
Neologism as Oppositional Language in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*

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In *(Un)Doing the Missionary Position: Gender Asymmetry in Contemporary Asian American Women's Writing*, Phillipa Kafka places Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* in a sequence of contemporary Asian American women's literature influenced by Second Wave feminism. Kafka presents the novel as an allegory through which Ng "links personal and family problems to historical and political ones, primarily gender and race asymmetry" (51). Citing Esther Ngan-Ling Chow's categorization of binary opposites that create cultural dilemma for "traditionally oriented Asian American women," these binaries being "obedience vs. independence," "collective (or familial) vs. individual interest," "fatalism vs. change," and "self-control vs. self-expression or spontaneity," Kafka argues that women experience these binaries "on a global basis" (52). It is to these dualisms that *Bone* speaks as both a private and national allegory criticizing Chinatown and society in general for "intolerance of difference" and exclusivity (Kafka 52). Kafka recognizes in *Bone* and in Asian American literature in general "the advocacy of syncretism," or balance between oppositions; she views the conclusion of *Bone* as the female characters' syncretism of terms in problematic binaries.

The syncretism observed by Kafka resembles the unitary self achieved through quest in literature by women discussed in Carol Christ's *Diving Deep and Surfacing* (1980). Christ argues that "women's quest seeks a wholeness that unites the dualisms of spirit and body, rational and irrational, nature and freedom, spiritual and social, life and death, which have plagued Western consciousness" (13-14). Like Doris Lessing's Martha Quest or Ntozake Shange's Black woman, Ng's Leila Fu Louie is a quest figure journeying from "ambiguous consciousness" to "self-affirmation" (Kafka 1). Both Christ and Kafka offer significant models for reading a novel such as *Bone* whose narrative can on one level be read as quest myth or allegory. However, neither "the blending of two cultures" (Kafka 2) nor a wholeness that overcomes opposition (Christ 26) can account fully for the effects of gender and ethnicity on Leila's experience of and response to binaries.

Although Leila syncretizes the opposites constituting some of the binaries she experiences, the language of the novel's conclusion rejects the possibility of syncretism of self-control/self-expression, the fourth binary identified by Chow. The conclusion further suggests the material impossibility of "wholeness" or unitary self for Leila as it evidences Ng's unique positioning of an Asian American woman in relationship to binaries. This positioning reveals a complexity arising from ethnicity *as well as* gender that is critical to subject identity but often ignored in feminist and postmodern theoretical attempts to deconstruct oppressive binaries.

In *Bone*, a novel exploring a Chinese American family's generational and cultural conflicts following one daughter's death, self is located momentarily through the invention of new language promised in Leila's neologism "backdaire," the last word of the novel. On one hand, this Chinese English neologism is a powerful linguistic act of syncretism and renaming through which Leila articulates her unwillingness to privilege either her Chinese or American identity or to break identity into clean-sheared roles that define one's place in culture and, by extension, one's self and power within that culture. The neologism suggests self-affirmation that transcends a compromise of patriarchal signifiers through new language specific to a Chinese American woman at a given moment when she has no other language to express her experience. Leila's sense of her self and her relationship to others goes beyond the "soul-searching," unselfish, feminist act of compromise which Kafka positions opposite Leila's sister Nina's selfish, "unreflexive postmodern postfeminist stance" (76). Leila understands that her apparently contradictory identities as Chinese, American, woman, sister, daughter, and translator/mediator cannot be discreet without being exclusionary, so, as do the heroines in Christ's study, she goes beyond awakening self to renaming the world in which she lives to accommodate multiplicity.

On the other hand, the neologism "backdaire" creates a paradox. Although Leila no longer is fragmented by the composite of ever-changing differences that constitute a postmodern subject, Ng's creation of language that simultaneously rejects the dominant discourse *and* threatens to impede Leila's access to power through that discourse acknowledges the material reality of living with difference. In *Bone*, the centrality of language to the self-control/self-expression binary suggests that syncretism of the two may not be possible or desirable for Asian American women like Leila and Mah whose ways of articulating experience challenge dominant discourse.

