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My Antonia: A Retrospective on an Immigrant Narrative

Abstract: Beginning with the early days of American literature, this work explores where the immigrant narrative has existed, and what said narrative may look like. When reading immigrant literature, there are typically three or four themes that present themselves among the immigrant characters and their community. Those themes are: a feeling of nostalgia towards, or affinity to the culture and of the immigrant's home country, the theme of inclusion or exclusion by the larger society in the new country, and the theme of resilience, that is, how immigrants overcome adversities and bounce back challenge after challenge. A novel in particular where these themes present themselves is in Willa Cather's, *My Antonia*. Although this is a novel that has those aforementioned themes in it, what makes it uniquely "immigrant," is also the attitudes and responses among the community to the arrival of the Bohemians. Those attitudes are something that nearly all immigrants become familiar with. With that being said, there is a duality in the immigrant narrative, where not only is there exposure of specific themes that make it that narrative, but also a response among the townspeople in this case, that reflect an immigrant experience.

Keywords: Immigrant, Literature, My Antonia

The democratization of literature has occurred in various ways, the most recent being that it demonstrates how the immigrant narrative is a particularly American one. And how could it not? A white, literary narrative has always been provided; however, there is also a gap between what the American narrative actually is and how it's been written. American literature began with the Colonial Period, with authors such as John Smith and John Winthrop, focusing on exploration and settlement in the colonies. This period was followed by the government literature of authors such as Benjamin Franklin, then by the British-inspired literary traditions of Washington Irving, and then by the Romantic period. While there was literature written by immigrants and the immigrant experience during these periods, they were few and far between. Only more recently have we seen literature *exploring* the immigrant narrative, as the work of Laila Lalami demonstrates—literature about the experience of being an immigrant within the United States.

Prior to the idea of a "melting-pot" society, or the emergence of cultural pluralism within the United States (at least on a greater scale, with various ethnic groups,) American

literature was(is) narrowly shaped by British literary traditions. American authors crafted their prose, chosen narrative, tale, etc. in a manner that reflected the poetry and literature written in Great Britain. But more than that, the adoption of British literary techniques crafted a national narrative, and a collective imagination for American audiences. American literature was—and one could argue still is—“free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of” African Americans, Indians, and immigrants (Morrison 4-5). Literature about the American experience has ignored these minority positions; there has been a blindness to the narratives written by and about immigrant voice. Morrison argues that when a country and its citizens are deeply suffering, their subconscious is affected by that suffering and is reflected in their art and literature. When it comes to the United States pre-nineteenth century (perhaps twentieth century), what was on the American mind was not the promise and price of immigration; the American mind was reserved for the engineering of the new nation, industries, and social construction. The literary imagination of the period reflects this latter preoccupation. Aside from needing a character for a moral punchline, humor, or for the synthetization of “ethnic” life, immigrants made little to no appearance in literature of this period. This signifies that immigrants, predominantly non-white immigrants, meant little to the imagination crafted by white American authors. The impact the immigrant narrative posed on authors was negligible (Morrison 15).

In an existing country that was built upon immigration, there is no way to avoid the looming of its beginnings. Even though it was not being written about, the immigrant narrative was alive and well. The past was bound to come up—and it did. As previously mentioned, since this country’s inception, immigrant voices and literature about them have always been marginalized. It was even a morally questionable subject matter for an author to pursue.

However, at the turn of the century, immigrant literature escaped from this being of unimportance, suddenly becoming a popular genre in the birth of postmodernism (Paul 249). Although postmodernism's beginnings were in the 1950's, immigrant literature was acknowledged earlier as artistic innovation. One novel in particular that captures the American imagination is *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather. By straying from the literary norm in the United States at the time of its composition, Cather produces a work that uniquely depicts the immigrant experience unlike other authors of her time. Consequently, her work is a pioneer of the immigrant literary movement.

