

A “Faint and Elusive Insinuation of Promise”: An Examination of Race Relations in John Okada’s *No-No Boy*

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Abstract

One of the greatest injustices of the 20th century was the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. Although the U.S. was also at war with Germany and Italy, people of German and Italian descent were not interned on the same mass scale as the Japanese Americans. Race played a definite role in the different treatment of foreign immigrants and their American-born children. Through an examination of John Okada’s pioneering novel about the Japanese American wartime experience, *No-No Boy*, we can observe the state of race relations in the U.S. after the war. Okada gives both hopeful and despairing points of view through his draft resister protagonist, Ichiro, and Ichiro’s war veteran friend, Kenji, and offers possible ways of resolving the divisions among racial minorities and in the Japanese American community itself.

Key words: John Okada, Japanese American, identity, minority, race relations

Introduction

John Okada’s *No-No Boy*,¹ published in 1957, tells the story of Ichiro Yamada, a young Nisei² man who has just returned to his hometown of Seattle after World War II has ended. He has spent 2 years in concentration camp and 2 years in prison. His “crimes” are but two: 1) he is of Japanese ancestry, and 2) he refused to be drafted into the U.S. Army. The phrase “no-no boy” refers to those Japanese Americans who refused to answer two questions in the affirmative in a loyalty questionnaire. These questions cast doubt on their loyalty to the U.S., almost implying that their allegiance had been to the Japanese Emperor, and also compelled them to declare a willingness to die for the very country that distrusted and imprisoned them.³ Thinking that this was an opportunity to prove they were “true” Americans despite their belonging to the enemy race, most Nisei men answered “yes” to both questions and left camp to fight in the war. Many of them died or were injured but those who survived were honored by the President, celebrated by the Japanese American community, and held up as an example of “real” Americans. However, despite this early acclaim, they, too, had to pick up the pieces of their lives destroyed by the forced incarceration. Segregated in the camps and in the army as well, Japanese Americans had to try, once again, to integrate themselves into mainstream American society. Okada gives a raw and unapologetic view of the complexities of race relations after the war. In this paper, I will examine how Okada portrays the problematic relations between Japanese Americans and with other minority groups, focusing on the contrasting attitudes of the draft resister protagonist, Ichiro and his war veteran friend, Kenji.

I. Conflicts Within the Japanese American Community

Okada begins the novel by showing the rift in the Japanese American community itself, caused by the Japanese Americans’ two widely divergent responses to mistreatment by the U.S. government. Resisters like Ichiro were ostracized by many Nisei and especially by those who chose to prove their loyalty by joining up.⁴ They considered “no-no boys” troublemakers who frustrated their hopes to assimilate and forget the hardships they had suffered during the war.

In the very first chapter, Ichiro bumps into a war veteran acquaintance named Eto Minato. Still wearing fatigues, Eto is at first unaware that Ichiro is a “no-no boy” and comments on the return of Japanese Americans to Seattle:

Lotsa Japs in Seattle. You'll see 'em around. Japs are funny that way. Gotta have their rice and sake and other Japs. Stupid, I say. The smart ones went to Chicago and New York and lotsa places back east, but there's still plenty coming back out this way. (2)

Eto seems to assume that Ichiro agrees with him and speaks as if the two of them are not Japanese. Use of the derogatory “Jap” shows self-loathing and serves as a way of distancing himself from them. Even though he has proven his loyalty to the U.S. through military service, he still has the need to disparage his own kind and emphasize that he is different. In addition, there is some irony in these comments, considering that Eto himself has returned to Seattle. When Eto realizes that Ichiro has not been discharged from the army and is actually a “no-no boy,” he spits on him. However, Ichiro suffers from a similar self-hatred about being Japanese, and, instead of getting angry, feels relieved for being recognized for what he is. He considers such treatment from Nisei war veterans as natural and regards such condemnation as the cross he must bear for refusing the chance to prove himself a loyal American and for heeding the advice of his Issei mother. He refers to the shock he suffers from his war experiences as a sudden discovery that “being American is a terribly incomplete thing if one's face is not white and one's parents are Japanese of the country Japan which attacked America” (54). Okada portrays him as both a victim of circumstances and of his own choices, a young man tortured with doubt and unable to come to terms with the Japanese and American sides to his character. Feeling dead in spirit, Ichiro represents the severe psychological pain and the identity crisis of both the resisters and of Japanese Americans in general.

