

Abstract: This article examines how the legacy of early modern French cultural mores, colonialism, and Orientalism have shaped and reshaped popular culture like comic books and film and thus impacted public perceptions of Islamic populations, particularly those in France in the early years of the twenty first century. Using the example of *Batman, Inc.*'s "Nightrunner," this article traces how Orientalist tropes and traditions continue to pervade our discussion of Middle Eastern and Islamic peoples and the discussion of knowledge and knowledge production. What is more, the article examines how anti-hijab and anti-burkha legislation is rooted in *charivari* traditions and is an interesting addition to the mask : superhero :: veil : Other mentality.

Keywords: French veil controversy, Islam, Batman, Nightrunner, Orientalism, immigration, American conservatism, 2005 riots, burkha, hijab, migration, charivari

Short Title: *Mask or Veil*

The Mask or the Veil: Unraveling the Cultural Discourse in France and Popular Culture **By Maryanne Rhett**

In dealing with the legacy of colonialism and Orientalism, Western countries find their increasingly cosmopolitan populations in conflict with ethnic prejudices and xenophobia. The disconnect created by assumptions about peoples and cultures and the realities of an increasingly globalized society have created tensions on the streets of major cities, on the silver screen, and throughout the pages of academic and non-academic literature. The global nature of this conflict situates specific examples, like those of modern France, throughout the fluid levels of historical discussion. This article examines how popular culture, like comic books and film, struggles with the complicated nature of twentieth and twenty-first century cultural discord, as situated squarely in the aftermath of colonial and Orientalist heritage and alongside cultural mores older still.

Historical Background

In modern Europe, France specifically, legal codes are, as a rule, uniformly enforced across geographic breadth of the state. In early modern France, however, resources and access limited the reach of the formal legal system, and where formal law had a circumscribed influence, local practice filled in the gaps, creating a cultural whole of “correct behavior.” In her ground-breaking work *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Natalie Zemon Davis discusses, in part, the power of the charivari in enforcing the cultural norms of early modern French society.¹ Charivari -- public, community performances demonstrating disapproval, for things like “unnatural marriages” -- reinforced the norms of the community by shaming individuals or couples into “proper action.” In the modern state, where the reach of law is more absolute the hint of the charivari past is nevertheless evident in what Arnold S. Rosenberg, describes as “motivational laws,”

of those rules and principles, a purpose or function of which is to motivate people to comply with laws that regulate their conduct toward each other or their environment. Motivational laws include obscenity and censorship laws, religious laws on diet, dress, liturgy and ritual, military disciplinary rules, “soft law,” the doctrine of consideration in contract law, and even procedural due process.²

Despite the fundamental political shifts which France has undergone since the era of Martin Guerre, the civic engagement in the enforcement of what society deems “correct” remains strong, most notably today in the guise of anti-hijab and anti-burkha legislation.

Between the era of the charivari and the present, France has undergone significant cultural changes. Following World War II most European states found themselves facing large labor shortages. In France, as an example, the quickest solution to the economic problems these

¹Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*(Boston: Harvard University Press, 1983), 20.

² Arnold S. Rosenberg, "Motivational Law,"(http://works.bepress.com/arnold_rosenberg/12007).

shortages posed lay in colonial and former colonial holdings. As the processes of labor recruitment and citizenship was revised, waves of North and West Africans and Southeast Asians moved to France. Needed only for their labor, not as cultural emissaries, none of these populations were considered permanent additions. Both the French state and the immigrants themselves, in this first wave of migration, believed this was a temporary state of being, and that the migrant labor force would return home, in turn, to aid their native lands in economic development.³ This is not how the story played out, and “Despite the many efforts to exclude or deport immigrants, post-World War II France has become one of the most multi-ethnic societies on the continent.”⁴ The immigrant populations stayed, married or brought families with them, and new generations of French Algerians were born, markedly changing the cultural landscape of their new homeland.