Cather's tale is an immigrant one, and not in the way where a family comes to town from another country. Nor is it an immigrant tale due to the various immigrants being present, such as the Bohemians, Russians, and Norwegians. But it is one in the way that is expressed through various forms. Within the book, the immigrant tale and the unique immigrant experience becomes defined through language, resulting social structure, emotion, allegiance, cultural expectation, etc. On the surface, the tale may seem like a story about Jim Burden's quasi- obsession, or infatuation rather, towards Ántonia, daughter of the neighboring Bohemian family living in a hole in the ground, and how she made her mark on his development. Be that as it may, it is also a book following various immigrant communities, and more specifically, following Ántonia as she goes from a fierce farm helper to a hard-working "hired girl" in town (something that was a tradition for immigrant girls to do in order to send money to their families). It is the latter synopsis of the book rather than the former that makes this a brazenly immigrant narrative. The specific themes that I will examine in Cather's immigrant characters are: feelings of nostalgia or affinity for their culture and home country, inclusion or exclusion

by the larger society in their new country, and resilience about how they overcome adversities and bounce back challenge after challenge.

Nostalgia

The theme of nostalgia is seen in the emotions and actions of all of the omnipresent Shimerda characters, ranging from reciting Bohemian tales to forming their whole identity around their home country. Starting with Mr. Shimerda, his affinity for his home country and his former life there is central to how he perceives himself. As the story progresses, we begin to see how that identity is not translatable to life within the United States. As early as our first encounter with Mr. Shimerda, we are told that he is a weaver who plays the fiddle for spare money, despite being older now, and that it will not have much *use* in America. Jim then goes on to describe him:

At that moment the father came out of the hole in the bank. He wore no hat, and his thick, iron-gray hair was brushed straight back from his forehead. It was so long that it brushed out behind his ears, and made him look like the old portraits I remembered in Virginia. He was tall and slender, and his thin shoulders stooped...I noticed how white and well-shaped his own hands were. They looked calm, somehow, and skilled. His eyes were melancholy, and were set back deep under his brow. His face was ruggedly formed, but it looked like ashes—like something from which all the warmth and light had died out (Cather 48).

Between his previous job, his character, and his aesthetic description, it is easy to gather that Mr. Shimerda has not adjusted or prepared for a life on the prairie. He is aware that he can no longer use his fiddle to make money, making it merely a sentiment of his passion and his home country. His attachment to what got him by in his past life is an example of an affinity towards that life, and the country he was in. Looking further into his appearance, Mr. Shimerda's is described as having melancholic eyes that were "set back" and looked as though happiness, essentially, has been sucked out of him. This may be due to the lack of money the Shimerda's have because of their move to the United States, but it may also because of the discontent he

feels now that his identity is displaced, which has allowed for nostalgia overtake him. He is later described as thin with soft white hands, a detail that suggests Mr. Shimerda's inability to work on the farm. However, agriculture is their only means of income in America, proving how untranslatable his skills are to this new world because of his identity being so attached to the old. Despite the love and gratitude that Mr. Shimerda demonstrates during the early chapters of the book, those feelings are trumped by his debilitating homesickness. One could argue that it is his poverty that puts him into a depressive state; however, for Mr. Shimerda it was moving to America that made him and his family poor in the first place. Following Mr. Shimerda's death, Jim states, "I knew it was homesickness that killed Mr. Shimerda, and I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country" (Cather 103). It is even obvious to Jim that his neighbor's death was due to yearning for his old life and his old country.

The theme of nostalgia for the culture of a character's home country is seen with Mrs. Shimerda as well. Although to a much lesser extreme than Mr. Shimerda, Mrs. Shimerda's allegiance, affinity etc. towards her home country nevertheless displays itself in differing ways and in different parts of the novel. Mrs. Shimerda still carries much of Bohemian culture with her, but she settles in much more effortlessly than Mr. Shimerda. In the fourth chapter of the first book, Jim narrates, "Ántonia had opinions about everything, and she was soon able to make them known. Almost every day she came running across the prairie to have her reading lesson with me. Mrs. Shimerda grumbled, but realized it was important that one member of the family should learn English" (Cather 52). What can be taken away from this is how Mrs. Shimerda has, albeit meager, resistance to the language of the new world that she is in.