Eto, a mere acquaintance, however, is not the only member of the Japanese American community who feels contempt for people like Ichiro. Ichiro's younger brother, Taro, also despises him and treats him like a stranger. Ichiro had taken the advice of his uncompromising mother, a woman who insisted on loyalty to Japan and dreamed of her family's eventual return to the motherland. By refusing the draft and going to prison, he sealed their fate as outcasts in the Japanese American community. When Ichiro advises him to pursue an education in order to improve his chances in life, Taro instead insists on joining the army, saying, “I want *in*” (18, my italics). When he turns 18, he hurries to enlist as a way of compensating for what he sees as his brother's sin and a way to show that he is different. When Taro expresses this desire to be “in,” he not only means in the army but in as a part of mainstream American society and a respected member of the Japanese American community. He chooses to distance himself from his brother and his Japanese parents. When Ichiro asks him about school, Taro tells him, “Keep *out* of it” (65, my italics). Feeling no connection with his family, he wants them out of his life, for they are outsiders. His Issei parents are not only ineligible for citizenship but also do not commit to making a life in the U.S. Because their mother refuses to take part in American society and discourages her sons from doing so as well, Ichiro also feels like an outsider looking in on a world he can never join. The Yamada home represents the bitter discord in the Japanese American community, where the Japanese and American sides cannot be reconciled, and the desperate struggle to find unity within one's group.

Kenji Kanno, like Eto Minato, is a young Nisei who willingly chose to join the military in order to prove his loyalty as an American. Kenji decides to fight for the U.S., the only country he has ever known and he returns home with a wounded leg. He tells Ichiro about what he has received from the U.S. government: “a medal, car, a pension” but admits simply, “It wasn't worth it” (60). This attempt at compensation for the psychological and physical pain that the Nisei veterans have suffered during the war is of small consolation. Because of his war service, Kenji is an insider, a person respected in the Japanese American community and accepted as a real American. However, unlike veterans like Eto Minato, he feels no superiority or hostility toward the resisters for choosing a different path than himself. Instead, Kenji understands that, as Japanese Americans, they share the same challenges, and, for this reason, he can befriend Ichiro. His is one of the voices of conciliation that calls for finding a way to heal the wounds of the past and bring about harmony within the community and within the country.

Unlike Ichiro and his dysfunctional family, Kenji belongs to a warm-hearted family that epitomizes the ideal American family. His Issei father, having given up the sojourner way of life in favor of embracing the country in which his children were born, happily partakes of the American way of life.⁵ He understands and respects Kenji's decision to volunteer for the army. He has a close and loving relationship with all of his children and they get together at the

family home to share dinner. They gather around the table, enjoying each other's company and an American-style feast of roast chicken and lemon meringue pie. Kenji's father takes pleasure in the society of his children and grandchildren as they watch a baseball game on TV. Okada gives an idyllic view of a Japanese American family, fully immersed in American culture and in direct opposition to the tense atmosphere of the Yamada family where the mother destroys her son's favorite jazz records and fanatically insists on obedience and loyalty to Japan. The emotional stability of Kenji's family and their full acceptance of themselves as Americans shows a happy state of affairs that is only marred by Kenji's physical degeneration. His wounded leg, amputated to the knee, requires one operation after another; these operations fail to relieve his pain and only shorten both his leg and his life. The character of Kenji thus represents the physical toll, the tangible losses, and the sacrifice of life that the Japanese Americans willingly made in order to gain acceptance into American society.

II. Relations between Japanese Americans and Other Minorities

In addition to the inner struggles within the Japanese American community, Okada also introduces from the very beginning racial discrimination between minority groups. After Ichiro's encounter with Eto Minato, he passes a group of blacks who greet him with "Go back to Tokyo, boy" and "Jap-boy, Jap boy" (5). Due to the accepted wartime discrimination toward Japanese Americans, the African Americans are relieved of some of the racism usually directed towards them. This allows them free reign to discriminate against Japanese Americans and to treat them like outsiders. Ichiro does not react openly to their insults and hurries away from them. However, his real feelings are the following:

Friggin' niggers, he uttered savagely to himself and from the same place deep down inside where tolerance for the Negroes and the Jews and the Mexicans and the Chinese and the too short and too fat and too ugly abided because he was Japanese and knew what it was like better than did those who were white and average and middle class and good Democrats or liberal Republicans, the hate which was unrelenting and terrifying seethed up. (6)

Here, Okada introduces different types of discrimination, not only based on race but also religion, political affiliation, class, and appearance. Because Ichiro himself is not white, average, or middle class, he can understand the powerful feeling of hatred that other minorities feel because he is a victim of such discrimination himself. Yet, he still finds it difficult to control his own feelings of anger toward minorities that discriminate against him, and he, in turn, lashes out against them with racist epithets. Ichiro realizes that blacks, Japanese Americans and other minorities are all outsiders looking in because, try as they might, there is nothing that can make them "look like Americans" (160).⁶ In addition, since he is an outcast among his own people, he expects to be treated poorly by whites as well. His rather servile behavior with a prospective employer, Mr. Carrick and his former teacher, Professor Brown, two white men who treat him with consideration, shows that he suffers from an inferiority complex, most likely exacerbated by his wartime imprisonment. However, he bristles at racist comments from other minorities whom he perceives as unequal to himself. The racial minorities feel inferior to the whites yet, ironically, feel superior to other minorities. It is this state of affairs that makes the dying Kenji cry out, " (D)on't let there be any Japs or Chinks or Jews or Poles or Niggers or Frenchies, but only people... I think about that most of all" (165).

Despite the existence of racism between minorities, Okada shows some places where different races can socialize. The seedier part of town which Okada describes as "a part of America and, at the same time, would never be wholly America" (71) has places where the races mingle. In Chinatown, people of different races gamble in back rooms of dry cleaning shops like "Wing's Hand Laundry" and export companies like "Trans-Asia Exporting, Inc." Kenji and Ichiro gamble with Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, and "a few stray whites." Race does not matter for each person has a "stout heart and hunger for the impossible" (69) ; they are desperate people in desperate circumstances who are not achieving the American dream of financial success and material wealth exemplified by the white collar, middle class, "average" American. In this sense, these outsiders are equal and potentially on the brink of ruin. The dealer, addicted to gambling himself, represents the depths to which they may fall. In addition, Asians and whites frequent a bar near the gambling dens called Club Oriental run by the Chinese proprietor, Jim Eng. It provides a place of escape for its

customers for they all have a "thirst for the drinks which would give them the relaxation and peace they sought" (73). However, during Ichiro and Kenji's first visit together, they meet up with Bull, another war veteran who hates "no-no boys." He comes into the bar with a white woman and shows her off to Kenji. When he sees Ichiro, he, along with Taro and other Japanese Americans, picks a fight with Ichiro but Kenji intervenes. Ichiro finds that he cannot get away from the insults of Japanese American war veterans there any more than he can get away from the racism of other minorities in the street. This scene is also significant in that it shows a Japanese American man using a white woman as a status symbol.

For Kenji, however, the Club Oriental feels as comfortable as home because it is a place where he "can sit all night and be among friends" (132). It is for him the only place besides his home where he can feel at ease despite being Japanese. While at the bar, Kenji thinks longingly that "it must be nice to be white and American and to be able to feel like this no matter where one goes to, but I won't cry about that. There's been a war and, suddenly, things are better for the Japs and the Chinks" (133). Kenji sums up succinctly the envy minorities feel toward whites because they can feel "at home" wherever they go in the U.S. but he also tries to convince himself that things are better for Asians now. But in the midst of these thoughts, a fight breaks out when a Japanese man tries to bring in two black men. Other Asian customers become angry and offended. Jim Eng calls the troublemakers "niggers" and "Jap boy" while another person calls the black men "ignorant cotton pickers" and worries that the bar will be overrun with blacks (133-134). Meanwhile, a drunken white woman from a burlesque house enters the bar with a Japanese man. Even though the white woman shouts out "Oh you Chinks and Japs! I love you all!" no one makes any objections to such insults and they just laugh when the man tells her to shut up. Asians are welcome to come in with whites and the racism of whites is quietly tolerated. In addition, while Jim and Kenji, a Chinese American and a Japanese American, seem to get along, they still end up using derogatory terms about each other's race. Even in this place of racial diversity, there is blatant racism and the unsaid implication that to be really American, one needs to be white. Discrimination that minorities exhibit toward other minorities is linked to the inferiority complex toward whites and an unconscious competition between minorities to be on the same level as whites.

