Trauma, remembrance and art in South Africa: An impression

Els van Dongen

But in one aspect I know I am extraordinary
My memory. You're right.
I have an amazing memory.
At times I even surprise myself.
I can remember things that never happened.
Ouma Kristina in André Brink's *Imaginings of Sand*

During research on remembering and forgetting among elderly people in Cape Town and its suburbs I stumbled upon art as a way to work through the memories of traumatic past and to build a new society. This impression is an attempt to make sense out of my meetings with South African art and artists. First I will discuss the relation between traumatic memories and their expression in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. The second section will elaborate on the issue of literature, the shaping of new identities and the use of memory to build society. In the conclusion, I will discuss the social meaning of art.

[trauma, memory, forgetting, violence, art, Apartheid, South Africa]

Coming out of the shit: An introduction on 'getting away from sickness'

Maureen, victim of torture during the liberation struggle with a shawl around her head to conceal her boldness caused by acid that the perpetrators threw over her head –she is now active in Khulumani ('Speak out', a political movement), her colleague, the colleague's daughter, a young girl full of dreams for the future, Colette, my student, and me, an anthropologist; we all drove in my student's small car. Maureen had promised me to show 'art' in Philippi, a township of Cape Town, when we met at the Trauma centre in the city. We were on our way from Maureen's shack, which would be soon demolished to make place for a house with five rooms, to the community centre where we would see the 'art'. The centre is a large building along the main road of Philippi, where little shops and shebeens (places to drink beer) are pressed together and provide people

with daily needs at low prices. The centre was almost finished and it would be opened officially within two weeks. It was made of bricks of warm, dark red colour. In front of the centre is a square, which will serve as a market place. The small walls on the square were decorated with colourful tiles and stones. The building itself had bars and gates. A guard was sitting in the shadow of the building. The centre was fine, but the community of Philippi was more dangerous underneath its sunny surface…. Inside, in the courtyard, we were welcomed by another guard and by the songs of the choir which was rehearsing for the official opening. The guard brought our small company in the big hall with its red walls and blue doors. There was a stage. The space was multi-functional. It could be used as theatre, sports hall or meeting hall. But no art… until we went into the lady's. Women were finishing mosaics on the walls of the toilets with small pieces of coloured tiles. They made flowers, figures. The walls looked nice, but art?

When we were standing outside in the wind, which always blows on the Cape Flats, I realised that I had an ethnocentric view of art. I had certainly not expected to find art in toilets. I suddenly thought these mosaics, Maureen and the others were so proud of, were art indeed. They were symbols of the victory over 'the shit' and the dirt of violence, abuse, crime and rape. I knew that toilets were not places where one could feel safe. Even in the 'lady's' the ladies were not safe. I had witnessed the problems in the toilets of one of the universities in Cape Town. These mosaics were art, because they would 'lift' people out of the dark of the confusing landscape of personal and gang violence by their bright colours, their gracious shapes and their simple beauty. This experience was one of the many I had that made clear that art may have a healing dimension, not only for an individual artist but for many others. From that moment I decided to write up my impressions, because art makes a contribution to the South African 'renaissance'; it is an essential part of the attempt to overcome traumatic pasts and to give new meaning to them.

Writing about art and the conditions of making art in South Africa is difficult without confining oneself to a 'political' track, or without discussing the quest for identity. South African artists – probably especially writers – always have spoken in terms of politics and they still do. Art in its different forms seems to play an increasingly important role in South African society, like it does in many countries that have suffered from violence, war and destruction. Art may make the traumatic and grim situation of people bearable; it will release people from social isolation or heal trauma, despair and fear. Art may be the result of a quest for identity, but above all it gives an impression of human vitality to get away from sickness in the sense of social suffering and misery.

The latter will be the focus of this essay. It is not my intention to discuss individual recovery by means of arts. I am interested in the social dimensions of art and art-making and its meaning for a society in which many people are traumatised. I will not focus on understanding of illness through art, but on reckoning with illness. I will write about art in relation to 'remembering and forgetting'. To do so may mean over-generalising the different forms and kinds of art, and overlooking other important ways to remember and forget misery and to shape a future. I will argue, though fragmentarily, the importance of art to the anthropological understanding of sickness and suffering. My essay is based on 'impressions' during fieldwork, conversations with different groups

in Cape Town, items from newspapers and magazines, and visits to different parts of the city and its suburbs. My research focus was not on art. I just ran into it. I am not pretending to give a scientific analysis of the meaning of art in the making of a new society; instead I would like to start a discussion about this topic. Some arbitrary examples will illustrate my thoughts.