Although the spiritual and social aspects of quest are not distinct (Christ 7), the major binaries identified by Chow characterize Leila's spiritual quest, while mundane binaries characterize her social quest. Leila struggles to move from within

the binaries defining her story: before/after Ona's death; Chinese culture/American culture; sister/self; bone/ash; blood/paper; living/dead; parent/child; Chinese/English. To free herself from expectations for traditional Asian American women, Leila first syncretizes terms of the mundane binaries before she attempts to deconstruct the major ones.

The mundane binaries driving Leila's quest are inherent in her obedience to her mother Mah and stepfather Leon and in their imposition on her of fatalism through folklore. The impetus for her narrative, though, as many reviewers agree, not the focus of the novel, is the middle sister Ona's death by a fall from the thirteenth floor of the Nam in Chinatown. The silence, guilt, and superstition with which Leon copes with his biological daughter's death magnify Leila's sense of binarism between Chinese and American cultures. For instance, the bone/ash binary impedes the family's coming to terms with the tragedy. Leon blames all of his bad luck, including Ona's death, on his failure to return Grandpa Leong's bones to China for proper burial. Characteristic of Leon is the fact that he "worried about the restless bones.... But in the end the bones remained here" (50). Chinese folklore held that "the blood came from the mother and the bones from the father" (105) and that "fates can be divined by the weighing of our bones" (153). Because Ona's bones literally are broken by the fall and her body cremated, her bones tell only the story of death, not life. It is not until Leon constructs an altar for Ona's ashes that he is able to live with his grief: "Side by side the sad with the happy" (102). Her ashes, put to rest, hang in balance with Grandpa Leong's restless bones, thereby becoming part of Leon's healing. His syncretism likewise heals Mah, whose emotional well-being has come to depend exclusively on Leon's behavior, and it opens the possibility of independence and change for Leila.

Leila's struggle to blend individual and cultural self-identities while remaining a part of her family is demonstrated in her dual role as parent and child to Leon. His position as patriarch of "nothing but daughters" earns him no respect in Chinatown. He is also socially and economically powerless in white American society. During a search of Leon's room at the San Fran for proof of his legal identity, Leila fantasizes about "gathering all Leon's papers, burning his secrets and maybe his answers, and then scattering the ashes into the bay" (60). Her decision to preserve Leon's fragmented American identity suggests her conflict between being an obedient daughter blind to Leon's failing and admitting her independence from a man emasculated by race asymmetry. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim recognizes in the literature of Asian American women of the past two decades "new plots" that reject "the traditional master plot of ethnic patriarch as villain and eth-

nic woman as victim” and present “the disempowering of a central male figure” (580). Lim writes,

Through the eyes of Asian American daughters, the father’s humiliations, losses, and pathetic struggles against white social authority are both indictments against racism (and therefore an assertion of ethnic protest) as well as evidence of patriarchal impotence (and therefore a stripping away of ethnic core identity). (580)

Leila’s awareness of the paper/blood, bone/ash, parent/child, and past/present binaries characterizing her relationship with Leon lessens the immediate oppression of gender and race asymmetry. At the same time, however, the binaries expose elements of her bicultural identity dependent on the asymmetry. Thus she “never forget[s],” acknowledging, “I’m the stepdaughter of a paper son and I’ve inherited this whole suitcase of lies. All of it is mine. All I have are those memories, and I want to remember them all” (61).

Informing all of the binaries shaping Leila is her bilingualism. She literally translates for a living in her position as consultant with the public school system. She also spends significant time and energy translating for her parents. Metaphorically, she attempts to “translate” experiences and beliefs from one culture which do not exist in reality or in language in the other. Unlike Martha Quest who finds fulfillment in motherhood or the Black woman who discovers the beauty of her body and color, Leila cannot act, as they do, according to or in opposition to social definitions of womanhood because there is no historically defined Chinese American woman; she has been fragmented into Chinese, American, mother, daughter, or wife. Furthermore, since “not everything can be translated,” there exists no language to define her bicultural identity. As postmodernists challenge the totalizing category “woman,” Ng challenges the category “Chinese American,” making Leila’s quest and subsequent deviation from the unitary self paradigm inevitable.

