Indigenous Posthumanism: Rewriting Anthropology in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*

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Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale* considers the construction of the human in the twentieth century by staging a series of encounters between the discipline of anthropology, particularly the structuralist school of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and multiple generations of an Amerindian family and community. Set in the savannahs, jungles and cities of modern-day Guyana, the novel is certainly *not* one in which indigenous people are depicted in timeless harmony with nature. Rather, after a short prologue, part one of the novel opens with the news that a herd of cattle — one of the prime sources of income for Chofy McKinnon and his extended family — has been attacked by vampire bats; the cattle are all dead or dying and the humans' lives will soon be turned upside down too. The bat attack introduces a world in which the relations between the human characters and their nonhuman others are being constantly remade, and a novel in which the terms of traditional anthropological discourse, including civilisation—primitiveness, nature—culture, progress—timelessness, and myth—science are undone by the text's indigenous posthumanism and its proposed politics and ethics of entanglement.

Thinking about the posthuman, Karen Barad suggests, is a means "not to blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman, not to cross out all distinctions and differences, and not to simply invert humanism, but rather to understand the materialising effects of particular ways of drawing boundaries between 'humans' and 'nonhumans'" ("Nature's" 31). Precisely such a boundary-drawing function is performed by the discipline of anthropology and its production of knowledge, which both depend upon and simultaneously perform the definition of the human and the recognition of certain people, certain objects of study, as human (Agamben). An interrogation of anthropological knowledge, such as that offered by Melville's novel, is thus necessarily a posthuman endeavour in Barad's sense. In addition, the text's collection of Amerindian cyborgs from the early to late twentieth century suggests that the posthuman is neither a new nor a particularly Western phenomenon. By writing posthumanism into the past as well as the present and future, the novel offers a corrective to work that understands posthuman thinking to be relevant only to recent or future technological advances or social changes (Mitchell), just as it counters arguments within the discipline of anthropology that concepts such as 'culture' and 'the human' need rethinking due only to new technologies or social forms (Strong). Secondly, the posthuman nature of Amerindian life and culture challenges anthropological notions of primitiveness as well as the "often unmarked Euro-American focus" in some posthuman thinking (Livingstone and Puar 5). Thus while

several critics have discussed — and come to differing conclusions on — the novel's engagement with contemporary indigenous identity and what Paula Burnett terms indigenous "survival politics" (Burnett 25, Shemak, Misrahi-Barak, Braz), I argue that the text engages with these questions on a more fundamental level than has generally been acknowledged. Certainly, it addresses the question of what it means to be indigenous, but it does so, I argue, in the context of the question of what it means to be human.

Towards the end of the novel, in a scene set in Georgetown, Guyana in the mid-1990s, the finance minister of Guyana makes an appearance. Caught between the pincers of foreign debt, the demands of the IMF and the neoliberal reform agenda of the USA, he imagines the option of turning the country into "an enormous theme park for tourists. They would re-create their history as a spectacle. People could act being slaves. Ships full of indentured labourers would arrive in the docks. Visitors would stare at Amerindian villages where the villagers would be obliged to return to traditional dress and customs" (Melville 324). In this fantasy, Amerindian people are forced to play at being 'native' — a timeless, primitive, picturesque version of themselves, a Western fantasy of 'authentic' and therefore valuable indigeneity for the tourism industry. The visitors would "stare" at the Indians, whose job it would be to remain static. The landscape, too, is still and passive, providing only the framing of the scene. This scene thus recreates in carnivalesque form Claude Lévi-Strauss's vision of the scene of anthropology as described by Johannes Fabian: "For Lévi-Strauss the ethnographer is first and foremost a viewer (and perhaps voyeur). ... It invokes the 'naturalist' watching an experiment. It also calls for a native society that would, ideally at least, hold still like a tableau vivant" (67). The theme park of Guyanese history imagined by the embattled finance minister would fulfil the fantasies not only of cruise ship tourists, but (some) Western scholars, too. Melville's novel takes on this anthropological tradition with sly wit, taking particular aim at the work of Lévi-Strauss (as is made clear with the introduction of Michael Wormoal, a Czech structural anthropologist in town to give a paper entitled "The Structural Elements of Myth"). The bulk of the novel, which precedes this scene, works to overturn this anthropological vision in multiple ways, upsetting its spacetime, its notion of primitiveness, and its conceptualisation of human ontology and relationality.

