

Introduction

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This special issue on *Perpetrators in Comics* departs from the conviction that comics are able to address complex questions around perpetration and complicity, and that they utilize a range of noteworthy strategies in dealing with perpetrator figures and the problem of their representation.¹ There is a growing corpus of comics that deal with genocide and mass violence and many of these works include increasingly nuanced and complex depictions of the figure of the perpetrator. For instance, the eponymous protagonist in Jean-Philippe Stassen's graphic novel *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* (2006, originally published in French in 2000) is a Hutu boy who, under duress, commits atrocities against his loved ones during the Rwandan genocide. In colourful panels, Stassen interweaves the past and the present to slowly unfold Deogratias's traumatic story, using the visual metaphor of the dog to bring forward issues around guilt, responsibility, and perpetrator trauma. Comics journalist Joe Sacco explores the events of the Bosnian War through detailed black-and-white drawings in *Safe Area Goražde* (2000). Throughout the work, Sacco juxtaposes stereotypical portrayals of Serbian perpetrators as one-dimensionally evil and sadistic with panels and storylines that focus on broken bonds and friendships and, therefore, offer a more complex view on perpetration and complicity. Eric Heuvel's *The Search* (2009, originally published in Dutch as *De Zoektocht* in 2007), an educational graphic novel about World War II and the Holocaust which was made in cooperation with the Anne Frank House, poignantly includes panels that show different perpetrator positions and explores a variety of reasons for participation in genocide. It features representations that range from higher-order architects of the genocide to soldiers of the Einsatzgruppen, to the men shoveling

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- 1 Throughout this special issue, contributors – including myself – will use a variety of terms when referring to the corpus: comics, comic books, graphic novels, graphic narratives, and graphic memoirs. These terms all point to works that are recognized as being part of the medium of comics because they use the combination of words and images to present a narrative and often, though not always, include medium-specific features like panels, text balloons, and gutters to combine these words and the images on the page.

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coal on the train that deports Jews to Westerbork. Reinhard Kleist's *The Boxer* (2014, originally published in German as *Der Boxer* in 2011) challenges comfortable notions of right and wrong through its morally complex survivor character and presents a nuanced view of the main perpetrator figure, who is characterized as an opportunist rather than an evil sadist.² Finally, Tian Veasna's *Year of the Rabbit* (2020, originally published in French as *L'Année du Lièvre* in 2011), which details the story of Veasna's own family—Veasna was born three days after the Khmer Rouge took power—as they struggle to live through the horrors of the Cambodian genocide. Veasna's work shows the unraveling of societal and family bonds, as the regime fosters suspicion and snitching, and destroys identities through its re-education camps. Comics thus constitute an important site of cultural representation of mass violence and its difficult legacy and they participate in the broader turn in culture, one we have observed in literature and fiction, towards critically exploring the figure of the perpetrator and addressing questions of guilt, complicity, and implication.³ The contributions to this issue further study the representation of perpetration in comics across multiple geographical contexts and cover a range of historical and contemporary topics, including the legacy of American slavery, Serbian nationalist terrorism, the (effects of the) colonial violence against the Dene community in Canada, and various aspects of perpetration in relation to World War II and the Holocaust.

Although comics artists increasingly turn to more nuanced and complex depictions of perpetrators of mass violence in their works, comics scholarship has, until recently, shown limited interest in these depictions. The majority of comics that deal with mass violence tend to focus on World War II and the Holocaust, which means that the Nazi perpetrator is, potentially, a key figure when referencing depictions of perpetration. However, in comics scholarship, Nazi perpetrator figures have not received much in-depth critical consideration. Many studies focus exclusively on the representation of the victim and the ways in which comics are capable of engaging with the personal and collective traumas of the Holocaust. In some instances, brief observations on the depiction of Nazi perpetrators are placed within

2 See Laurike in 't Veld, 'Nuancing Gestures: Perpetrators and Victims in Reinhard Kleist's *The Boxer*', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 3.1 (2019), 69–94.