Language serves as one of the many pillars of identity, and in this context with the Shimerda's, they do not have much, and not much in terms of possessions that remind them of Bohemia. All they have left is their cuisine, language, and memories. Mrs. Shimerda's interactions with food also depict the theme of affinity to the immigrant's home culture. This is exhibited in the tenth chapter when Grandmother Burden and Jim go over to the Shimerda's house, Jim reports:

As we rose to go, she opened her wooden chest and brought out a bag made of bed-ticking, about as long as a flour sack and half as wide, stuffed full of something. At sight of it, the boy began to smack his lips... 'For cook,' she announced. 'Little now; be very much when you cook,' spreading out her hands as if to indicate that the pint would swell to a gallon. 'Very good. You no have in this country. All things for eat better in my country' (Cather 85).

As formerly mentioned, cuisine is another example of identity for people. Foods vary among cultures and play an influential role in defining identity; foods commonly eaten for people such as the Shimerda's offer a window into the traditions and cultural norms of Bohemia. In this situation, it also presents to the reader's insight into how the Shimerda's eat and how it resembles Bohemian culture. Not to mention, they were carried all the way from a forest in Bohemia—the food is quite literally Bohemian. The Burdens are unaware of what these “chips” are that Mrs. Shimerda gives to them, demonstrating that it is a non-American cultural item (at least on the prairie). Mrs. Shimerda shows an affinity towards her home country by continuing to eat and cook with the foods that are often used and consumed there.

A separate character who exhibits the theme is *Ántonia*. Unlike her father whose identity is inextricably tied to his Bohemia heritage and her mother who accepts American customs but lives as a Bohemian in the U.S., *Ántonia* embraces this new life. She is Bohemian in the way that allows you to see that she was born there, yet she is also eager to assimilate

herself into the American life. She wants to learn English, work like an American on a farm in the prairie, try American food, and beyond. This was her new life, and she is evidently ambitious when it comes to becoming an American girl. Nonetheless, *Ántonia* still embraces her Bohemian heritage, and the culture surrounding it. In the fifth chapter of book one, *Ántonia* brings Jim over to meet the Russians Peter and Pavel. On their way out, Jim narrates the account as such, “Before we left, Peter put ripe cucumbers into a sack for Mrs. Shimerda and gave us a lard-pail full of milk to cook them in. I had never heard of cooking cucumbers, but *Ántonia* assured me that they were good” (Cather 57). This scene is a direct example of *Antonia* showing an affinity, or allegiance, to the culture of her home country. She is exposing Jim to the food that is familiar to her, and other immigrants on the prairie. Akin to Mrs. Shimerda giving the Burdens mushrooms, *Ántonia* shares insight into her home country’s culture with others rather than eating American food. While I acknowledge that “American food” was hard for her family to come by since they couldn’t farm well, her actions here still display love for her culture.

Aside from the Shimerda family, there are various other characters who demonstrate nostalgia for their home culture and share it as well. In the book there is a motif of storytelling that creates intimacy between the characters, allowing readers to get a better grasp on the characters themselves, but also to aid the understanding of one immigrant community to the next through oral storytelling. Mr. Shimerda’s tales are passed on to *Antonia*, who shares them to keep his memory, what he loves, and Bohemia alive. In Book Two Jim narrates, “While we sat in the kitchen waiting for the cookies to bake or the taffy to cool, Nina used to coax *Ántonia* to tell her stories—about the calf that broke it’s leg...or about old Christmases in Bohemia... We all liked Tony’s stories. Everything she said seemed to come from the heart” (Cather 158). In

this instance, *Ántonia* is both sharing the culture of where she comes from and loves and creating a sense of unity within her community via further understanding of one another. It is also seen when Jelinek shares a tale of being an altar boy during the Cholera epidemic. Both examples allow for relatability among prairie folk, while also allowing for the storytellers to embody nostalgia for their home country.

Societal Inclusion and Exclusion

The second omnipresent theme in immigrant literature is the theme of inclusion or exclusion by society in the new country. In the context of this book, that society is on the prairie and Black Hawk. During the time when *My Antonia* was written, often what unified a community was shared language and culture that signified similarity to one another. Cohesion was of course possible, as we see within the book, but exclusivity still presented itself. One might ask how immigrants belong to a new society, and that is done in various ways and dependent on the society they are entering. In older times, that looked like learning their language and becoming as similar to another as possible in order to understand one another, whereas now integration while immigrants maintain cultural identity is much more accepted. Despite being bonded through story-telling and the warming appeal *Ántonia* has, on the prairie it is more often the former historical frame rather than the latter that rings true.