Until the moment Leila creates her own language, her quest proceeds according to Christ’s paradigm:

Women’s spiritual quest concerns a woman’s awakening to the depth of her soul and her position in the universe.... It involves asking basic questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the universe? In answering these questions, a woman must listen to her own voice and come to terms with her own experience. She must break long-standing habits of seeking approval, of trying to please parents, lovers, husbands, friends, children, but never herself.... Because she can no longer accept conventional answers to her questions, she opens herself to the radically new — possibly to the revelation of powers or forces of being larger than herself that can ground her in a new understanding of herself and her position in the world. (8)

Common to the female quest stories studied by Christ are characters' four stages of experience: *nothingness*, anxiety about the outcomes and value of life and self; *awakening*, grounding one's power of being, often through mystical experience; *insight*, integrating power of self with power of being; and *new naming*, the articulation and subsequent validation of experience through language (16-24). By opening herself to these experiences, a character may move from ambiguity to self-affirmation.

Leila's ethnic ambiguity is revealed through her understanding of women's place in Chinese culture and history. The novel begins, "We were a family of three girls. By Chinese standards, that wasn't luck" (3). She later acknowledges, however, that Chinese history is just "all stories": "We're lucky, not like the bondsmen growing up in service, or the newborn daughters whose mouths were stuffed with ashes.... Nina, Ona, and I, we're the lucky generation.... We know so little of the old country" (35-36). Instead of stories of oppression and the silencing of women, Leila needs, as Christ advocates for all women on quest, authentic stories of women's experience that "may ground [her] in powers of being that enable her to challenge conventional values or expected roles" (3). "Old country" stories live through Mah and Leon, specifically through the blood/paper conflict of their cultural identities. However, even though Mah embodies stories of the past, inconsistencies in her character signify Ng's rejection of the stereotypical Chinese immigrants presented in earlier Asian American literature. Identifying stereotypes in autobiographies by Virginia Lee and Jade Snow Wang, Kai-yu Hsu argues that through their characters these writers unknowingly mimic the dominant culture's perceptions of Asian Americans. Hsu observes, "the stereotype of the Chinese immigrant who is, or should be, either withdrawn and stays totally Chinese, or quietly assimilated and has become unobtrusively American" (qtd. in Chin et al. xxiv).¹ Mah's character is not so easily reduced. For example, her behavior borders on stereotype when she sits alone one night in the dim light of the television waiting for Leila to come home and drink the strong ginseng brew she has prepared. When Leila arrives and discloses that she and Mason are cooking steaks, Mah scolds, "Don't eat American every day.... It's not good for you" (48). Despite Leila's obvious fatigue, Mah launches into complaints about Leon: "All head and no tail.... *Faat moon*" (49). Her self-alienation, silence, and cuckolding fulfill the "totally Chinese" stereotype of which Hsu writes.

Mah, however, has not always sequestered herself during Leon's absence, resistance evidenced by a past affair with her employer and landlord Tommie Hom. When, as a child, Leila saw Mah publicly take comfort in Hom's arms after finding Grandpa Leong dead, she concluded, "I knew there was more to it than just

finding Grandpa Leong. It had to do with Leon being gone so much, it had to do with the monotony of her own life” (82). Mah rejects the terms of her role as a green card wife when she seeks personal fulfillment beyond the given parameters of that identity. Ng’s creation of a more complex, realistic character challenges the stories which comprise Leila’s cultural history. Mah’s social failure offers hope for Leila through a different, albeit difficult, story.

Despite her potential to help Leila, Mah’s “stubborn one-track moaning” for her absent daughters reinforces Leila’s definition of a split self: who she was before Ona’s death (sister) and who she is after (self) (Ng 91). Having once defined herself against her sisters, Leila is cast from a “mutual process of self-definition” into a solitary process of self-negation precipitated by Mah (Downing 11). She still attempts to define herself as who she is not, but the absence of her sisters, or defining others, leads to her ever-diminishing sense of self: “There I was, the living present daughter, and Mah was hung up on the other two. I wasn’t dead. I wasn’t gone” (Ng 91). Her fragmentation of self literally hurts, manifest through neck and shoulder pain: “It was more like in my head. It was being pulled back and forth between Mah and Mason.... it was mostly Mah’s being alone and Mason’s waiting for me” (50). For the sake of compromise, Leila splits her time after Ona’s death between the past in Salmon Alley with Mah and the future at the Mission with Mason. However, because those parts do not combine to create the desired wholeness of self-affirmation, her identity becomes a site of struggle between her past and her future, with no self-affirming present.