First I will discuss the relation between traumatic memories and their expression in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. The second section will elaborate on the issue of art, i.c. literature, the shaping of new identities and the use of memory to build society. In societies that suffer(ed) under totalitarian regimes and violence, writing and other forms of art mushroom, because "the only safe place is inside the story" (Fugard cited in Brink 2000). Under Apartheid it was impossible to distinguish the personal from the public or the story from history (Brink 2000: 30). Many people who could not voice their remembrance before, will do so now. In the conclusion, I will discuss the social meaning of art.

Burden of the past and fear of the present: Art and trauma

The social landscape of South Africa is one of confusion. Personal safety seems an over-riding concern for all people: many are armed. Most people know someone whose car was stolen, who was abused or shot at. Houses have bars and gates and shields on the garden walls warn that there will be an 'armed response'. In the suburbs – the townships – public buildings have high fences with barbed wire; children are playing behind wires and walls. Guards are everywhere and people look over their shoulder when they hear footsteps. Gangsterism, rape, murder, abuse, bombing, kidnapping, robbery and neglect are part of daily life. Every day, people read about severe violence in the newspapers. Victims are numerous. Racism, ageism and discrimination are still common. In a United Nations survey of 69 countries of 1998, it is showed that South Africa has the second highest rate of firearm related homicides in the world.[1] Hamber and Lewis (1997) provide us with some statistics, which support the view that South Africa is a violent country.[2] The authors discuss the effects of violence, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, bereavement, lack of social integration, medical problems, relation breakdowns and substance abuse.

Even though people do not allow fear and cynicism about the inability of the government to control negative forces in society to govern their lives, one feels what it must mean to live in a 'culture of violence'. Some of my own observations and experiences may make it clear. Especially for women and children, travelling by train is a survival. Watches and jewellery are put away; mothers and grandmothers hold their children firmly against their bodies; sometimes one sees a woman who clings a little tin with tear gas. Walking through the darkness on a lukewarm night through the empty streets in Oranjezicht, a relatively safe part of Cape Town, I realised that suspicion and fear governed the social lives of people. If somebody in the street would be in trouble and need help, nobody in the houses would notice it. The walls around the private properties were too massive.

The current fears come on top of the traumatic past of colonialism and Apartheid. Dreadful experiences of the past are deeply inscribed into the bodies and selves of people. Besides the horrible experiences of torture, murder, kidnapping and abuse and the struggle for freedom, people also suffer because social and cultural structures are damaged by migration and forced displacement. On the past, families were separated by identity cards and racial categorisation. This led to absurd situations that had serious effects on the health of many people. Most of them have 'their story'. Veronica's explains what the consequences can be for one's life. Her story is not full of horrifying details, as the stories were which were told at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Veronica did not belong to a liberation movement. It is an ordinary story which she shares with so many who tried to survive and make a living in a violent society. She is a black woman, who lives in an old age home in Woodstock, a part of Cape Town. She became confused and nervous because she married an illegal Portuguese immigrant and therefore was officially 'white'. She could move freely. That meant that she could visit 'white' restaurants and other spaces which were 'only for whites'. The white people looked at her and whispered about her when she was in such a place. Worse, however, was that her 'own people' talked nastily about her. Every two years, she said, she had a "nervous breakdown". She was treated in the psychiatric hospital with electro convulsion therapy. "Now my head is totally empty."