3 See, e.g., Joanne Pettitt, *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives: Encountering the Nazi Beast* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Erin McGlothlin, *The Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction and Nonfiction* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021).

a larger framework and discussion of the medium of comics—or of specific titles— and their status as historical narratives, trauma narratives, or (auto)biographical works.⁴

This absence of an in-depth engagement with Nazi perpetrator figures is especially surprising when considering comics in which the perpetrator is clearly a principal character. For instance, the early post-war short Holocaust comic *Master Race* (1955) written by Al Feldstein and drawn by Bernard Krigstein, which centrally features a character who is revealed to be a Nazi perpetrator, is often discussed for its innovative graphic storytelling rather than its inclusion of a perpetrator character.⁵ In the same vein, the large body of scholarship on Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986 & 1991) generally does not move beyond a short consideration of the implications of drawing the Nazi perpetrator as an animal figure.⁶ In *Maus*, Art Spiegelman shows his father's experiences during the Holocaust and famously draws the various ethnic groups as different animals: the Jews are depicted as mice, the Nazi/German characters as cats, the Poles are drawn as pigs, and the Americans appear as dogs. In the case of scholarship that addresses Spiegelman's Nazi/cat metaphor, this lack of in-depth engagement could also be motivated by the fact that 'Germans tend to remain the categorical perpetrators, and the cats undergo little modulation either graphically or conceptually'.⁷ Throughout *Maus*, the Nazi cats largely remain anonymous, one-dimensional, and menacing figures that are presented as uniformly evil. However, there is a similar dearth of critical and comprehensive engagement with the depiction of complicity and bystandership of the Polish/pig characters. This is surprising because in contrast to the Nazi cat figures, Spiegelman offers much more graphic and conceptual

4 See, e.g., Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989); Markus Streb, 'Early Representations of Concentration Camps in Golden Age Comic Books: Graphic Narratives, American Society, and the Holocaust', *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art*, 3.1 (2016), 28-63; Victoria Aarons, *Holocaust Graphic Narratives: Generation, Trauma, and Memory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

5 John Benson, David Kasakove and Art Spiegelman, 'An Examination of "Master Race"', in *A Comics Studies Reader*, ed. by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), pp. 288-305; Victoria Aarons, "'Master Race': Graphic Storytelling in the Aftermath of the Holocaust", in *The Palgrave Handbook of Holocaust Literature and Culture*, ed. by Victoria Aarons and Phyllis Lassner (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 493-510.

6 See, e.g., *Considering 'Maus': Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust*, ed. by Deborah R. Geis (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003); Alison Mandaville, 'Tailing Violence: Comics Narrative, Gender, and the Father-Tale in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 44.2 (2009), 216-248.

7 Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (New York: Cornell University Press), p. 161.

modulation of the Polish/pig characters in *Maus*, and he pays more attention to the different positions taken by ordinary Poles in actively (or not) helping his parents navigate a perilous situation. More broadly speaking, comics scholars observe that Holocaust comics often narrow down the genocidal events to the binary categories of perpetrators and victims without much attention for the complex in-between positions or grey zones—a tendency that can be seen from early post-war comics to more contemporary works.⁸ While the good/evil binary thus returns as a narrative trope in Holocaust comics running from early post-war comic books to more recent works (see, for instance Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz* (2003, originally published in French in 2000)), the past two decades have also seen a noticeable shift to more nuanced understandings of perpetrator positions and issues of complicity, for instance in graphic narratives like Peter Pontiac's *Kraut* (2000), Reinhard Kleist's *The Boxer* (2014), Barbara Yelin's *Irmina* (2016, originally published in German in 2014), Nora Krug's *Belonging* (2018) and Serena Katt's *Sunday's Child* (2019).