This gap between the absent and the immediate first developed when Leila was notified of Ona’s death. She subsequently descended into nothingness:

I walked out of the office, down the stairs, and into the girl’s bathroom. Inside, I felt refrigerator-safe. I wanted to sink into the coolness, to freeze time. I locked myself in a stall, sat down on the edge of the toilet and put my head on my lap. Oh god. My whisper filled the tight space, beating the god word back at me. God. God. God. (136)

Her descent below ground and her repetition of “God” evoke an image of a creature forsaken by its creator. Leila’s spirituality is not overt in the novel. Her degree of faith in omniscient power is only hinted at through her skepticism toward the Chinese superstitions and folklore defining the relationship between the living and the dead. At this moment, however, Leila appears to recognize, if not beckon, a god of sorts. At the same time, she remembers finding Ona as a child hiding in a school bathroom because she had ruined a handmade dress. Leila scolded her for ruining the dress, but in retrospect wonders why she did not console her. At that

moment, shock and grief open the text of her past to new insight into her relationship with and power to have saved Ona.

Leila's ascent signals her strength to move beyond nothingness. Her meditation is broken by the realization that she must tell Mah and Leon that Ona is dead. Obliging she reenters the world of the living: "I left the lavatory and climbed the stairs and slipped out the side doors. Outside, the light was aggressive. Every shining surface caught the sun.... I felt chased by it; the light hurt my eyes and I kept blinking" (137). She cannot hide in darkness but her responsibility is as painful as the bright light. She literally "sees the light," an awakening which occurs outdoors, as close as she gets to the natural world that figures prominently in the quest stories studied by Christ.

Leila's self-expression beyond that of a messenger or translator depends on the development of voice, but self-blame for Ona's death causes her to censor herself into Mah's responsible but muted daughter. The extent to which individuals may choose their fate becomes critical to the self-expression Leila seeks. Leon believes Ona's death was bad luck, "like she had no choice" (50). In actuality, the family never knows for certain if Ona's death is suicide or a drug-related accident. Law enforcement officials assume it was suicide because of circumstantial evidence surrounding Ona's use of downers and her forbidden relationship with Osvaldo, the son of Leon's cheating business partner. Leila corroborates their interpretation in order to believe that Ona made a choice. As Leila understands it, both Ona and Nina have made choices. Ona chose death over life. Nina is self-exiled in New York; she chooses to be American. Leila does not perceive them as victims, as controlled Chinese women, but as individuals who privilege one term to escape the oppressive fatalism/change binary.

Unlike Mah and Leila, Ona and Nina can be characterized by "dual personality," the oversimplification of self that Chin et al. argue weakens earlier Asian American literature by "suggest[ing] that the Asian American can be broken down into [her] American part and [her] Asian part" (xxiv-xxv). Because Ona cannot disrespect Leon's wishes that she break off her relationship with Osvaldo, she is reduced to the dutiful Chinese daughter. She cannot live with that reduction. In a scheme of binaries, she seeks a middle term that does not exist except in memory or theory, a place between an oversimplified self and a self yet to emerge. For this reason she does not exist beyond memory in the novel. Through similar privileging of one term, Nina achieves her American identity by leaving Chinatown and disregarding her family's past. It should not have to be, but is, "achieved at the expense of Asian affiliation" (Cheung 17). Unwilling to follow Ona's or Nina's lead, and because of her responsibility to her parents, Leila realizes her own choices

regarding binaries: to accept them as dualisms, to create unity of opposing terms, or to reject both terms set in opposition in search of a new configuration of experience.

Leila's connection of reality and self, of Ona's choice to die with the potential of her own ongoing life, marks her developing insight:

For me, it was as if time broke down: Before and After Ona Jumped. I didn't want anything to be the same. I wanted a new life, as if to say that person then, that person that wasn't able to save Ona, that person was not me.... I had to believe that it'd been Ona's choice. (15)

When time breaks down, Leila is able to move backward and forward, as the recursive structure of her narrative does, to live simultaneously in the past and present. By perceiving death/life and past/present as interchangeable rather than opposing terms she accepts that she will continue her life while keeping alive a part of Ona. She thinks, "Inside all of us, Ona's heart still moves forward. Ona's heart is still counting, true and truer to every tomorrow" (145). Leila's acceptance of the dualism dead Ona/live Leila inspires a process of renaming which begins with her understanding of duality for what it is and can be, rather than living with it as a nameless source of discontent.