The horror stories in the files of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are bizarre facts that brought severe damage to people, whose suffering must be recognised. The TRC's aim was to establish unity, reconciliation and repair, but the critics on its work have become louder. One of the critics was that the TRC has limited itself to murder, torture, kidnapping and abuse (Mamdani 2000). Colin Bundy (2000) points out that the real trauma of South African people is the permanent violation of human rights, preceded by a history of denial, subjection and deprivation. Racial identities were created in colonial times, under apartheid and presently again. The TRC created a collective history, but "what the TRC threatens to do is to uncouple these histories; to define three decades of the past in terms of perpetrators and victims and tightly defined categories of wrong, and to suggest that this is 'the beast of the past'" (Bundy 2000: 17). If the histories of people are uncoupled, there will be no possibility for 'working through': reconstructing a comprehensible and satisfying story of what people remember and have forgotten. There will be a lack of cohesion. "We could go on and on and on. But there is no need to do this. What is the acknowledgement of such pain and suffering that only now is it meaningful to ask: why" (Ndebele 2000: 22).

In a society that has fallen into pieces, where people do not know who they are, where a collective memory lacks, remembrance is politicised and people distrust each other, the only solution to answer the question 'why' seems to be that "it may take poets, artists and creative writers of fiction to complete the task" (Villa-Vincencio 2000: 30). The idea that art may provide answers to why-questions and even can heal pain and suffering, and can construct new identities, is attractive. The reason why art may be preferred as a mode of expression for people who suffered, could be that everyday lives and traumatic events are beyond imagination and may only be expressed through aesthetisation and metaphorisation (cf. Nbedele 2000). According to Bakhtin

(1990: 276), to have a vision of a separation between art and reality is to have an aestheticised reality, which is perceived and shaped. The 'new' art in South Africa raises questions about the aesthetic dimension of the works. The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is an example of people reinventing themselves though narratives (Ndebele 1998: 27). According to Ndebele the facts of the testimonies will be the building blocks of metaphor. But are the testimonies and the 'facts' aesthetic, as art seems to require? What makes art art? Derrida and Adorno (cited in Menke 1998) suggest that the narrative is already the result of perceiving and shaping reality, which implies an 'aestheticisation' of reality. Aesthetic and non-aesthetic stances merge when people write about their trauma. "Traumatic experience catalyses a transformation of meaning in the signs individuals use to represent their experiences … as it is spoken by survivors, the traumatic experience is reinscribed as metaphor" (Kali Tal 1996: 16). Through aesthetisation, art "transgresses the ethics of the unrepresentability" (Marlin-Curiel 1999). In this way, art may answer why-questions.

To many South African authors, a writer has a greater responsibility to his society than to writing. During the apartheid regime and before, artists in South Africa lived under censorship. Their opposition made some of them into 'giants': Biko, Breytenbach, Coetzee, Fugard, Gordimer, Mathabane. Literature never was without engagement –*l'art pour l'art;* in South Africa every personal story became a political story. Breytenbach (1985) states that writing is politicising; it must broaden human consciousness. For this author, literature has to be radical and to express people's culture. The 'Sestigers', a group of English writing Afrikaners, rejected Apartheid and reflect today on what happened during that era.

One example is *Imaginings of Sand*. In this novel, Brink narrates the memories of Ouma Kristina, who got severely injured when black freedom fighters set her house on fire, shortly before Apartheid was banned. Ouma Kristina narrates her memories to her granddaughter Kristien. Kristien who returned to South Africa after the disastrous attack of the freedom fighters (young black boys). Although she had lived in Europe for many years, Kristien is as wounded as her sister, who has a fearful life and is repressed by her husband. Ouma Kristina and her granddaughter return to the burned house where Ouma spends her last days. Ouma narrates the stories she kept for Kristien. She tells about a woman who is transformed into a tree; about a woman who disappears when she looks for her shadow; a woman who went to Bagdad with her lover. The stories are too fantastic to be 'true'. They are Ouma's answers to the political, social and personal history (Brink 2000). If life gets its form through stories, the choices that people make in those stories must be taken seriously, because they may coincide with the choices people make in their lives. In *Imaginings of Sand* Brink recovers the trauma of white South Africans who were involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. Their memories are articulated within the South African society, not outside.

Black art was also strongly politically oriented. The work of black poets was performance poetry; "a cry from the heart for their people's agony" (Kellas 2000). Black poetry went hand in hand with activism. When apartheid was banned, this tradition seems to have died, according to some (Kellas 2000). Black poetry was recited on meetings and funerals, but is now published in English. For example, Hlatshwayo

calls up the Cosato employees to participate in the labour movement instead of being lethargic:

Cosato today be wise
In the desert
Only the fruit trees
With long and sturdy roots
Survive.