The Ventriloquist's Tale does not only offer a critique of anthropology; it is also a novel which thinks deeply about time, space and physics (see also DeLoughrey and James for two different readings of the novel's engagement with quantum physics). Quantum mechanics, relativity, post-Newtownian physics and non-Euclidean geometry are all at work in the novel, set in a land in which "some rivers run backwards" (Melville 36). These two strands of the novel are not separate, nor do they represent a particularly surprising combination. Rather, the novel's engagement with quantum physics is central to and entangled with its critique of anthropology, for "anthropology achieved its scientific respectability by adopting an essentially Newtonian physicalism ... at a moment near the end of the nineteenth century when

the outlines of post-Newtownian physics ... were clearly visible" (Fabian 16). The rivers that flow backwards show that the time of the novel is not linear time, and thus the novel rejects the spacetime which conjoins colonialism and anthropology. This imperial time, Adam Barrows argues, is conceptualised as "a river with one source, one outlet, and one even rate of flow" (71). According to Fabian, the discipline of anthropology provided late-nineteenth-century colonialism with this linear time as a tool of domination: "Anthropology contributed above all to the intellectual justification of the colonial enterprise. ... It promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time — some upstream, others downstream" (17). This anthropological colonial time is undone in the novel by a cosmic event which offers a glimpse of the materialising effects of the interaction of matter and discourse: the solar eclipse of 1919. Observations of the eclipse at the time offered empirical evidence of Einstein's theory of relativity via photographs of the bending of light around the sun; its inclusion in the novel shows up anthropology as a project that has always been out-of-joint with its time, a sort of pre-modern remnant, perversely attached to primitive mythologies of linearity, continuity and identity — all of the characteristics, that is, that traditional anthropology foisted on its favourite object of study, indigenous peoples. At the same time, the eclipse upsets ontological certainty and thus the borders between humans and nonhumans, suggesting that a different ontology and, as a result, a different politics is required.

In Part One of the novel, set in the mid-1990s, Chofy McKinnon, a Wapisiana man from the Rupununi savannahs of present-day Guyana, finds himself struggling with his place in the landscape, his desire for and fear of cultural and personal change, and the material pressures brought by migration and altered economic and trading practices. Although he believes that "his existence was tied into the landscape and the seasons, rainy or dry," he also feels "a small worm of dissatisfaction with his own life" (Melville 14). He is torn between this nagging desire for change and his conviction that "any change was the beginning of disintegration" (15). After Chofy moves from the savannahs to the capital, Georgetown, to look for work after the farming disaster caused by the vampire bats, he continues to worry about indigenous identity and futurity. His cousin Tenga offers a bitter summary of the situation: "We're destroyed if we mix. And we're destroyed if we don't" (55). The two men's concerns, and their conversation, are soon echoed, albeit from an abstracted and 'scientific' perspective, in a conversation between two visiting European scholars, the anthropologist Wormoal and the British literary scholar Rosa Mendelson: "It is a shame how rapidly Indian culture is disintegrating these days — contaminated mainly by contact with other races," says Wormoal; "I'm an internationalist, I suppose. I believe in a mixture of the races," Rosa replies (78).

An answer to some of these concerns is provided soon afterwards. Chofy's elderly aunt Wifreda, who is also in Georgetown for an operation on her cataracts, experiences a long flashback to her childhood, which forms Part Two of the novel. The shift from

Part One, set in the 1990s, to Part Two, set in the early twentieth century, is introduced by Wifreda's sudden blindness after her operation; in the darkness, she hears her sister Beatrice's voice recalling childhood memories. Thus the novel returns to the past, rewriting and reworking it, to offer an answer to Chofy's questions and worries about his own future and the future of indigenous culture and identity, while implicitly responding to the visiting Europeans scholars as well. Begun in blindness "like a termite" (Melville 88), it eschews the medium of vision, thus breaking with both the tradition in which "the figure of vision is indeed ineluctably tied to the specifically human" (Wolfe 3), which Wolfe traces from Freud, and the Lévi-Straussian "voyeur" identified by Fabian. A simultaneous reliance on and realisation of the inadequacy of vision also plagued early colonists, the novel suggests, who were driven mad by "a fear of the existence of something they could not see" (Melville 36-37). Rather than this maddening sense of individual inadequacy, the story recalled by Wifreda and passed on to Chofy during her blindness is one which emphasises dependence on both multiple senses and multiple others, rather than the autonomy of an all-seeing I/eye.