Kenji dreams of an America where "democracy is a democracy in fact for all of them" but he also understands the reality of race relations. Okada gives several examples within Kenji's reverie about the different races discriminating against the other. Kenji has observed many cases that demonstrate the racial divide. He remembers the white immigrant woman who can barely speak English getting out of her bus seat when a black person sits on the other half and how blacks try to hide their anger in such situations. He also recalls the Chinese girl who shows off her white date at the prom because she believes that she has risen in the world. He thinks about the Japanese man who thinks he is better than the Chinese who goes to an Italian restaurant with a Jewish companion and then is refused service by the Italian Americans because he is Japanese. Minorities share this self-hatred and inferiority complex that makes them want to move away from their own kind in order to be with white people so they can "rise" in the world. Kenji notices this tendency in others but does not exhibit such behavior himself.

Ichiro, at one point, in search of acceptance by whites, hears about a church that his friend, Tommy, says is "glad to have us." Ichiro accompanies Tommy and find the congregation friendly and welcoming. However, after several weeks, he notices an old black man standing in the back and wonders why ushers offer other members of the congregation folding chairs but not the black man. At the end of the service, the members of the congregation wait until the black man leaves before they get up and start chatting. Ichiro expresses outrage about this behavior to his friend who responds, "They treated us fine! We're in no position to stick out our necks when we've got enough troubles of our own!" (230-231). Tommy feels relief that he is no longer the target of discrimination and does not feel bothered about it being directed toward others. Ichiro, however, finds this complacency offensive. The fact that Ichiro is disturbed by this passive participation in discrimination shows a growth of character since he is no longer just preoccupied with his own "miserable little life" and he hopes that there will be "room for all kinds of people" including outsiders. Throughout the novel, Kenji, as well, agonizes about bigotry and the ugliness of people, noticing among all people the "common struggle for recognition as a complete human being" and longs for "a sense of unity and purpose which inspires one to hope and optimism" (134). Both Ichiro and Kenji dream of an America in which all human beings are treated equally and fairly for this is surely one of the lessons that must have been learned from the internment.

III. The Future of Race Relations in the U.S.

Kenji believes that an end to the divisions in the Japanese American community and racial discrimination will come about as a result of perseverance and sacrifice. While Ichiro despairs of ever fitting into the Japanese American community and longs to run away and somehow make a new start elsewhere, Kenji advises him to stay in the community:

"The kind of trouble you've got, you can't run from it. Stick it through. Let them call you names. They don't mean it. What I mean is, they don't know what they are doing. The way I see it, they pick on you because they're vulnerable. They think just because they went and packed a rifle they're different but they aren't and they know it. They're still Japs.... The guys who make it tough on you probably do so out of a misbegotten idea that maybe you're to blame because the good that they thought there were doing by getting killed and shot up doesn't amount to a pot of beans. They just need a little time to get cut down to their own size. Then they'll be the same as you, a bunch of Japs." (163)

He believes that the Japanese Americans who despise the resisters will eventually realize that the sacrifices made by the veterans to prove their loyalty were in vain, and, that to white America, they are and will always be "Japs." As they discover that the racial divide between Japanese Americans and the whites has not been overcome, the resisters will, in time, eventually be accepted into the community. In this way, Kenji counsels the familiar Japanese American philosophy of "gaman" to encourage Ichiro to stay until he is accepted.

In regard to the future of Japanese Americans in general, Kenji holds the same view earlier expressed by Eto Minato. He thought that after being released from the camps, Japanese Americans would avoid living in big groups as this was one of the reasons they were considered incapable of assimilation and therefore not bona fide citizens. He sees the return of the Japanese Americans to their previous communities on the west coast as a mistake even though his own father had chosen to do the same thing:

It's a shame, a dirty rotten shame. Pretty soon it'll be just like it was before the war. A bunch of Japs with a fence around them, not the kind you can see, but it'll hurt them just as much. They bitched and hollered when the government put them in camps and put real fences around them, but now they're doing the same damn thing to themselves. They screamed because the government said they were Japs and, when they finally got out, they couldn't wait to rush together and prove that they were. (164)