Qabula praises the African nature:

In summer mornings
when mist is covering the hills
the mountains hovering over the plains, the landscapes,
and valleys, at the moment
when the sun rises
as the mist begins to lift
leaving the trees, the grass and flowers
soaking in dew.

Malange writes about crisis:

I am here
Living under a Black Cloud
I am here dying of hunger
Here, living in thinning light
And my country is also dying.

Despite their different languages (Zulu, Xhosa), the three poets have found each other in the theme of 'absurdity': South Africa, with its beauty of flora and fauna, and plenty of food, needs the resistance of people to understand the world. The beauty of the country cannot be reconciled with violence, hunger and suffering. The three poets see themselves as 'cultural workers'. Their work is now translated in English, which was the language of the elite and the intellectuals. There is always a danger that these poets and many others are not understood by those for whom they write. But workers and students gave English a facelift and stripped it from the power structures of a dominating minority.

In South Africa writing is a private act of imagination and a public act of history writing (Ray 1990). Art making became a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In a press release on the *Fault Lines Exhibition* we read:

> Artistic and cultural concerns in many ways engage with, yet are distinct from the legal-political questions that will arise. Betrayal, sadism, mourning, loss, confession, memory, reparation, longing, these are the persistent themes of the arts. The Commission will be examining the legal and political implications of these same themes. Through the arts we can explore who we are, and why we do what we do to one another (cited in Marlin-Curiel 1999).

South Africa deals with its complex and specific past and the effects of a brutal history. Art is one of the spaces in which memories of collective experiences come together. Literature, and other forms of art as well, are ways to remember the past or to forget; they are means to come to terms with trauma and unrepresentable events. However, shortly after the new South African government took office, Albie Sachs – one of the twelve judges in the Constitutional Court – made a statement that writers in the new South Africa could now stop being political. They could release themselves from writing about apartheid. Sach's statement caused a heated debate among writers. Some speak about 'Renaissance' and want to revive old forgotten sources of culture. Others, like Van Niekerk, are sceptical. Art, and writing in particular, makes more than the naked reality. It brings a certain version of the truth into the open, which is also shaped by private motivations, hidden agendas, prejudice, biographical manipulations and suspicion.

Easing aching hearts, quest for identity and the birds of Ouma Kristina

Today, art in South Africa is for a great part about identity and the 'making of a new society'. *The house in Tyne Street* by Linda Fortune is one of the many books that are published after Apartheid was banned. It is a probing story about the traumas of people in the diaspora of Cape Town. It tells about memories of childhood in District Six, whose empty, dilapidated spots remind of the sadness of people who were dispersed to the frayed outskirts of the city, Parow, Mitchell's Plain, Mandalay, Hout Bay and Ottery. Fortune's book revives the small community of District Six with adventures and little dramas at school, the death of her father, the disappearance of a friend, the exile of the hair dressers. In an interview I had with Fortune, she told me how she started to write: "I must finally do something to ease my aching heart." I understood her pain better, when she told me about her present life. Not that this life was bad. She was an education officer at the District Six museum, had a good family and a supporting husband. But she had to travel every day by train from Parow to the city centre, which was a real 'survival trip'. Trains and stations are places full of danger, violence and abuse, for those who cannot afford to travel first class. She lived in constant fear.

Today's traumas make real *Trauerarbeit* very difficult. Fortune is but one of the many writers who struggle to make sense of the past. In his Albert Verweij-lecture in the Netherlands, Etienne van Heerden states that every writer in South Africa is as guilty as the hundreds of people who are brought to court every day. The guilt of the writer is that he or she appropriates the lives of other people and the past. A writer, according to Van Heerden, destroys and transforms (Van Heerden 2000). Being a writer in South Africa means having to live with a moral dilemma, because every choice a writer will make is loaded with moral issues; the choice of language, the theme, the structure, the publisher. On *Litnet*, the internet site which is edited by Van Heerden, writers debated the freedom of writing in a specific language under the head of "Ek skryf soos ek wil" (I write like I want) November 24 2000). Afrikaans was a 'white' language that also belonged to the right wing suppressers during Apartheid. The

language was in a *dinktronk* for a long time, because of its relation to suppression. Nowadays, writers claim the freedom to use the language they want: "Vrijheid behels nie net die vryheid om te sê wat jy wil nie, maar ook *hoe* jy wil. Ons wat Afrikaans praat, was lank genoeg in 'n dinktronk. Ek is nie van plan om my nou in 'n styltronk te laat inkerker nie, nee" (Litnet, November 24, 2000).[3]