This early twentieth-century section of the novel challenges both Michael Wormoal's notion of Amerindian cultural decline and contamination, and Chofy's own worry that cultural change means disintegration, by offering an alternative conception of cultural change and identity — one which emphasises continuity through change and refuses both essentialist and static notions of identity or belonging, and which offers instead a relational model of indigenous identity formed by work on and in the landscape. Part Two of the novel charts some of the changes taking place in the Amerindian community depicted in the early twentieth century — with Catholic missionary work appearing to have perhaps the greatest cultural impact — but it steadily refuses any sense of victimisation, not least by maintaining a light-hearted tone almost throughout. In the indigenous communities portrayed, early-twentieth-century colonial rule and late-twentieth-century neocolonial exploitation are not erased, and their harms not denied, but they are decentered. Through this decentering, even marginalisation, of colonialism the text insists on multiple different histories —for example of indigenous sovereignty and hospitality — and thus suggests the possibility of alternative futures. In this way, the novel pursues a similar strategy to that proposed by Wilson Harris, who suggests that literature listing "catalogues of injustices" or promoting "irreconcilable differences — irreconcilable frontiers — irreconcilable ghettos" obeys "a static clock that crushes all into the time of conquest" (45). In response to Harris's call for an alternative to this "dead time" (45), The Ventriloquist's Tale presents us with a quantum time of entanglement which demands a reconceptualisation of the relationship between humans and their environment.

The plot of Part Two is dominated by the incestuous affair of two of Wifreda's siblings, Beatrice and Danny, and its repercussions and reverberations. This too is a challenge and a re-writing of Lévi-Strauss and his theory of the incest taboo as the foundational threshold of human culture and community. In Lévi-Strauss's terms, this threshold has not been properly crossed in the Amerindian community in the novel, for

while the incestuous relationship is greeted with some disapproval, it is considered neither taboo nor particularly unusual. Rather than shying away from this liminal position of the human/subhuman, the novel pursues it: the incestuous couple are compared to animals like the tapir and to magnetic rocks. The affair also has a mythical and cosmological element in the eyes of the Amerindian characters: according to a widespread Amerindian myth, recounted several times in several versions in the novel, the sun and moon were once sibling-lovers too. The incestuous affair combines with the novel's overturning of what Mel Chen terms the "animacy hierarchy" (13): a descending chain of value from human life to animal life, plant life and nonliving matter. Starting with the narrator's claim of kinship with rocks in the novel's prologue —"I will have you know that I am descended from a group of stones in Ecuador," he proclaims (Melville 2) — the text presents a series of relationships which can be understood as a kind of posthuman queering that operates by transgressing animacy categories and "violating proper intimacies (including between humans and nonhuman things)" (Chen 11). This is particularly evident in the posthuman sexuality of Beatrice, whose partners, prior to her brother, range from the intense heat of the sun's rays to the colours of certain scarlet and blue flowers particular wavelengths of light and energy which are once again spectrally anthropomorphised when her sexual practices are described as "making love with ghosts" (Melville 128).

This porous border between humans and nonhumans is emphasised both by the poetics of the text and by its invocation of an alternative myth of the beginnings of human culture (discussed below). Part Two contains myriad examples of both anthropomorphising and various iterations of its reverse technique, or kinds of 'thingomorphising'. Apparent anthropomorphising, such as the intelligence and "imagination" attributed to "ventriloquist" jaguars (Melville 199-200), may be understood to function as "an intervention for shaking loose the crusty toxic scales of anthropocentricism" (Barad, "Nature's" 27) by questioning whether such properties are or have ever been solely the domain of the human. Characters in the novel are also repeatedly given the characteristics of various animals, plants, fungi, rocks, geometrical patterns and quantum particles. For example, after Beatrice and Danny begin a sexual relationship, they are described as lodestones, savannah rocks which "become magnetised and it is impossible to prise them apart" (Melville 170). The novel thus challenges both anthropocentrism and the expected domain of the posthuman. The text's posthuman tendencies are to be found not only in "nonhuman entities that seem to take on organic, lifelike, or 'autopoietic' characteristics" (Mitchell xiii), but also in human characters that take on the features of nonhuman others, and in 'improper' intimacies between them.