There are a number of changes that came to post-colonial metropolises like France, but one of the most notable is the repercussion of this migration on the question of religious freedom, a central tenet of the modern French state. A large number of those immigrants who came to France after World War II came from Islamic countries, and their inclusion in the largely Catholic French culture was perceived by some as an unsettling dynamic to be curbed in order to protect “Frenchness.” Despite the “perception among social scientists, often assumed rather than stated, that Western Europe is essentially secular and that issues of church and state are no longer relevant to public policy,”⁵ recent laws and references in popular culture clearly indicate this is not the case.

³ Joel S. Fetzer and J. Christopher Soper, *Muslims and the State in Britain, France, and Germany*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 64.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

Minority and State Tensions: Popular Culture's Personifications

In the summer of 2005, France experienced large scale and widespread riots, first focused in the areas right around Paris, but quickly spreading to the entire country. The tensions that led to these riots were not limited to anti-Muslim legislation, but spoke more widely to the two culture environment emerging in modern France. Indeed, these tensions were explored a decade earlier in Mathew Kassovitz's film *La Haine (Hate)*, co-written by Saïd Taghmaoui. Kassovitz's work, which followed a day in the life of three young men living in Clichy-sous-Bois, was strikingly true to life. Kassovitz's co-author, Taghmaoui, is himself an important feature of this story, both in the film and behind the scenes. As a French citizen of Moroccan descent in real-life, Taghmaoui's Maghabi character "Saïd" personified the thousands of French North Africans trying to get by and do the right thing, but who were, and are, forced to witness brutal violence and be subjected to continual racial harassment. The film's other two main characters, a black man, "Hubert," played by Hubert Kounde, and a Jewish man, "Vinz," played by Vincent Cassel, navigate this life rife with tension and an environment of, as Hubert notes, "Hate [which] breeds Hate." *La Haine* explores the lack of employment and opportunity, racial profiling and discrimination, and in much the same way as Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* depicts the results of general boredom. Enveloped in the tropes of American cinema and music, e.g. references to *Taxi Driver* and use of French rap heavily laced with American influence, the film foreshadows the violence of 2005. A number of journalists and academics have noted that had France's policymakers taken the film's message seriously, the riots of 2005 could and should not have been much of a surprise.

La Haine is just one popular cultural example of the difficulties inherent in fusing some of France's most cherished national symbols: freedom, democracy, and cultural exceptionalism. See Submission Guidelines page for the journal's not-for-profit educational open-access policy

While these tensions are expressed in French cinema, one of the more profound outlets for exploring these issues actually comes from the American comic book industry. In the wake of then President George Bush's question "Why do they hate us?" the repercussions of a global cultural dialogue married strangely antagonistic parties. When France chose not to support the U.S. invasion of Iraq, anti-French sentiment heatedly sprang from the mouths of hawkish Americans. Even in the wake of this rhetoric, so strong among American conservatives, a pro-ethnic-French sentiment also surfaced. Perceived attacks on ethnic-Frenchness, became a rallying cry of bigoted, racialized, rhetoric. French nationalism and the tensions caused by minority rights in France are not limited to the borders of the French state. As *La Haine* reflected the global nature of French national rights, so too does the debate over the D.C. series *Batman, Inc.* and its character "Nightrunner."

How Batman Became a Proponent of Inclusive French Nationalism

To meet the interests of those seeking superheroes who look more like the world in which we live, the Batman series in 2010 integrated a new character and the very themes of *La Haine*. D.C.'s choice received a great deal of attention and support, as well as a certain amount of vitriol.⁶ As part of the on-going attempt at franchising the Batman concept (Batman Inc.) Bruce Wayne (aka Batman), has set out to create "Batmans" throughout the world. These men (and women) brought into the Batman business are combating rampant *global* crime. Bruce Wayne's decision to take the Batman image global is a conscious effort on the part of D.C. creators to acknowledge the borderlessness of the comic book world. In the case of France, Wayne enlists

⁶ It should be noted that on 31 May 2011 D.C. announced a "historic renumbering" that was to go into effect on 31 August 2011. According the D.C. announcement on "August 31st, DC Comics will launch a historic renumbering of the entire DC Universe line of comic books with 52 first issues." See: David Hyde, 31 May, 2011, <http://www.dccomics.com/blog/2011/05/31/dc-comics-announces-historic-renumbering-of-all-superhero-titles-and-landmark-day-and-date-digital-distribution> . Since August of 2011 the character most closely connected to this article, Nightrunner, has appeared a couple of times, but it is unclear how long his story arch will run.