Kenji blames the Japanese Americans for limiting their own opportunities. He sees it as ironic that many Japanese Americans choose to return to their former enclaves instead of taking the advice of the government to move freely to the Midwest or other areas with a smaller population of Japanese Americans.⁷ Ichiro counters that the Japanese are not the only ones to behave in such a way, citing that other groups like the Jews, Poles, and Armenians also have a tendency to stick together. Ichiro's experience with a young Nisei waiter in Portland who tries to befriend him with "Are you Japanese?" causes Ichiro to think about the Chinese and other minorities who support each other:

The Chinese were like that too, only more so. He had heard how a Chinese from China by the name of Eng could go to Jacksonville, Florida, or any other place, and look up another Chinese family by the name of Eng and be taken in like one of the family with no questions asked. There was nothing wrong with it. On the contrary, it was fine thing in some ways. Still how much finer it would be if Smith would do the same for Eng and Sato would do the same for Wotynski and Laverghetti would do likewise for whoever happened by. Eng for Eng, Jap for Jap, Pole for Pole, and like for like meant classes and distinctions and hatred and prejudice and wars and misery.... (157)

This desire for unity within a racial group seems to work against unity of all Americans regardless of national origin. Ichiro feels that this bias in favor of one's own people over others will ensure that there will never be one American people, that the prejudice that gives birth to racial discrimination will always exist.

Like Ichiro, Kenji also thinks that this kind of behavior is wrong and that Japanese Americans, particularly after what has happened to them, should not stay together in groups. Such behavior would be voluntarily segregating themselves and would indicate an unwillingness to assimilate. He encourages Ichiro to move East and to marry a different race for he sees intermarriage as a means of beating racism. This of course implies that their only way to get

rid of racism is to get rid of the different races. In essence, he is calling for a kind of cultural suicide, what Frank Chin calls to be "racially absorbed and assimilated out of existence" (61). Sacrificing one's cultural heritage in favor of the "majority" white culture seems to certainly be a method of eradicating discrimination based on race and a way to avoid exclusion. But the implications of such a method in order to be accepted, to be "in" as Taro sees it, requires people to turn their backs on their families, histories, and traditions.

Ichiro ponders the problem in another way:

Maybe the answer is that there is no in. Maybe the whole damned country is pushing and shoving and screaming to get into someplace that doesn't exist, because they don't know that the outside could be the inside if only they would stop all this pushing and shoving and screaming, and they haven't got enough sense to realize that. That makes sense. I've got the answer all figured out, simple and neat and sensible. (159-160)

Ichiro's take of the situation does not require the conscious effort to give up one's culture in order to get acceptance; rather, he considers that a change of attitude may be the key, but this solution, however, is far from "simple." By this speech, Ichiro shows that he has more faith in human beings' ability to reason and recognize that everyone is an outsider. This harks back to the origins of the U.S. as a haven where outcasts could live together. Okada ends the novel at the point where Ichiro realizes that that to be Japanese American is not to be either Japanese or American and this acceptance of himself enables him to accept other outsiders as well.

Conclusion

At the beginning of *No-No Boy* when Ichiro and Kenji first get re-acquainted after the war, they want to change places with each other. Ichiro, who feels hopeless and mentally dead, longs to be the war hero with a wound as proof of his loyalty to his country. On the other hand, Kenji looks at Ichiro with envy because his body is still whole and he has his life ahead of him. However, both come to accept their individual fates and recognize the validity of the different choices they made when faced with unconscionable circumstances. Likewise, they see the divisions within their community caused by the veterans ostracizing the resisters as Japanese Americans try to integrate themselves into American society again. They face discrimination as do other racial minorities. Ichiro and Kenji observe racist behavior and are sometimes guilty of it themselves. While both dream of a better world where everyone is treated equally and with respect, their ideas toward making this dream come true are quite different in part due to their dissimilar family relationships.