The novel's engagement of the spectre of the subhuman does not endorse but rather overturns narratives of linear progress, thereby challenging the very notion of primitiveness. The 'subhuman' is also posthuman and cyborg: the porous borders of the human towards animal, plant and mineral categories also expose cyborg tendencies

towards entanglement with machines, apparatuses and technologies. It questions presumed differences between Amerindian and Western technological sophistication and scientific knowledge so that the status of 'technologically advanced' is removed from the West, just as it challenges the fantasy of technology-free, 'pure', or primitive indigenous cultures. One example of this is provided by a comparison between the reading practices of Alexander McKinnon, an ethnic Scotsman who lives in the Guyanese savannahs, and Maba, one of his two Wapisiana wives. The European newspapers which occasionally arrive at their ranch have talismanic properties for McKinnon. Despite being years out of date, torn, yellowing and only semi-readable, they enable him to feel connected to "the world at large" (Melville 177), by which he means events on the European continent — a place which, as far as we know, he has never even visited, having been born to missionaries in Jamaica. It is in one of these newspapers that he reads about the approaching solar eclipse and the scientific expeditions planned to test the theory of relativity during the eclipse. A short time later, Maba, wife to McKinnon and mother to Beatrice and Danny (the sibling-lovers, who have run away from the ranch following the discovery of their affair), decides that her husband's understanding of news, important events and even the meaning of the eclipse are so inadequate that she must seek answers herself:

She decided then and there to consult her father about the whole business. McKinnon seemed so completely unaware of what was happening.

Her father had died two years earlier. His bones hung in a gaily beaded and feathered basket from one of the rafters. She took them down. His spirit, she reckoned, must be almost gone from them by now. Still, she took them out carefully and threw them on the dried-earth floor to study the pattern.

Several things happened almost simultaneously. A cloud crossed the sun, throwing the room into darkness and making the bones invisible. The house filled with the oily, bittersweet smell of citrus trees and Mamai Maba heard a sort of groan rolling around the room. (Melville 208-09)

The novel thus sets up a number of parallels between Maba and McKinnon's ways of reading: both read media that are difficult to decipher, unreliable, and rather old. Despite this, and although the messages they receive or decode are vague, out of date, or difficult to contextualise, both McKinnon and Maba have great faith in their reading technologies. Even as the objectivity, truthfulness and relevance of McKinnon's newspapers are put into doubt by the comparison to the magic conjured by the bones, this comparison also reveals Maba's practice of bone reading as a cultural practice similar to McKinnon's reading of newspapers. The bones themselves are thereby represented as a communication technology, crossing over from the realm of the human to the non-human after death, or blurring the border between these categories once again. At the same time, the efficacy of both characters' reading (and writing) practices are thrown into doubt: the cloud which covers the sun and the strong smell of citrus trees after Maba reads the bones are impressive, but they seemingly work to obscure any message, only making it harder to read whatever the bones might have to

say. In a similar way, the information contained in McKinnon's newspapers not only about the eclipse, but also about World War I — his reading about "the bravery of the Canadian troops; the losses; the number of casualties" (Melville 178) — clearly cannot convey, and McKinnon consequently remains unable to imagine, the reality of war: the stench of the many things rotting in the trenches or the effect of weeks of rain on the mud of Flanders in autumn 1917. This crisis of representation reveals language as murky and obscure. Furthermore, reading and writing are shown to be not — or not only — products of human agency or entirely within human control, throwing into doubt another key marker of the human. Indeed, the novel has suggested as much from the very beginning: the prologue features scenes of the narrator fishing words like moss-covered stones out of a lake; words which then take control of the story and "choose" the fisherman as their ventriloquist-narrator.