Another example of the sensitivity of the theme and the quest for identity is the work of Pienaar, which was debated in the *Daily Mail & Guardian*. Pienaar, a white Afrikaner, made a controversial video film of his circumcision, which was performed by a black woman. Pienaar's aim was to undergo the Xhosa ritual like more white men do nowadays under pressure of their black colleagues, who will consider an uncircumcised colleague as a *kwedini* (small boy). The film was excluded from an exhibition on masculinity. Black artists thought that the ritual was not his. They also had objections against commercial aspects of the film. Pienaar reacted: "When people look at this exhibition twenty years from now, they're not going to see the same debate. They're going to see this as a time when white male Afrikaners were feeling oppressed by their identity" (*Mail & Guardian*, October 20, 2000). Old rituals, recent frustrations and political involvement of the artists converge in this event.

Other examples of 'the quest for identity' in South African literature are the many versions of Krotoä's story (cf. Malherbe 1990). That story is as follows: In Cape Town, in February 1669, two children were separated from their mother, a *Khoikhoi* woman who lived in a small house of the Dutch East Indian Company. She had the name of Eva and was the widow of Pieter van Meerhoff, a Company's physician. The children came under the custody of a member of the Dutch community and became the founders of Afrikaner families. Krotoä was banned to Robben Island, where she died. Her role as ancestor of Afrikaner families was denied for a very long time. However, after centuries, many versions and interpretations of the story came into being. Now, Krotoä is called 'our mother'. She has become a metaphor for alienation and loss. Like Ouma Kristna in Brink's novel, she is a woman who became a symbol of reconciliation and healing. Coetzee (2000) has described how 'Krotoä' got meaning for the Afrikaans speaking part of the South African population. In one version, Krotoä is a symbol for the city. Cape Town is the mother city; the first city where the Afrikaner history started. Here, Krotoä is a good mother for her children, who were separated from her by a cruel, white father. Modern versions of the story wish to get rid of the comparison mother-city. They accuse 'the city' of racism and intolerance against the black people. Their focus is on the mother, not on the white father. Europe meets Africa. Krotoä is a symbolic champion and the mother of everyone. The political gain of this story is that 'mixed blood' is recognised and that the Khoikhoi had their share in the community. Other versions of the story, like that of Pieternella, an Afrikaner performer, show attempts of reconciliation and unity. Coetzee (2000), however, concludes that there is a risk. Recent interpretations of the story enable people to link their descent with ancestors and to look for their roots in South Africa. Some people make great effort to show that they are relatives of Krotoä by means of amateur genealogical research! But the risk of such interpretations is that deep trauma, conflict and obliteration will be forgotten.

Who and what are the South African artists? Are all the forms of art of the different groups appropriate spaces for remembering and reconciliation? The international world seems to see various groups and different degrees of art. Not all forms of art are present on the international level. The borders and boundaries of white, coloured or black artists, which were so heavily contested during apartheid, have been repressed. But they are certainly not absent. The story of Krotoä may be an attempt to blur categorisation and division, but it may also reflect fears of remembrance. Other attempts to get away from trauma and to reconciliate people are the cross-pollinations through arts. South African history and art can be found on the walls of buildings and on shelters in the townships. When one walks or drives on the roads that stretch in straight lines through heaps of shacks and houses and remind people of the police raids during the Apartheid struggle, one sees on the walls little texts, poems and paintings. Those colourful birds seem to have escaped the urban jungle of rawness and chaos. Hacking (1996) argues that the things that are forgotten offer more possibilities to shape the past than those that are remembered. He speaks of "indeterminacy of the past":

> When new descriptions become available, when they come into circulation, or even when they become the sorts of things that it is all right to say, to think, there are new things to choose to do. When new intentions become open to me, because new descriptions, new concepts, become available to me, I live in a new world of opportunities (Hacking 1996: 236).