Leila's new naming is both literal and figurative. She literally translates the news of Ona's death into Chinese for Mah and Leon. Later, when she tells her mother in Chinese that she has married Mason in a private ceremony, she realizes that she has "a whole different vocabulary of feeling in English than in Chinese, and not everything can be translated" (19). She revises these stories, changing details and emotion in her translations when her language skills or the language itself is inadequate. In response to the news of Leila's marriage, Mah "grunted," a sound which Leila translates into a number of curses and accusations. She admits, "WHAT could I say? Using Chinese was my undoing. She had a world of words that were beyond me" (22). Unable to respond in Chinese, Leila pursues the argument and pushes her mother to resolution in English. Leila stands her ground with a language which, in the given situation, empowers rather than "undoes" her.

Mah's "grunt" is notable because it signals her rejection of both terms defining her circumstances; speaking neither Chinese nor English, she communicates with Leila. At another time, when she is nervous about seeing Leon after a long time at sea, Mah uses the English word "nervous": "It was like she chose a foreign word to express a foreign feeling in the hopes of keeping it far from her. Noi-vay-see. Mah said the word in three syllables, stretching out the anger, the despair, and the sadness that were welling up inside her" (151). Here, as with her grunt, Mah manipulates language to speak the unspeakable. Although Mah's "grunt" and mis-

pronunciations may fall short of linguistic revolution, they defy conventional discourse and suggest that she challenges her identity as a Chinese American woman.

When Leila eventually leaves Salmon Alley to live with Mason, she enters no-woman's land between what she can leave behind and what she can take with her:

All of my things fit into the back of Mason's cousin's Volvo. That last thing I saw as Mason backed out of the alley was the old blue sign, #2—4—6 UPDAIRE. No one has ever corrected it; someone repaints it every year. Like the old-timer's photos, Leon's papers, and Grandpa Leong's lost bones, it reminded me to look back, to remember. (193)

She is reassured as she leaves, having resolved a spirit/body conflict played out symbolically through Leon's obsession with the lost bones of his sponsoring father. Leila knows better. She leaves behind the superstition that associates only negativity with Ona's death and takes with her the insight into fatalism and self-determined change that exist simultaneously despite and because of greater powers of being.

What follows in the novel's conclusion, however, complicates Leila's shifting position as it relates to gender and ethnic binaries. As she leaves, she affirms,

I knew what I held in my heart would guide me. So I wasn't worried when I turned that corner, leaving the old blue sign, Salmon Alley, Mah and Leon — everything — backdaire. (196)

Kafka reads this ending as syncretism, as Leila's resolution to "distance herself to lead her own life, but not too far away" (77). Through Leila's final move, Kafka argues, "Myenne Ng thus establishes her distinction between the feminist who leaves the past behind when it is appropriate, and only after much soul searching, and the postfeminist who ignores it by fleeing entirely" (77). Kafka's view of Nina's choice as a "postmodern postfeminist stance" creates the binary feminist/postfeminist, a dualism in which the feminist is compromising and respectful of the past, while the postfeminist is selfish and forgetful of the history of gender and race asymmetry. This reading returns to the structuralist binary model that some feminist critics view as the fundamentally oppressive power of language (Moi 104-5). Predicating Leila's self-affirmation on a feminist/postfeminist binary creates opposition between sisters, a relationship fundamental to women both biologically and metaphorically. It thereby suggests a self-defeating model, that one woman's self-affirmation depends on her negation of another. For that reason, reading the conclusion as syncretism not only limits Leila's self-affirmation, but as a matter of course denies self-affirmation to women as a collective power.