For McKinnon, who is excited by any and all newness and experimentation, the eclipse represents a chance for him, as an amateur photographer, to feel part of the scientific expeditions taking place at the same time. Maba and Zuna, his wives, have a different attitude towards the eclipse. Maba remembers that an eclipse is "a brother and sister coming together and eloping", while her sister Zuna explains that an eclipse "is a disgrace. It brings chaos. ... And everything can change into something else. Animals into people. People into animals. The dead and the living all mix up" (Melville 180-81). Zuna's concerns about the transgressive power of the eclipse recalls another eclipse story told to Danny by his uncle: "a long time ago we could all speak the language of plants and animals. Animals was people like we. ... When the eclipse was over and the sun became itself again, we Wapisiana people had lost our immortality and we could no longer speak to the plants and animals" (Melville 122-23). For the Wapisiana, the eclipse has the power to upset the established order of things: to separate humans from animals and plants, or to mix them up again. It has happened at least once, according to the story told by Danny's uncle, and Maba and Zuna fear it might happen again. The Amerindian science therefore understands the power of the 1919 eclipse far more accurately than McKinnon's notion of Western progress: although Western scholars like Michael Wormoal may still not realise it decades later, the particular age of the human upon which he relies has been brought to an end by the advent of quantum mechanics. At the same time, the Amerindian focus on the power of the eclipse on language suggests once again that language and representation are not autonomous human capacities, but rather processes of materialisation which emerge from interactions (or intra-actions) between human, nonhuman, and even cosmic bodies.

A few years after the 1919 eclipse both the advent of a new ontology and the materialising performativity of language become clear when numerous discourses — of relativity, incest and mythology — come together and simultaneously materialise in the figure of Sonny. Sonny is the child of Beatrice and Danny, conceived during the eclipse. The child of an incestuous union, he is conceived in Lévi-Strauss's terms at the threshold of the human and human culture. Conceived during the delayed dawn of

relativity (the moment of empirical evidence some years after the theory), he also marks another threshold of humanism: the advent of a time, space and physicalism which undoes not only the linear time of anthropology, but also humanism's notions of identity and being. In the terms of the Amerindian eclipse myths related by the text, Sonny confirms the eclipse's power to upset the established order of things. Sonny is an odd, queer child; described as a "singularity" and a "walking event horizon", he is a figure of indeterminacy: "no one knew what went on inside" (Melville 283). Characters in the novel (just as critics of the novel) cannot decide whether he is precociously intelligent or intellectually disabled, a real child or a figure of mythology. This border between text and material world is further destabilised when Sonny later disappears and, through another time- and mind-wrenching twist, seems to have become the original narrator of the text. Small, asocial and strange, "he managed to be there and not to be there at the same time" (285). He is like a quantum indeterminacy, like an electron in a quantum superposition. The text ascribes an ontological uncertainty or indeterminacy to Sonny; the moment of the eclipse, in which "everything can change into something else," has not passed, but remains an enduring state of becoming. Such ontological indeterminacy, Karen Barad argues, "radically undo[es] classical notions of identity and being" ("Quantum Entanglements" 251).

The text thus offers an alternative ontology which not only defies the categories of anthropology, but which also demands new forms of ethical relationality. Barad suggests that accepting indeterminacy in the nature of being and becoming, rather than remaining attached to clearly definable ontologies and identities, would lead to an ethics of entanglement rather than separation. An ethics of entanglement also means putting an end to the nature–culture binary and moving beyond an understanding of culture as a supplement to a nature deemed inadequate, passive or meaningless; instead, we might understand "culture as something nature does" (Barad, "Nature's" 47). This ethics would recognise and demand our "relations of obligation — being bound to the other" in "specific material relations" of human and nonhuman, living and nonliving others, resulting in a "diffraction/dispersion of identity" (Barad, "Nature's" 47). These relations are neither universal nor fixed, but rather open to reworking and reconfiguration, part of a process of constant materialisation and differentiation.