the aid of a French Muslim of Algerian descent, Bilal Asselah. This member of the Batman repertoire represents a post-World War II generation of French citizenry.⁷ Asselah, or “Nightrunner.” is a young man unique to France and the French historical narrative. He is an avid practitioner of *parkour*, an activity made famous in the United States in a series of Nike advertisements from the early 2000s. In France, this urban phenomenon, was started by David Belle and Sebastien Foucan (the term “parkour” coined by Belle’s friend Hubert Kounde), and speaks to a number of truly French phenomena, especially, the layout of French metropolitan environments and the boredom associated with a youth culture which feels trapped in these urban settings.

A citizen of France and a Sunni Muslim, Asselah says that “I have lived in Paris my entire life, yet I have never lived in Paris. At least, not the ‘Paris’ I’ve heard about. Mine isn’t a city of culture and romance ... Mine is something **different.**”⁸ Although Asselah is the fictional product of an American sequential artist, he is also the symbolic bridge between Orientalist and post-Orientalist popular culture. He deconstructs not only the images established by Orientalist work, but their counterpoints in the European (Occident) world as well.

Bilal Asselah represents more than a French Algerian; he represents the twenty-first century France that must deal with its nineteenth and twentieth century selves. When approached to become part of the Batman, Inc. franchise Asselah is introduced to the job, as an option to become someone who is more than a fighter, someone “to unite a city ... someone who does not fight for one side, but who fights for one *goal.*”⁹ This goal, justice for all, is attainable for a person like Asselah, not because he is a minority, Muslim, or a man, but because in wearing the

⁷ Asselah, or “Nightrunner,” is first introduced in *Batman Annual #12* and then carried into #28, both released in 2010.

⁸ David Hine, *Batman Annual #12* (DC Comics, 2010). Emphasis original, 46.

⁹ *Ibid.*

mask he can fight for justice “without sparking racial or ethnic retaliation.”¹⁰ Ironically, for Asselah, the veil equalizes him; for French Muslim women, the mask forces them to stand a part.

Politics and Backlash

While Asselah certainly represents the sentiments expressed in *La Haine*, he is also a component of the controversy facing France over the definition of French secularism and religious freedom, and how far the separation of Church and State needs to be taken. By the 1990s, controversy flourished as the cultural landscape of France appeared to be redefining itself. One aspect of this dispute centered on the right of schoolgirls to wear the Islamic *hijab* (the modest, but by no means ultra-conservative Islamic headdress more commonly referred to as “the veil”) in public schools. Ultimately deemed too much a signifier of religion for state sponsored schools, the hijab was banned in 2004.¹¹ Emboldened by this particular turn of events, conservatives in France moved further into an anti-Islamic dress agenda, proclaiming a desire to maintain a strict separation of “Church and State” in France, by bringing through an outright ban on the *burkah* (the most conservative form of Islamic dress for women, most well-known for its relationship to the culture of Talibani Afghanistan). This was ultimately accomplished in July 2010 with a nearly unanimous vote in the National Assembly.¹² Tensions centered on the veil mirrored other frustrations experienced by minority populations across France, not only those felt by Muslims. The veil became emblematic of the rights of minority groups who suffer significantly higher jobless rates, poorer standards of living, and a good deal of racial inequality

¹⁰ibid.

¹¹ Law 2004-228, the French law banning the hijab also *appears* to include restrictions on other religious signifiers including “large” crosses and stars of David as well as yarmulkes. The language of the law is relatively vague however, so it also seems that small crosses or stars of David are acceptable. The key to the law seems to be “ostentatious displays of religion.”

¹² According to Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, “As of January 2012, only six Muslim women had been fined for wearing the forbidden veil since the law was passed.” See: to Contemporary Affairs, <http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/countries/france>.

in comparison to their ethnically French counterparts. The veil engendered fear and xenophobia in real-life France, but a mask, in essence the same protective garment as a veil, acted as an equalizing force, making a French-Algerian Muslim the savior of metaphorical and physical France, bringing the French mainstream into conversation with an increasingly globalized popular culture.