In scholarship that engages with comics that deal with instances of mass violence and genocide beyond the Holocaust, we can also find discussions of perpetrator figures. For instance, scholars have discussed the use of animal figures as a means to comment on victims and perpetrators in different events of genocidal violence, including the Rwandan genocide.⁹ In this context, Deborah Mayersen notes how animal figures can be used to provide insight into the human condition and provide important emotional cues: '[a]cross numerous graphic novels, images of vicious dogs serve as a trope that

8 See, e.g. Kees Ribbens, 'The Invisible Jews in August Froehlich's "Nazi Death Parade" (1944). An Early American Sequential Narrative Attempt to Visualize the Final Stages of the Holocaust', in *Beyond 'Maus': The Legacy of Holocaust Comics*, ed. by Ole Frahm, Hans-Joachim Hahn and Markus Streb (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2021), pp. 133-168; Christine Gundermann, 'Real Imagination? Holocaust Comics in Europe', in *Revisiting Holocaust Representation in the Post-Witness Era*, ed. by Diana I. Popescu and Tanja Schult (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 231-250; Joanne Pettitt, 'Memory and Genocide in Graphic Novels: The Holocaust as Paradigm', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 9.2 (2017), 173-186; Joanne Pettitt, 'Remembering the Holocaust in American Superhero Comics', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 10.1 (2019), 155-166. A more comprehensive analysis of the depiction of Nazi perpetrator figures can be found in Markus Streb, 'Die Darstellung von Deutschen Tätern in Comics über Anne Frank: einige Beobachtungen', in *Anne Frank im Comic*, ed. by Ralf Palandt (Berlin: Christian A. Bachmann Verlag, 2021), pp. 193-216.

9 Deborah Mayersen, 'Cockroaches, Cows and "Canines of the Hebrew Faith": Exploring Animal Imagery in Graphic Novels about Genocide', *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 2.11 (2018), 165-178; Laurike in 't Veld, 'Introducing the Rwandan Genocide from a Distance: American Noir and the Animal Metaphor in *99 Days*', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 6.2 (2015), 138-153.

symbolizes perpetrator violence'.¹⁰ I similarly analyze a connection between perpetrator violence and animal metaphors in my article on *99 Days* (2011), an American detective graphic novel that uses the Rwandan genocide as a backstory for the protagonist. Here, I argue that the animal figure, in this case a hyena, functions as a distancing device that allows readers to consider where the protagonist—who is both perpetrator and victim—and the animal meet, and where they diverge.¹¹ Comics scholars also broach the issue of perpetration and its representation in graphic narratives in connection to other topics (though not often as the main focus), including violence, child soldiers, wartime rape, trauma, and human rights.¹² In these publications, scholars offer some reflections on the narrative role of perpetrator characters and consider the ethical considerations these characters bring to the story. Pramod K. Nayar, for example, points out that in many graphic novels that focus on human rights themes, including works on genocide, perpetrators are anonymized as a way to show a social order in which 'the perpetrators do not have a "self" but simply a role',¹³ which, he argues, offers a commentary on how dehumanization also affects perpetrators.¹⁴ Tatiana Prorokova-Konrad analyses two graphic novels about child soldiers and shows how they engage with the ethics of these characters, who are 'at once an innocent child, a fearless fighter, a dangerous enemy to some, and a pawn controlled by criminals'.¹⁵ She notes that the graphic novels actively engage with these contradictions and with the child soldiers' in-between positions.

In contrast to scholarly works that analyze the depiction of genocide in comics mostly through the lens of victimhood and trauma, some recent discussions have moved the perpetrator figure to a more central position. In *The Representation of Genocide in Graphic Novels: Considering the Role of Kitsch* (2019), I employ the concept of kitsch to investigate

¹⁰ Mayersen, p. 168.

¹¹ in 't Veld, 'Introducing the Rwandan Genocide from a Distance', p. 149.

¹² See, e.g., *Representing Acts of Violence in Comics* (New York: Routledge, 2019), ed. by Nina Mickwitz, Ian Horton and Ian Hague; *Contexts of Violence in Comics*, ed. by Nina Mickwitz, Ian Horton and Ian Hague (New York: Routledge, 2019); Tatiana Prorokova-Konrad, 'Child Soldiers in Transatlantic Graphic Narratives of War', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 12.5 (2020), 719-736; Pramod K. Nayar, *The Human Rights Graphic Novel: Drawing it Just Right* (London: Routledge, 2021).

