who watches his known world disappear and experiences the total powerlessness and betrayal-by-silence of once favoured deities. I see no archiving on the parts of our people about this. This absence, I imagine, damages all parties. We have held no memorials for the destroyed. We use our boundaries to shield us from the past and its

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unrequited ghosts. People who are our brothers, mothers, fathers, ancestors, accusers. There is no “long ago” to the consequences of human deeds.

As a world and continent we have never grieved our excesses, our losses of self, families, community, worldview, gods, goods, stories, time, spaces, lands, archetypes and imagination in word, deed and thought. I posit that these live out their lack of resolution to the present. Is it from these too that we seek to escape through our boundaries? What does the now mean to a continent that was massively defeated in an undeclared brutal and genocidal war; a place where defeated men and women could do nothing when their wives, husbands, parents, lovers, sons, and daughters were seized, raped, sodomised, brutalised, mutilated, and hunted in their presence?

Linked to this, there was a way of economics woven in intricate trade networks that the Post-Berlin conference war had been hijacked and taken over. Global monsoon networks reached into the continent’s own heart before reaching into China and Azerbaijan where an Africa diaspora has long existed; the trans Saharan trade, the southern circuit that moved gold, ivory, gemstones into the coast. The space that is Africa is largely made up of a people and culture in and of movement as a path to wealth, adventure, humanity and encounter. What is the impact and implications of the such losses of economic wherewithal that offered so many African cultures an access to the world on their terms? These were violently taken over way by assorted European trading companies that are the parents of the conglomerates we are familiar with today, who own, manage, control the resources from a continent that does keep the world afloat. We do not talk often about this—or if the conversations occur I have not been a party to them. The responsibility for this lack of questioning rests squarely at our assorted African doors.

I wonder why in most cases, after fifty years of supposed independence it is easier and cheaper for me travel to Paris and live there for two months than it is for me to travel to Ouagadougou from Nairobi. Why? We are a people who seem to have not only lost agency over their resources, but also lost the endless scope of their actual and imagined existence in the basic of ways: to give you an example, most Africans today have no idea that coffee was never about Starbucks or Colombia; that coffee culture, its identification, use, consumption as beverage, medicine and ritual substance is originally, intrinsically and creatively African. Again, when I define the African milieu as encompassing all our seas, and discuss African maritime imaginaries, many gawk at me as if I am speaking to them in hieroglyphics.

What bothers me the most as an artist is our wilful African unknowing, wilful constraints – boundaries – to imagining, thinking, hearing and seeing. Are we then to move from ignorance to ignorance, a floating people disconnected from our own humus and unable to speak of it, not only to the world, but more painfully, to ourselves? A people whose story is limited, constrained framed and only retold by others, a story so small that ours becomes an existential battle of making our lives miniscule enough to enter into the categories created in order to not again, suffer a brutal fate worse than death? Hovering above our psychic heads is the real fear of a return to the diabolic violence that can be unleashed at the whims of one culture that for the most part—apart from the Germans, has declined to examine its conscience and review its consciousness of life and humanity in the face of its impulse to atrocities and the denial of these. I do worry about a post-

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independence Africa that lost its voice so that it is inarticulate before the realities of a Libya, Somalia, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Russia, Colombia or Ukraine, Brexit or Trump. Yet only bystanders, and victims of fate have nothing to say about their destiny. Only the long dead have a right to such silence. How do we proceed to traverse into the present and future through the unknown territories of our being where there are neither bridge builders nor bridges?

There is a phrase we popularised in Kenya during election 2013: *“Accept and Move On.”* Moving on. It was assumed that the diabolic violence of the PEV could be commanded into silence. But the violence and its ghosts keep interfering with our present, feeding from it; we have known no psychological peace. We are caught in a death-roll of a putrefying form of corruption, we are consuming ourselves, and subject to a disgusting inner corrosion coming from such refusals to give name to our horrors. You who speak of movement and boundaries, do you ever imagine that one of the keys to the future is buried in our many darknesses that require courage and humility to excavate in order to extract roots embedded in the past? Given that movement points to two directions, do we dare step into deep truth telling in order to repopulate the present with what will set the future free? Your theme is a pertinent one in that it invites a fresh calling into being of paradigms for a continent and world in urgent need of life-giving ideas about itself.

Now, for a more optimistic note to conclude this reflection:

The African continent plays host to the youngest of the world’s populations. Youth bulge, or demographic dividend it is called. These lot look at the world with other eyes. They host each other in their rooms. They travel fearlessly. They set up online literary platforms like Jalada.com—look it up – that think beyond no boundaries and have, for example, translated a story by Ngugi wa Thiongo into over a hundred languages, including Urdu. They code. They regenerate vocabularies. They milk sacred cows. They live, for the most part, an expansive imagination that has no lexicon attached to it yet. Secondly, the influx of new souls and cultures into a continent that thrives on variety is also a great portent in more ways than it is challenging. Unlike the popularised consensus, not necessarily articulated by Africans themselves, I can also read the influx of the Chinese people into Africa through hopeful lenses. Cultural renewal through exchange of people has always been a force of transformation in the world. These combined forces, the youth, the migrants present an atypical movement impetus on the continent that perhaps, promises a transformative idea of place that just may be able to bear the weight of this agitated world and guide it, maybe, into a more wholesome future.

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