As an alternative to syncretism, the conclusion may suggest the inevitability of ambiguity. Ng's use of the bicultural neologism "backdaire," mimicking the

“updaire” sign in Salmon Alley, suggests her awareness that although Leila may accept difference by facing dualism, living with it still poses obstacles within the mundane and the spiritual. The use of “backdaire” is a rejection of Chinese and English as discreet languages, suggesting the need for a blended language to reflect difference. Ng would not be the first to suggest this need. Chin et al. remind critics that “the vitality of literature stems from its ability to codify and legitimize common experience in the terms of that experience” (xxxiv). They argue that when reading the first generation of Asian American writers, critics “never considered the fact that a new folk in a strange land would experience the land and develop new language out of old words” (xxxiv). John Okada’s critically ignored *No-No Boy* was one of the first Asian American works to exemplify this need for new language. Okada belonged to a Japanese American literary tradition beginning in the 1920s, through which writers “were rejecting the concept of the dual identity and asserting a Nisei identity that was neither Japanese nor white European American” (Chin et al. xxxiv). Okada’s Japanese American hero’s quest is a prototype for Leila’s in that

being Japanese or American would seem the only options, but [Okada] rejects both and works on defining Nisei in terms of an experience that is neither Japanese nor American. Okada’s hero ... cannot be defined by the concept of the dual personality that would make a whole from two incompatible parts. The hero of the double and hyphenated “no” is both a restatement of and a rejection of the term “Japanese-American” — “No” to Japanese and “No” to American. (Chin et al. xxxv)

The incompatibility also has been central to Asian American women’s autobiography, most notably in the Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter*, and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*.

Ng’s fictional quest goes further toward self-affirmation for an Asian American woman than Wong’s, Sone’s, and Hong Kingston’s autobiographies. Its conclusion, however, may suggest the debilitating paradox currently tangling the relationship between feminist and postmodern criticism: an inability to escape the totalizing categories of gender and race, coupled with the need to recognize them as a point of departure. In *Modern Feminist Thought*, Imelda Whelehan’s articulation of this contradiction in theory illuminates the tensions persisting at the end of *Bone*:

There may be much a feminist can invest in the postmodern explosion of the binaries of classic Western thought. But might it not be the case that postmodernism itself derives impetus from a certain binarism in its demarcation of postmodernism and feminist postmodernism? (201)

The ending of *Bone* is perhaps as liberating and pessimistic as Martha Quest's apocalyptic prophecy in *The Four-Gated City*, which Christ finds "detached from women's social quest for equality in relationships, work, and politics" (73). Ng affirms a self who transcends dual personality by resisting reduction to a single ethnic identity, by recognizing gender and race asymmetry underlying the dualisms she faces, and by responding with "new" language that simultaneously liberates and threatens her power of discourse. Leaving everything "backdaire" articulates Leila's movement from one position of ambiguity to another.

Objecting to feminist proponents of identity politics as a means to what Patricia Hill Collins terms "an alternative epistemology," Phillipa Kafka proposes that

the point is not to transcend but to multiply the many manifestations of power so that the model of master/servant, oppressor/oppressed is no longer the central one. In this respect, the subjugated can develop oppositional practices that challenge hegemonic structures, and the dominant groups, in turn, discover that they themselves assume characteristics of the oppressed. (169)

It seems certain, however, that presenting a feminist/postfeminist binary as a different "manifestation of power" will do little to force dominant groups to discover common ground with the oppressed. The feminist/postfeminist binary is nothing more than recreation of hegemonic structure within the subjugated. Although the outcome of Leila's renaming is ambiguous, "backdaire" is the germ of an oppositional language with power to challenge hegemonic discourse. Like Mah's coping strategies that fall short of deconstructing self-limiting roles, Leila's quest ends in self-affirmation that is only momentary. Nevertheless, she moves beyond the acceptable compromise required by syncretism toward the discomfort and conflict she proves inherent in a life that seeks to upset gender and race asymmetry. ✿

Notes

¹ Frank Chin's introduction to the 1974 *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* is both legendary and controversial within Asian American literary studies. In *Articulate Silences*, King-Kok Cheung recognizes Chin's contribution to the recovery and validation of Asian American literature. She also notes her uneasiness regarding his division of Asian American literature into the "fake" and the "real," depending on the author's birthplace and the "cultural purity" of her or his experience. I share Cheung's concern with Chin's distinction but here draw from the strengths of his introduction as significant to the tradition of Asian American literature.

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