¹³ Nayar, p. 40.

¹⁴ For more on the anonymization of perpetrators, also see Streb, 'Die Darstellung von Deutschen Tätern in Comics über Anne Frank', and in 't Veld, *The Representation of Genocide in Graphic Novels: Considering the Role of Kitsch* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 88-90.

¹⁵ Prorokova-Konrad, p. 4.

the tensions around the representation of genocide in graphic novels. I mobilize kitsch as a concept that points both to a 'too much' (an excess of visuals, melodramatic narrative techniques, and moral transgressions) and a 'too little' (a simplification of politically and morally complex situations). I argue that certain kitsch strategies can produce meaning and facilitate an affective interaction with the genocide narrative, while also mapping where kitsch strategies produce problems.¹⁶ I include a chapter on the 'moralisation of perpetrators', exploring ordinary and extraordinary depictions of perpetrators in a range of comics that deal with genocide.¹⁷ I demonstrate that many of the excessive and grotesque perpetrator figures in comics about the genocides in Armenia and Rwanda (excessive both in action and visual appearance) hark back to the cultural figure of the 'evil Nazi'. This cultural figure is characterized by a sense of otherness through its sadistic and monstrous behaviour which 'allows for a psychological distance that minimizes a more complex and morally uncomfortable interaction with the ambiguous elements of genocide perpetration' while also closing off 'any further investigation of the premise that perpetrators are humans, rather than monsters'.¹⁸ In contrast, other comics include 'nuancing gestures': visual and verbal strategies that are aimed at presenting a more complex and morally ambiguous representation of perpetrator characters. I argue that in these comics, artists draw the perpetrators as looking similar to the victims, which offers a visual uniformity that 'contributes to the premise that perpetrators are not inherently different from other humans'.¹⁹ Furthermore, these comics explore a variety of reasons for participation in genocide, offering a diversity that 'ultimately implies that perpetrators cannot be seen as a single-minded group'.²⁰

Other scholars approach the perpetrator figure by viewing it in relation to the ethical and affective relationships that comics can facilitate with events of the past. They explore what happens when comics complicate these affective relationships through a focus on the perpetrator figure.²¹ An example of this is the previously mentioned

16 in 't Veld, *The Representation of Genocide in Graphic Novels*, pp. 1-4.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 83-126.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

20 *Ibid.*

21 See, e.g., Suzanne Keen, 'Fast Tracks to Narrative Empathy: Anthropomorphism and Dehumanization in Graphic Narratives', *SubStance*, 40.1 (2011), 135-155; Kate Polak, *Ethics in the Gutter: Empathy and Historical Fiction in Comics* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017).

Deogratias, a comic on the Rwandan genocide that offers a complex view on perpetration and complicity. In the comic, the eponymous protagonist is so traumatized by his role in the genocidal events that he dissociates, turning into a dog. The dog is a loaded figure within the context of the genocide: dogs were shot en masse by the Rwandan Patriotic Front because they were eating the Tutsi corpses during and after the genocide. Visually, Jean-Philippe Stassen establishes this transformation on the comics page by adding canine features to Deogratias's appearance at certain points in the narrative, and finally completing the transformation when Deogratias becomes too overwhelmed with guilt. Several scholars have discussed this more-than-human iconography in *Deogratias*, in which the dog plays an ambiguous role, along with other (symbolic) animal figures, such as the cockroach (used in Hutu rhetoric to designate the Tutsi), and the gorilla (Rwanda's tourist attraction).²² In her article, Suzanne Keen explores the ways in which such ambiguous representations of the figure of the dog, 'oscillating between sympathy and horror',²³ ultimately complicate narrative empathy. Kate Polak similarly argues that the comic takes a radical stance on narrative empathy as the perpetrator protagonist presents 'an uneasy readerly position because it highlights Stassen's choice to deny the reader the familiar stance in receiving a survivor's story about atrocity'.²⁴ However, Polak extends the argument and posits that the complication of the empathetic response through the perpetrator protagonist also 'illuminates the situation of the bystander'.²⁵ Not only is the traumatized Deogratias revealed as a bystander to his own memories, but the fact that he is also a participant in the genocide, she argues, triggers an awareness of, and a sense of shame about, our own role as Western onlookers and bystanders;²⁶ a complicity which is further explored in the work through the insertion of various Western characters.