When the Shimerdas move to America, they do not know how to speak English except for *Ántonia* who knows a few words. They are only able to communicate with one another and their Bohemian cousin Peter Krajiek who they speak to in Bohemian and translate for them. This allows for Krajiek to essentially be the decider of their fate in situations if he pleases (and he does so,) and to manipulate them. When it was time for the Shimerda's to buy a home in America, the only person they could turn to was their cousin who sold them a house that

wouldn't last a Nebraska winter and overcharged them in the process. Following that, soon after their move the Shimerda's isolate themselves as Krajiek tells them that in Black Hawk they will be mysteriously separated from their money. Jim states, "They hated Krajiek, but they clung to him because he was the only human being with whom they could talk to or from whom they could get information" (Cather 53). From the start of the book, the Shimerda's are ostracized from society due to the language barrier that exists between them and the rest of the prairie folk. This creates difficulty in reconciling the old life in Bohemia and the new.

A separate instance where we see inclusion or exclusion of immigrants on the prairie is with the Russian characters, Peter, and Pavel. The people of Black Hawk often exclude and dodge these two characters who Mr. Shimerda because they do not understand their mannerisms and decorum. At the beginning of the chapter, Jim says:

I asked her if she meant the two Russians who lived up by the big dog-town. I had often been tempted to go to see them when I was riding in that direction, but one of them was a wild- looking fellow and I was a little afraid of him. Russia seemed to me more remote than any other country—farther away than China, almost as far as the North Pole. Of all the strange, uprooted people among the first settlers, those two men were the strangest and the most aloof (Cather 54).

This excerpt offers a glimpse into the fear created by the lack of understanding other cultures, leading to the avoidance and exclusion of them as people do not know how to interact with them. Jim being an impressionable child throughout most of the book, readers can assume that these views of Peter and Pavel do not start or begin with him. They are more than likely how most of the prairie peoples view them as well. Fear of people consistently leads to the ostracization or exclusion of them.

As present as exclusivity is among the immigrants in the novel, the inclusion of them shows itself as well. Starting with Otto Fuchs, he is happily integrated into the Burden family due to his work ethic and how helpful he is to them on the farm and taking care of other menial

work they need done. At times, he serves as a brother or fatherly figure to Jim, a rite of passage that only occurs when one is accepted. Although he does not interact too much with other people on the prairie or in Black Hawk, he is nonetheless approved of by them because he can speak English, is kind, and is a hard worker. In addition to Otto, it is evident that *Ántonia* is accepted as well. One could argue that she is accepted *because* of her cultural background in this society. Tony is a balance of embracing both her home country along with her new one, she does this by being eager to learn English, becoming a hard worker on the farm (which is somewhat of a love language for prairie folk,) and telling captivating stories about Bohemia. The key to inclusion in this part of the country, as is seen with Tony and Otto, is knowing English, and having a large heart. However, Tony is more than included in this society, for some she is put on a pedestal.

Resilience

The third and final theme that shows itself in immigrant literature is the theme of resilience, that is how immigrants overcome adversities and bounce back challenge after challenge. This motif does not fall short in the plot of *My Ántonia* as the book begins with struggle. However, this resilience is most often seen with *Ántonia*, which is a key aspect of her appeal (among many things). In Book One, we are given an *Ántonia* who knows roughly three words in English when she arrives in America with her family. None of them know how to farm, and their house—considered a cave by others—can barely last through Nebraskan winters. Beginning a life like that in a new country is no easy task, thus it sets the Shimerda's up for hardship as soon as they even touch the ground in the United States. Following their arrival to America, they endure poverty, lack of resources and basic essentials, the suicide of Mr. Shimerda, and more. It is quite easy to say that the Shimerda's do not have it easy on the prairie. A large aspect of

their characterization in the novel is that they are an immigrant family who struggles in this new land.