Kenji belongs to a family that has committed itself to the American way of life and has disassociated itself from Japan. His father and his siblings both love him and are proud of him and his military service although they worry about his war wound. Ichiro, on the other hand, belongs to a family where his mother's fanatical patriotism for Japan forced him to make a decision that is the source of his mental agony. His brother hates him for being a "no-no boy" which has brought shame to him. It is not surprising, then, that Kenji and Ichiro do not agree about how to bring about harmony in the Japanese community nor about how to overcome discrimination between the races. Kenji believes that, given time, the Japanese Americans who reject the resisters will eventually forgive them and accept them into the community, so there is no need for the resisters to leave. However, he also thinks that as long as races do not insist on existing in their separate cultural enclaves and eliminate racial and cultural differences through intermarriage, discrimination will someday disappear. Ichiro, on the other hand, does not have foresee such a rosy future and though hoping for reconciliation in the Japanese American community and peaceful co-existence between the races, sees a country that will always be divided along racial and cultural lines. He also questions the necessity for people of racial minorities to discard a part of themselves to be "American." Although Okada attempts to end the book on a positive note with Ichiro chasing a "faint and elusive insinuation of a promise" (251), one representative of that promise, Kenji, is dead. The promise of an America in which the different races can exist together harmoniously is one that Okada describes through both Kenji and Ichiro as some kind of dream. With the death of one of the most optimistic proponents of that dream, Okada in *No-No Boy* appears to assert that such a hope remains "faint and elusive" and makes clear that there are no easy solutions.

Notes

- 1 John Okada, *No-No Boy*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1976. Subsequent references to this edition will be made throughout the text.
- 2 "Nisei" is the term for the 2nd generation, American-born children of Japanese immigrants ("Issei"). At the time of the internment, most of the Issei were in their fifties or sixties while the average age of the Nisei was 18 years old.
- 3 Not much attention has been paid to those brave Japanese American men who stood up to the government and fought for their civil rights as American citizens; their story was one that Eric L. Muller called of "untold patriotism." The Fair Play Committee was a resistance group of Nisei at the concentration camp in Heart Mountain, Wyoming, who were loyal to the U.S. and willing to serve in the military once their civil rights were restored. 63 men refused the draft and were sent to federal penitentiaries while 7 of the leaders were accused of conspiracy to counsel draft evasion. John Okada's friend, Jim Akutsu, was one of the draft resisters and he was the model for Ichiro in *No-No Boy*.
- 4 Such ostracism was encouraged and condoned by the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). They had attacked the integrity of the resisters throughout the war and, even in its aftermath, continued to blacklist them. This conservative organization, originally established to advance the economic interests and social status of Japanese Americans, "emphasized American loyalty rather than ethnicity" (Takahashi 35) and its actions tended to support an agenda of white supremacy. Instead of fighting for the civil rights of Japanese Americans, the JACL pandered to the American government's racist policies and went on witch hunts for "disloyal" Japanese Americans. None were ever found. Due to the vindictive tactics of the JACL, many resisters were alienated from the Japanese American community. It took 57 years for the JACL to make a formal apology to the brave men who stood up for their rights as Americans.
- 5 Many Issei came as sojourners ("dekasegi") who fully intended to return to Japan after making their fortunes. In most cases, they decided to settle down in the U.S. because of their American-born children. Among the Issei characters in the novel, Mrs. Yamada was the most insistent about being loyal to Japan and not fighting against one's own people.
- 6 There was a famous case in which a Japanese American tried to "look" American. Unlike most Japanese Americans, Fred Korematsu refused to report to camp. Instead he had plastic surgery to alter his eyes in an attempt to escape detection as a Japanese American. However, when waiting for his girlfriend at a street corner, he was identified as Japanese and arrested. Korematsu chose to challenge the constitutionality of the internment but the Supreme Court sided with the government, arguing that the incarceration was due to military necessity and had nothing to do with racism. In 1983, historian Peter Irons discovered documents that proved that the Japanese Americans were not a military threat to the U.S. As a result, Korematsu's conviction was finally overturned.
- 7 When the War Relocation Authority was in the process of releasing Japanese Americans from the camps, they tried to encourage them to move away from the west coast where most Japanese had established communities. Many young Nisei did venture out to such places as Chicago, Denver, and New York where anti-Japanese feeling was less virulent. They were accepted because the white Americans realized that the Nisei were "hardworking, culturally conservative people with essentially middle-class aspirations." Roger Daniels points out that the fact that Japanese Americans were not African Americans also was just as important due to the prejudice of most white Chicagoans (*Prisoners* 82).

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