Recently, scholars have also begun to explore the representation of perpetrator figures in genres that are less concerned with establishing a firm historical grounding, including fantasy and horror. Mihaela

22 These animal constellations are also explored in other graphic novels about Rwanda, including Ruper Bazambanza's *Smile Through the Tears* (2005, translated in 2007). Also see: Jesse Arseneault, 'On Canicide and Concern: Species Sovereignty in Western Accounts of Rwanda's Genocide', *English Studies in Canada*, 39.1 (2013), 125-147.

23 Keen, p. 152.

24 Polak, p. 59.

25 Ibid., p. 43.

26 Ibid., p. 73.

Precup and Dragoş Manea analyze the representation of the figure of the female perpetrator and accomplice in Nina Bunjevac's 2018 graphic narrative *Bezimena*.²⁷ In *Bezimena*, Bunjevac explores the mind of a perpetrator of sexual violence and shows the protagonist's traumatic backstory while detailing his faltering grip on reality. Manea and Precup argue that *Bezimena's* combination of a story of sexual violence with elements from classical mythology offers a more complex and nuanced view on perpetration that moves beyond the single, fixed category of 'the perpetrator' to also consider related positions such as the accomplice.²⁸ Furthermore, in his monograph *Reframing the Perpetrator in Contemporary Comics: On the Importance of the Strange* (2022), Manea focuses on British, American, and Canadian comics that consciously estrange the figure of the perpetrator through a variety of visual and verbal strategies. Manea discusses the position of the genocide perpetrator in alternative histories of World War II and the Holocaust in comics such as *The New Adventures of Hitler* (1989) by Grant Morrison and Steve Yeowell and Kieron Gillen's series *Über* (2013-), as well as in the context of American colonial expansionism in *Manifest Destiny* by Chris Dingess and Matthew Roberts (2013-). Furthermore, he also investigates the traumatized perpetrator in the story of Christian missionaries in China and the 1899-1901 Boxer Rebellion as it is presented in the two-part comic *Boxers & Saints* (2013) by Gene Luen Yang. Manea demonstrates that these comics, many of which merge historical fiction with elements of satire, fantasy, and horror, can engage readers with histories of mass violence in new ways.²⁹

The articles collected in this special issue contribute to this growing body of scholarship and engage in the much-needed task of exploring depictions of perpetrator characters in detail and as a main focus of analysis. The contributions in this special issue engage with portrayals of the figure of the perpetrator and perpetration in the medium of comics through comprehensive and nuanced analyses that recognize the ambivalences and complexities that are, at times, brought forward by the graphic narratives under discussion. The contributors draw on perpetrator studies scholarship, comics

27 Bunjevac's graphic narrative *Fatherland* (2014) offers another angle on perpetration and is analyzed by Olga Michael in this special issue.

28 Dragoş Manea and Mihaela Precup, "Who Were You Crying for?" Empathy, Fantasy, and the Framing of the Perpetrator in Nina Bunjevac's *Bezimena*, *Studies in Comics*, 11.2 (2020), 373-386.

29 Dragoş Manea, *Reframing the Perpetrator in Contemporary Comics: On the Importance of the Strange* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

scholarship, and publications in other related areas, including African American studies, genocide studies, and Indigenous studies, to present their arguments, thereby offering a multidisciplinary approach to the topic of the representation of perpetrators in comics.