This poverty and lack of skills doesn't create a lack of agency for *Ántonia*. She is still proactive throughout the story and does nearly everything she wants to do because of her characterization in the story—a strong, creative, hard working girl who becomes a carefree woman. Knowing that she has a lot to learn, *Ántonia* gets right to it as soon as she meets Jim. She is eager to learn the language so she can communicate with others even though it may be hard for her. She also tries her hand at farming so her family can stay afloat. Both of which she succeeds at. But *Ántonia* ends up doing more than succeeding, or staying afloat, she makes a mark on people that they will remember forever. She consistently bounces back from struggle and grows as a person along the way. In defiance of the life she has been given, *Ántonia* becomes a farm worker, a cook for the Harlings—who pay her for her labor and provide her with an allowance for her clothing—and one of the most admired dancers in the pavilion. Jim notices this admiration, stating:

All the young men felt the attraction of the fine, well-set-up country girls who had come to town to earn a living, and, in nearly every case, to help the father struggle out of debt, or to make it possible for the younger children of the family to go to school. Those girls had grown up in the first bitter hard-times and had got little schooling themselves. But the younger brothers and sisters, for whom they made such sacrifices and who had 'advantages,' never seem to me, when I meet them now, half as interesting or as well educated. The older girls, who helped break up the wild sod, learned so much from life, from poverty, from their mothers and grandmothers; they had all, like *Ántonia*, been early awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to a new (Cather 172).

What is significant here is not how beautiful or desirable these women are, or even their resilience. It is the recognition by upper class men that they yearn for country girls *because* of

the lives these women have endured. Jim's statement shows that these girls were more than resilient and prospered on the prairie and in Black Hawk.

Aside from Tony, the theme of resilience is seen in Lena Lingard as well. In Book Two chapter four, a young girl who is dressed well and is attractive shows up at the Harling's' house, only for Jim and Tony to realize that is Lena. Prior to that run in, Lena was known for being a poor farm girl who wore ragged clothes. She informs Jim and Antonia that she is now a dressmaker and rents her own room in Black Hawk. Coming from a place of poverty and then making something of yourself, as we also saw with Antonia, requires resilience and hard work, especially for an immigrant during the time Cather's work was written. That is not only a theme in immigrant literature that is universal, but also in the immigrant's real life to this day.

Although not one of the three major themes that presents itself in immigrant literature, a theme seen in some is the, albeit cliché, American Dream. The theme of desiring the American Dream or living by it subconsciously is not seen in all immigrant literature, but it shows itself in *My Antonia*. Three components of the American Dream that are universally acknowledged are: that anyone can obtain success, upward mobility in society is doable, and you can achieve your dreams via hard work, all of which are seen in the novel. Starting with hard work and learning how to farm well, Antonia goes on to accomplish all three. She began as a child of a poor family that no one spoke to because of the language barrier, to making her own money and working for people in the town, to being adored by people in Black Hawk. Although it is not clear what Antonia's dreams are, we see along the way things she wants to accomplish and always does. There is not something thrown at her that she is not able to handle. One cannot comment on if she becomes successful, because we do not know what success looks like to her. Though in terms

of attaining the American Dream, she ends up happy and owning her family's farm that they get by on the prairie, which to most the epitome of the "American Dream."

American Perspective

Beyond the given themes of immigrant literature and how they are displayed in *My Án tonia*, the story is a piece of immigrant literature in its own unique way. Although we are given the immigrant narrative through Jim's lens and see only a limited view of the narrative, this is what makes it unparalleled. As a bildungsroman, the book acknowledges how immigrants in society, and the conditions they endure, shape him. As readers, we witness the duality of the immigrant experience in American, from the arrival of someone coming to town to the realistic responses people have to the newcomers. We grow with the characters in their attitudes towards immigrants, while also rejecting some and learning from many. We learn the immigrant narrative in conjunction with learning how Americans view and treat foreigners. This attitude towards immigrants, whether evolving or sedentary occurs with most characters. Both Jim and Grandma Burden interact often with the Shimerda's and their reactions to them are the most significant, but we receive tidbits of opinion from nearly every character and those characters offer us insight into the entirety of the immigration reality.