The connections between Asselah's mask and a French Muslim woman's veil are numerous, but for our purposes let us consider two particular points. First, Asselah represents an immigrant population invited to come to France in his very maleness. The first waves of immigrants to France after World War II, after all were "heavily male, ... often [leaving] their [wives] and children in the country of origin."¹³ Women who had not come in the first waves of immigration, were, by virtue of their eventually coming to France, symbols of "otherness," and thus being excluded from the mainstream of French society appear, at least, to participate more fully in their traditional/religious heritage. In the case of Nightrunner, Asselah's mother transmits to him the notions of virtue and morality which underpin his motivations to become Nightrunner. The veil, for a woman, however, is the symbolic choice between acceptance by one culture for donning it and exclusion from the other, or vice versa. Second, in line with what has been noted by G. K. Spivak, the French forced removal of the veil is an example of "white men saving brown women from brown men" and the further objectification of women.¹⁴ In this case, Muslim women, like Asselah's mother, are doubly objectified, first as Muslims and second as women.

In the comic book and graphic novel world there are works like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Naif Al-Mutawa's *The 99* (a comic book team of Islamic superheroes), which are

¹³ Fetzer and Soper, *Muslims and the State in Britain, France, and Germany*, 64.

¹⁴G. K. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 297.

doing their bit to reclaim the history of the Middle East from/for the Middle Eastern perspective, but it cannot be denied that more Orientalist trends remain. Pat McGreal's *Veils* stands as a perfect example of the continued power exotic and erotic images of "Orientalist" thinking produce.¹⁵ While Edward Said's work may seem outdated, or even cliché, the prevalence of power and knowledge questions *vis à vis* Middle Eastern, Islamic, or veil topics remain strikingly significant in understanding popular culture responses, particularly to sequential art. Resistant to "understanding" and developing a clearer picture persists, particularly when new voices emerge. In late 2010, in response to D.C.'s *Nightrunner*, a wave of conservative fear and anxiety surfaced. Some bloggers proclaimed David Hine (author of *Batman Annual* #12 and #28) and D.C. were being overtly politically correct at the expense of "white pride" and a "real understanding of Islam." In December 2010, blogger Warner Todd Huston contributed his own views on D.C.'s choice for a French-Algerian Muslim as a crime fighting superhero in, "Batman's Politically Correct European Vacation." Hine, in turn countered that "Most American comics are so USA-based that it limits their potential," going on to note that he "love[ed] the idea of Batman going global. ...[and if] successful, this will be a chance to explore the whole superhero/vigilante mindset from a totally different cultural perspective. [In comics] It needs to be more than just a world tour with a few postcard scenery backdrops."¹⁶ For the most part the reaction among comic book fans was positive. Hine further noted that "The only controversy about *Nightrunner* himself is purely as a reaction to the online nonsense that began on English-speaking sites, where a few fringe commentators appeared to be getting angry on behalf of the

¹⁵Pat McGreal, *Veils*(New York: Vertigo, 1999).

¹⁶Kevin Mahadeo, 5 November, 2010, <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=29252>.

French. Overwhelmingly the response has been positive. Even the mayor of Clichy-sous-Bois has expressed interest.”¹⁷

The anti-Nightrunner sentiment is clearly understood in the heart of Huston’s neither difficult to follow nor novel argument when set within the larger context of Orientalist rhetoric. As in *The Song of Roland*, the Frank, (that is, native born European, read: white man) chivalrous hero and savoir, is juxtaposed against his adversary leading the invading Muslim army. The worldview created by works like *The Song of Roland*, Huston maintains, is accurate. For Huston, D.C.’s choice of a Muslim Batman is sure to mislead “people from any understanding of why riots are *really* going on in France.”¹⁸ Riots, like those in 2005, were carried out, according to Huston’s assessment, because of a minority group’s religious beliefs, not because that group suffers great poverty and political inequality. In Huston’s vision of recent French history, Algerian Muslims have invaded France, unrequested by the French populace, and sought to destroy all that is *French* in a quest for some form of global Islamic dominance. In fact, in 1947, “France granted a new status to ... Algeria, which gave the Muslim majority [there] ... equal freedom of movement alongside the settler minority. Designed as a symbolic measure” to stem the tide of growing calls for decolonization, “it had the effect of exempting Algerians from immigration controls in metropolitan France.”¹⁹ Setting aside most of the absurdity of Huston’s argument, his main concern, that D.C. is somehow warping reality is an interesting assertion about the power of popular media (not to mention the cliché that “truth is stranger than fiction”). Yet, Huston is not alone in his fears.