Art centres in South Africa, like the centre of Cecil Skotnes in Johannesburg, became places where people from different backgrounds and races can work together. The art works are rooted in tradition, new technology, myths, magical fantasies and the harsh reality of everyday life. On the one hand works like those of Marion Arnold and Helen Sebidi, a white and a black woman who work together in order to come to terms with their roles as white and black women, generate contemplation and give pleasure. On the other hand, they also come up with memorable images of a confusing world. Art was always there in South Africa, but it was not in the centre of the society for a long time; or it was framed in ethnographic museums as exotic and traditional. Now art is 'hot'. Galleries want it, museums exhibit it, tourists buy it when they visit the whales of Hermanus at the Western Cape Coast, and publishers print it. A quick Internet search on South African art produces over 300 000 webpages. I did not speak about music, which is also an essential part of South African art. A provoking idea to me is that while the famous symphony orchestra of Cape Town is wrestling with financial problems in order to survive, jazz and old African songs flourish in almost every part of the cities and villages. The South African legends, sung by Miriam Makeba are famous and known by many. Jam sessions are held in the townships and young musicians fuse contradictory music; they combine the raw essence of the blues with traditional rhythms and traditional jazz structures.

Art hounts the innocent city dweller like the birds that follow Ouma Kristina in *Imaginings of Sand*. Maybe they are the messengers of the past, promising reconciliation, or peace, or of a new country. The birds of Ouma Kristina enter her room and sit down on her death bed. Ironically she asks her granddaughter:

"Do you believe in God, Kristien?" I honestly do not know what to say. Her lips move again. I press my ear to her mouth. "If there is a God", she says, "why am I allergic to feathers?"

Allergy and memory

In the toilets of the new community centre of Philippi, I only could imagine the meaning of the colourful art. In the stories of people I only guessed the depth of memories but I did not even know whether those memories were about things that had actually happened. It did not matter. Literature, art searches the past, which could be narrated for many years. Language and images conceal more than they reveal. It is fascinating that a story, a poem, an image touches reality, but also creates a new social and personal reality. Often the memory is not meant to be a memory. It may be redemption of memory.

I remember a prominent therapist, who works with traumatised refugees in the Netherlands. He was about to present a lecture about his work, but when he stood on the stage, he threw away his papers and spoke of his despair and powerlessness to relieve the suffering of his clients. I found his 'narration' more convincing than his undelivered lecture. Now I realise that the man did not try to explain sickness, but struggled out of it in a language that differed from his jargon. That language revealed to me the speaker's allergy to misery.

Art in societies with a violent past has a similar allergy. It seeks the past, not the truth. It has to be a past to live with. The difficulty to artists in societies where violence and violation of human rights were (and are) prominent, is that the reality is often too fantastic to be shaped by imagination and even memory (cf. Moyana 1976). When the world is too fantastic to be told, stories will be less linked to the 'facts'. They will be the building blocks of metaphors and symbols. The relationships between those blocks are known but strange. They produce a version of reality people can live with. They make a story of what is not a story (Greenspan 1986). The stories that art tells must not be approached in terms of what they result from, but in terms of what they point toward. Individual memories as well as collective ones tend to restore coherence, belonging and possibly redemption, notwithstanding the deep resistance at the individual level or at the level of different groups in a society. Maybe, art will reintroduce the individual, sometimes mythic memory into an overall representation. It confronts political decisions and decrees that neutralise the despair, pain and misery. It will keep watch over meaning and answer the question: "Wie is ons en waar kom ons vandaan?" (Van Heerden 2000).

Notes

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1 Per 100.000 people 26.63 murders by gunshot annually. South Africa is second to Colombia, which has 53.99 murders per 100.000 people!

2 A quote from Hamber and Lewis: 'South African Police Service (SAPS) figures indicate that in 1996 there were a total of 25 782 reported murders, 28 516 attempted murders and 12 860 car hijackings. In terms of sexual violence, there were a total of 50 481 rapes. South African children are not exempt form violence. In 1996, 20 333 crimes of a sexual nature were reported to the Child Protection Units, while there were 8 626 reported assaults of children.'

3 Freedom is not only the freedom to say what one wants, but also how one wishes. The Afrikaner people were long enough not free to think what they want. I am not intending to let myself being placed in a prison of style.

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