Succeeding the introduction of the novel, it begins with the arrival of both Jim and the Shimerda's at the prairie. Already readers are introduced to a situation where both the American narrator and the immigrant family are foreigners in their new settlement. This sets the story up in a way where we are mutually learning about the immigrant experience and Jim's newness to the land and migrants. Jim's emotions towards the immigrants are tumultuous, but it is rather progressive for his time. At the beginning of the book, Jim seems to be having his first contact with immigrants. He does not feel weary of the Bohemian family, there is this rather interest in

them and who *Ántonia* is. As this is a learning experience for him, his shift in attitude towards the immigrant families is an occurrence, but it is not necessarily bad, it is just naive. He makes various comments that display that naivete, such as in this conversation between Jim and Tony: “‘Why aren’t you always nice like this, Tony?’ ‘How nice?’ ‘Why, just like this; like yourself. Why do you all the time try to be like Ambrosch?’ She put her arms under her head and lay back, looking up at the sky. ‘If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us’” (Cather 131). Jim does not fully understand that the lived experience on the prairie is different for him than *Ántonia*. Of course, he is aware that they are different to an extent, but the intricacies of life that the Shimerda’s must live is not something Jim is wholly conscious of. In another scene of the book Tony is explaining the adversity her family experiences, especially Mr. Shimerda, to Jim and Jim responds with, “‘People who don’t like this country ought to stay at home.’ I said severely. ‘We don’t make them come here.’” (Cather 96). To be fair, Jim is ten in this scene he recounts, but we still see ignorance that is distasteful. Be that as it may, by the end of the novel Jim comes to respect and almost admire the immigrants on the settlement for their hard work and character. He states, “‘One result of this family solidarity was that the foreign farmers in our county were the first to become prosperous” (Cather 173). For members of Black Hawk, this translates to acknowledging that immigrants hard work, and should be respected. Pairing the earlier and later accounts and the emotions he feels in them allows for the readers to see development among Jim.

Grandmother Burden is someone else who’s relationship with immigrants is something to be investigated. Rather than witnessing a change in attitude such as we do with Jim, Mrs. Burden is more of an example as to how Americans treat immigrants. I would go as far as to say that the various attitudes she takes on is common among American people. Grandma Burden is

evidently loving and kind, she makes food for Jim, offers to bathe him and clean behind his ears, does things with him, etc. but when it comes to immigrants (the Shimerda's mostly) on the prairie, those attributes become conditional. She is more kind to the Shimerda's when they act in a way that is deemed acceptable to her. This is a frequent attitude that American people have towards immigrants whether they mean to or not. An example of her actions being that of the American to the immigrant is when Jim is talking about Mrs. Burden and says, "She always spoke in a very loud tone to foreigners, as if they were deaf" (Cather 47). Maybe not offensive, but a sign of a lack of awareness towards immigrants that is displayed by lots of people in the United States. A separate instance that depicts "Americanness" is after Mrs. Shimerda gave the Burden's food. Mrs. Burden responded with, "They might be dried beef from some queer beast, Jim. They ain't dried fish, and they never grew up on a stalk or vine. I'm afraid of 'em." (Cather 87). The language she chooses to use such as queer or afraid creates this sense of exoticness of the Shimerda's, and thus separateness from the norm, or the socially acceptable. Even though it does not appear as maliciousness, much of Grandma Burden's treatment of immigrants on the prairie is akin to real world treatment towards immigrants.

Although a much more minimal character, another person we see display American attitude towards foreigners is Grandpa Burden's farm hand, Jake. Throughout the novel he makes multiple comments regarding immigrants that are brazenly xenophobic. When he is on the train going to the prairie with Jim, he tells him to avoid the foreigners because you are likely to get diseases from them. We do not hear much else about Jake or from him until a later chapter where Jake punches Ambrosch in the head after a hostile exchange they had. Following the incident, Jake tells Jim that foreigners cannot be trusted, and that Jim should stay away from the Shimerda's. As disheartening as it is, the generalizations made by Jake are shared by many

American people (it is decreasing though,) making his character a reflection of reality in the United States.

People typically reserve the term, “immigrant novel,” for writers of color (or those who are not Western). Yet, any reader of *My Ántonia* can see how the book captures themes that align with the traditional immigrant narrative. As my argument above demonstrates, the tropes are there, and the attitudes towards them are present. It is difficult for audiences to read this book and not have it color your interpretation of foreignness, love (whether domestic or more erotic), nature, innocence, etc. for the rest of your life. Even with occasional brutishness, callous, and judgement, these people still belong to one another in the ways that trump those negative instances. It is web of families and the favors they do for another is an example of love and the life one should live, and a community that is united despite its differences.

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