¹⁷Brett Schenker, 25 January, 2011, <http://graphicpolicy.com/2011/01/25/10-questions-with-david-hine/>.

¹⁸Warner Todd Huston to Publius Forum, 23 Dec., 2010, <http://www.publiusforum.com/2010/12/23/batmans-politically-correct-european-vacation/>.

¹⁹Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx, eds., *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 9.

The satirical television show, *The Daily Show*, also examined the concerns raised by bloggers like Huston, in the 1 March 2011 report: “Batman’s Muslim Sidekick.” Aside from questioning the authenticity of a Muslim superhero, the report looked at another comic book, by Bosch Fawstin: *Infidel*. Fawstin’s character, “Pig Man,” combats the rise of jihad, a trait which Fawstin claims all Muslims may be drawn to. In the report which aired, Fawstin maintained that all Muslims have the potential to be jihadists, but in a post-interview clarification Fawstin notes that “Islam prescribes Jihad as something its true believers should engage in, in order to spread Islam.”²⁰ Fawstin’s assertion about the nature of jihad lacks the necessary nuance for understanding this complex ideological concept. Jihad is not a pillar of Islam, like pilgrimage, fasting, or the giving of alms, but the concept of jihad is an important one. Jihad means “struggle,” and in Islam there is a *greater* struggle and a *lesser* struggle. The greater struggle, the one in which all Muslims are encouraged to participate, is the *internal* struggle against personal evil and sin. The lesser jihad, which has gained and lost significance throughout Islamic history, focuses on those who would oppress and take away the freedoms of Muslims. This outward struggle against the oppression of Muslims is the form of jihad which terrorists point to in their codes and slogans, and as a result the one which most Westerners associate with Islam. What appears to be a semantic argument is based in the reality that having been voyeurs for so long, Western audiences are not fully cognizant of the difference. This, as it turns out, is an important example of how the image produced by popular media can alter the understandings people have about history, groups of people, and the world around them. Both Huston and Fawstin fear Nightrunner, and similar storylines in sequential art, as distortions of the historical record. In this

²⁰Rich Johnston to Bleeding Cool, March 3, – 5:16 am, 2011, <http://www.bleedingcool.com/2011/03/03/bosch-fawstin-talks-about-the-daily-show/>.

way they are perhaps more correct than they think, as the historical record has been for centuries based largely on misunderstanding and misleading tropes. Consider again Said's contentions.

Returning then to the fears that Huston expressed, mainly as they pertain to the power of popular media, an expanded understanding of colonial and post-colonial history sets his assertions about this power, to sway and alter public understanding through forms of popular culture, in a particularly relevant light. Aside from the significant theoretical turn *Orientalism* created, Edward Said brought into view just how powerful popular culture was in shaping the thoughts of Europeans, particularly Europeans unlikely ever actually to visit the Orient. Artwork and literature, littered with erotic descriptions and thick with exotic locales and peoples, gave the European populace a foundation for *knowing* the Orient. The trend among comic books and graphic novels is to reassert this access to knowledge, but with heavy emphasis on the voices of those who actually live, work, and breathe a Middle Eastern or Islamic life. This is important to consider, in particular for those of us who teach Middle Eastern or Islamic history and culture. The canon with which Said worked has changed. It is unlikely our students will come to us having read *The Song of Roland* or seen the collected works of Jean Léon Gérôme. They will, however, have seen *The Daily Show* or perhaps even have read *Persepolis*. What Huston fears, that Americans will be taught to believe something about Islam that he thinks is false, is exactly what authors like Marjane Satrapi, Joe Sacco (*Palestine*), Naifal-Mutawa, and David Hine are attempting to do. The difference is that, for the authors of these comic books and graphic novels, the world is not actually black and white (although they may choose to portray it as such in the visual layout of their works).