The special issue consists of five research articles and one roundtable conversation between three comics scholars. Two of the articles and the roundtable conversation explore, in detail, the figure of the Nazi perpetrator and the topic of Nazi complicity across a range of comics that deal with World War II and the Holocaust. The other three articles extend the scope, focusing on depictions of perpetrator figures across other geographical and historical contexts.

My article, 'Familial Complicity in Peter Pontiac's *Kraut*, Nora Krug's *Belonging*, and Serena Katt's *Sunday's Child*', explores how these three graphic narratives offer a visual and textual collage of sources to explore familial complicity during World War II. I argue that the artists are aligned in their efforts to question, prod, and hypothesize to uncover the historical facts of their family members' complicit pasts while also addressing their own emotional involvement. By making the readers privy to the process of meaning-making, the artists eschew a single, definitive narrative, offering a more nuanced and complicated view of Nazi involvement instead.

In her article 'The Legacy of American Slavery: Contesting Blackness and Re-envisioning Nationhood in *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation*', Tatiana Konrad demonstrates how the graphic novel adaptation of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979) explores the legacy of slavery by connecting the American past and present through its use of medium-specific features, including its colours and the arrangement of narrated episodes. In addition, Konrad analyses how the graphic novel explores relationships between perpetrators and victims of slavery by making race visible on the page and by raising questions about more indirect forms of participation in racism, and how these forms connect to Michael Rothberg's notion of 'implication'.

Olga Michael's article 'Looking at the Perpetrator in Nina Bunjevac's *Fatherland*' explores how this graphic memoir (2014) uses medium-specific elements like braiding and visual motifs, including visual and narrative circles and bird-related imagery, to foreground the effects of intergenerational trauma. Furthermore, Michael demonstrates that Bunjevac's intertwining of public and private histories complicates straightforward notions of how her Serbian nationalist father functions as a 'monstrous' perpetrator. Michael argues that the work asks its

readers to rethink the perpetrator figure as an individual who is placed within a relational web of familial, historical, and national contexts.

Johannes Schmid also focuses on intergenerational trauma in his discussion of Joe Sacco's representation of the cultural genocide of Canada's Indigenous peoples in his article 'Cultural Genocide in Joe Sacco's *Paying the Land*'. Schmid argues that Sacco's work (2020) draws a clear distinction between the colonial violence of the Indian Residential School System (IRSS) and the intracommunal Indigenous violence, presenting the latter form of violence as a direct effect of the former. Schmid explores Sacco's framing strategies, including a focus on the victims' stories and anonymous and unnamed bottom-level perpetrators, as a means to emphasize the systemic violence of the IRSS. Furthermore, Schmid demonstrates that Sacco also explicitly addresses the reader as an implicated subject who is invited to consider their own entanglement in violent colonial histories.

In their article 'The Perpetrator as Punch-line: *Hipster Hitler* and the Ambiguity of Controversial Humor', Mihaela Precup and Dragoș Manea focus on the webcomic *Hipster Hitler* and explore what is at stake when a historical perpetrator is displaced for comedic effect. They analyze the layers of humor that emerge when the figure of Hitler is merged with the figure of the hipster, and in doing so investigate the affordances, limitations, and omissions that the webcomic brings to the figure of the familiar perpetrator, paying particular attention to the shallowness and vacuity emphasized by the connections drawn between hipsters and Hitler. They argue that, as a layered text, this webcomic occupies an ambiguous cultural space that does not allow for easy moral categorizations.

The issue concludes with a roundtable discussion between Christine Gundermann, Ewa Stańczyk, and Kees Ribbens, that addresses various aspects of the representation of World War II and the Holocaust in comics. These include the depiction of perpetrators, the use of comics in education, and the ways in which national contexts have affected the content and reception of these comics. Offering a rich historical overview of World War II and Holocaust comics, the three scholars highlight the predominant focus on victim figures in graphic narratives and discuss its implications for the representation of perpetrator figures. Furthermore, the participants explore the memorial and commemorative frameworks in which the World War II and Holocaust graphic narratives are situated.

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