In Part Three of the novel, after the long flashback from Wifreda in Part Two, the story returns to the mid-1990s to offer yet another answer to the questions of survival and identity posed in Part One. Just as Chofy is becoming more confident amongst the mix of people in the city — and in his passionate affair with the British literary scholar Rosa — tragedy strikes. Chofy's young son, Bla-Bla, is mortally injured by an explosive charge set by employees of the American Hawk Oil company, who are prospecting for oil in the savannahs. The child's death casts a grim light on the debates of Part One. Tenga's prediction — "We're destroyed if we mix. And we're destroyed if we don't" — might seem to be proven correct. Chofy's initial feelings of intense guilt and disorientation after his son's death confirm this sense of doom: "he felt that he had

lost not only a child but a whole continent" (Melville 345). But after Bla-Bla's death, Chofy returns to the savannahs with his wife Marietta, and the concluding pages of Part Three suggest that there he finds a sort of peace, despite his grief, in his renewed connections to the landscape and his work. Soon he feels that "in the savannahs his son's death seemed contained within a certain order of things and not just an extra, random confusion, as everything was in the city" (Melville 349). Chofy's renewed sense of himself as part of his landscape, family and community is not essential or pregiven; rather, his sense of identity and relationships to others have been (re-)enabled and newly shaped by his experiences in the city. This demonstrates that while Tenga's fears of destruction are not ungrounded, there is another risk that, as articulated by Wilson Harris, "If we succumb to a blackhearted stasis — to enclosures of fear — we may destroy ourselves" (33). Harris's suggestion that "we begin to immerse ourselves in a new capacity or treaty of sensibility between alien cultures" in order to "bring into play a new variable imagination or renascence of sensibility" is not limited to only "the necessary diversity and necessary unity of man" (33), as Harris suggests, but is expanded in Melville's novel to the complex entanglements of human and nonhuman bodies. The novel thus insists on indigenous futures, emphatically rejecting colonialanthropological discourses of indigenous extinction (Forte), without insisting on any ontology of indigeneity.

This entangled ontology and ethics, in Barad's terms, also demands a new politics one which takes account of this interrelationality — and it is to this that the novel gestures in its final pages. Jasbir Puar suggests that rather than a politics of representation, which both requires and reproduces human exceptionalism and a humanist subject, we should consider a politics of assemblage or agencement: "assemblages do not privilege bodies as human, nor as residing within a human animal/nonhuman animal binary. Along with a de-exceptionalizing of human bodies, multiple forms of matter can be bodies — bodies of water, cities, institutions, and so on. Matter is an actor" (57). The crass question of the Hawk Oil man — "Was the little guy insured?" (Melville 347) — in response to Bla-Bla's death demonstrates the limits of the "dead time" of capital, labour and territory (Harris), and the notion of justice realisable within this spacetime. Chofy's silence in response offers the first hint of the need for a different, "non-subject-oriented politics" (Puar 50). This politics, and this spacetime, is one that cannot be limited to indigenous people, but necessarily extends beyond indigenous identity without erasing its specificity. To this end, the novel refuses to resolve the questions that remain open regarding specifically Amerindian futurity. The final anthropological desire to objectively 'know', analyse or understand this contemporary indigenous culture is denied to us, and at the end of the novel we are forced to leave Guyana with the European scholars Rosa and Wormoal, certain only that Wormoal's final boast — "I think I know as much as it's possible to know about the eclipse mythology in these parts" (Melville 351) — could hardly be more mistaken.

The original trickster narrator from the prologue, also an ontologically indeterminate figure who seems both mythical and all too human, returns in the epilogue. He recalls his travels in Europe and the "epidemic of separatism" he experienced there (Melville 355), followed by his return to South America to witness the neocolonial exploitation of indigenous knowledge and environmental resources and widespread environmental destruction. Both of these are phrased as bodily ailments: the transmutable "virus" of separatism in Europe (355), which may manifest as racism, nationalism or religious orthodoxy, and the apparent cancer affecting denuded forests and tumorous parrots in South America. The novel thus moves from the apparently isolated tragedy of Bla-Bla's death to more insidious and widespread, but no less deadly, forms of "slow violence" (Nixon), and from the specific context of indigenous survival to planetary futurity, thus suggesting the broad scope that a politics of entanglement would necessarily entail. It suggests connections and similarities between the violence of pollution, environmental destruction, racism and nationalism while insisting on a shared, global spacetime in which indigenous people not only suffer disproportionate harms, but also share responsibility both for environmental exploitation and for future conservation. An indigenous posthumanism which accounts for our relations of obligations to all others and our mutual becoming might offer the possibility for the survival, which means the ongoing differentiation and becoming, of all our worlds.

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