In Sum

It is, in fact, the power of knowledge that continues to bring readers into bookstores, whether to buy traditional fiction and non-fiction, or comic books. Moreover, who has the right to shape that knowledge influences the story as well. In the case of modern France, the mask and the veil clearly explore this idea. The writers of anti-hijab and anti-burkha legislation actively denude women of a garment and simultaneously their opinion with regards to how they self-identify.²¹ For those supporting these legislative moves, the veil is a symbol of women's oppression, that they do not have the choice to wear or not wear the burkha in the first place. In this last regard we return to Spivak's argument: if the laws are meant to protect women, then they are passed by (mostly) white men, to protect (arguably) brown women from (arguably) brown men. Moreover, the contention that no woman chooses to wear the burkha or hijab of her own free-will is as spurious as the argument they all do. The very debate about the role of the burkha in Islamic societies is currently playing itself out in Pakistan in the guise of controversy of the soon to debut "Burka Avenger." As noted in a recent BBC article about the cartoon, "Pakistan's first caped crusader is a burka-clad superhero who fights school-hating baddies by night and moonlights as a gentle, compassionate schoolteacher by day."²² Just as in France, however, the burkha is a controversial garment. According to Marvi Sirmed, the burkha is not an appropriate garment for a resistance fighter. Sirmed contends "It is subversive and it says that you can only get power when you don a symbol of oppression."²³ While the "Burka Avenger" has not yet been shown, it might be important to note that her creator is a man who had initially

²¹ John R. Bowen's article "How the French State Justifies Controlling Muslim Bodies" contends that in places like France "Civic 'normality' is ... portrayed against images of its opposite: people who by their bodily practices [e.g. veiling] show themselves to be visibly and slavishly obedient, unmodern, and sectarian." John R. Bowen, "How the French State Justifies Controlling Muslim Bodies: From Harm-Based to Values-Based Reasoning," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2011).

²² "'Burka Avenger' Fights for Pakistani Schools," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-23468573>.

²³ Ibid.

set out to make an iPod app game, not make a political statement. In the French case, what can be said about these laws is that they do target women's attire, only. Men who dress "piously" are not restrained by similar legislation, presumably because male pious dress is in line with conservative secular dress and thus culturally acceptable. The closest such laws come to infringing on male attire is in the hijab ruling with regards to boys wearing yarmulkes. As was noted earlier, the key to the law rests in the phrase "ostentatious displays of religion." The heart of the matter however lies in the fact that these laws are little enforced by the traditional branches of law enforcement, but rather by the community. According to Nadeen M. Thomas, the burkha law only impacts a small number of women and of these women only a small handful have been fined.²⁴ The police contend that they would rather spend their energies on what they consider to be serious crime. Instead, Thomas contends, women are publically shamed for wearing the burkha, either through verbal or physical assault, carried out by fellow French citizens. The law, in this regard is a motivational law, turning the community into vigilantes regulating societal conduct.²⁵

The mask is offered to Asselah as an emblem of freedom, agency and official absolution for vigilantism. He is able to both become anonymous and, in a sense, hide his "brownness." The French state's efforts to ban the veil, on the other hand, take away the woman's ability to be anonymous. If a woman chooses to protest the law and continue to veil she does so as a target of public mockery. If a woman obeys the law she may feel she has lost the identity with faith, with something bigger than herself, which, conversely, Asselah's mask actually gave to him.

Embedded in the representations of life, art, media, real-life, we learn and relearn identity.

²⁴ There is at least one case in Northern France where a woman has been fined a number of times, but continues to wear the Burkha as a sign of protest.

²⁵ Nadeen M. Thomas, "'On Est Tout-a-Fait Bloqué': Symbolic and Structural Obstacles to the Integration of Students of North African Descent in France," in *Access and Privilege in Higher Education: Third Biennial Interdisciplinary Conference on Race* (Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ2013).

Comic books and French legal codes equally inform the global community's conversation about what it means to be a member or not of a given (set of) society(ies).

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