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Dire la violence des frontières. Mises en mots de la migration vers l'Europe

Editorial

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- 1 Border violence, now a regular news item in the media, involves sociological, anthropological, political and discursive issues. Between January and October 2016, 3,800 migrants died in the Mediterranean, a new record according to the UN (*Le Monde*, 26/10/2016). Although deaths at the borders in this maritime zone are not a new phenomenon, their number has continued to rise since 2011. This situation, driven by the destabilisation of regions in crisis (Syria, Libya, Eritrea, Somalia, etc.), has been described as an unprecedented “migration crisis” (Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins, 2014). However, violence at the borders is not limited to the capsizing of fragile vessels, which constantly adds to the toll of those missing at sea. It has long been the daily reality for migrants from the so-called “Global South” who, while crossing land and sea in an attempt to reach Europe, are exposed to beatings and intimidation, but also exhaustion, disappearance and sometimes murder of their relatives. This physical violence is regularly accompanied by verbal, institutional, political or simply daily violence in the various “transit” locations and areas that punctuate migratory routes.
- 2 These different forms of violence bear witness to and reveal the social and political tensions which crystallise around the “border world” (Cuttita, 2007). Looking at the issue of deaths at the borders from an anthropological perspective and, more specifically, the way in which they are dealt with politically (Kobelinsky, 2016), is a means of examining contemporary societies. Providing information on societies in the North and the South, on societies of destination, “transit” and departure, these “border markers” (Ritaine, 2015: 118) shed light on relations between Europe and other regions of the world. Beyond short-term and ephemeral emotions¹, the political treatment of the bodies of migrants who have died or disappeared at the borders – whether they are European borders or more broadly areas to which the effects of European borders have been pushed back – tends to employ language rendering them invisible and anonymous (Perera, 2006). Denouncing the way in which they are made invisible, even

dehumanised, NGO reports on deaths at borders have been multiplying over the past fifteen years. In November 2013, a group of associations submitted a list to the President of the European Parliament, containing the names of 17,306 people who have died or disappeared while trying to reach Europe. In 2015, following the shipwreck of a vessel which had left Libya bound for Italy, resulting in 800 deaths, the association *Terre d'Errance* organised a ceremony at the Norrent-Fontes camp (Pas-de-Calais) to pay tribute to those who have died at the borders². Through these actions and operations to count the dead, which are multiplying in Europe and at its periphery (Babels, 2017a), associations and NGOs point the finger at borders condemned as murderous. They denounce the violations of fundamental rights to which the policy of externalisation of migration control implemented by European countries contributes, against those who try to reach the continent without having been “invited”.

- 3 Meanwhile, international institutions also publicise their discourse on this subject. In 2014, IOM (International Organisation for Migration) published a report *Fatal Journeys: Tracking Lives Lost During Migration*, in which it is estimated that more than 22,000 migrants have died trying to reach Europe irregularly since the 2000s, the majority of them in the Mediterranean. In 2015, IOM estimated that 3,771 had lost their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean. Yet, from IOM's perspective, it is less a matter of challenging migration policies than dissuading potential candidates for departure by raising awareness on the dangers involved³. According to the studies and their sponsors, whether they are NGOs or international institutions, the modalities of counting the number of deaths at borders - based, due the very nature of the facts recorded, on estimates - are the subject of debate.
- 4 However, the focus and target of the statements made also diverge, depending on whether responsibility is attributed to those who *erect* them (politicians), those who *facilitate crossings* (smugglers)⁴, those who *attempt to cross* them (migrants) and/or those who try to *rescue* them (NGOs in particular)⁵. In this respect, taking note of the role of putting into words seems particularly critical in understanding the balance of power crystallised in the *border object*. On the basis of his work on Lampedusa, Ritaine (2015) distinguishes three types of interpretation of the dead and missing at sea: the media approach which, within the time-frame of the event, treats drowned migrants as bodies arousing emotion; the institutional and political framework which, presenting the dead as public policy issues, operates within the temporality of political negotiations; and the militant framework which, over a longer period of time, considers the dead as persons and legal subjects. To these three interpretative contexts, we add a fourth: putting into words by those who attempt the perilous experience of irregular crossing. By mobilising distinct modes of legitimisation, these different interpretative frameworks bear witness to the conflicts and inequalities *surrounding* and *within* the relationship to borders.
- 5 From a perspective that refuses to “dissociate the language-related from the social” (Lahire, 2015: 22), this dossier puts the emphasis on discourse in order to consider the *border object*. The approach through language, corresponding both to taking into account the discourse produced *about* migrants and the words spoken *by* them in various discursive frameworks, is at the centre of the dossier. Putting into words is considered at different levels, whether in terms of *production* in institutional arenas (international organisations, political spaces at European or State level) or production and *reception* by migrants, during their journey to Europe or subsequently, when they

have arrived there, or on their return to their country of residence following deportation. The point is to consider language practices as an integral part of migratory practices in that they construct contexts and perform reality (Canut and Von Münchow, 2015).

Migratory and discursive practices: the emergence of new meanings

- 6 Since the 2000s, numerous ethnographic works have documented, in distinct geographical spaces, the way in which the “effects of the border and the border as an effect” (Pian, 2009) are producing new migration practices and, more broadly, new migratory configurations (Streiff-Fénart and Wa Kabwe-Segatti, 2011; Canut, 2013; Lecadet, 2016; Albahari, 2015; Schmoll *et al.*, 2015; Pian, 2016; Babels, 2017b). While these migration practices are based on and invent new forms of social organisation, aimed at crossing the borders erected by States, they are constantly faced with multiple forms of violence. Whether it is the combined effects of natural obstacles such as the climate, material conditions (for example, the poor condition of boats at sea), injuries inflicted by other categories of actors⁶ or the failure to assist persons in danger⁷, the violence endured is an integral part of migration and is destined to increase as border security increases. However, the way in which these extreme experiences in physical encounters with borders are *put into words* remains largely under-researched.
- 7 By putting into words, we refer to the process of construction and circulation of discourses considered as productions and interpretations which are socially, spatially and temporally situated. It is therefore not a question of looking at discourse outside the ethnographies carried out by researchers with migrants (monitoring trajectories, sharing everyday life in places of transit, arrival or return, etc.), but, on the contrary, of constructing interpretations resulting from a confrontation between what is *said* and the production of social practices in the broad sense. The value of critical sociolinguistics (Heller, 2002; Boutet and Heller, 2007) or of *linguistic anthropology* (Duranti, 1997) lies precisely in this praxeological conception of language: the construction of meaning, through words, is just as much a construction of social contexts (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992) which are constantly redefined in this to-and-fro between words, acts and situations. Thus, bringing out the meaning that migrants give to their situation through language does not conflict with the meaning that the researcher can establish through the observation of non-language-based practices: it reveals social rationales that observation alone does not always bring to light.
- 8 While speech is always addressed to someone, it cannot be considered definitive or related to supposed “ideas” of individuals outside of any interaction. Discourses are constantly changing according to the interlocution situation: thus the narrative produced for a researcher contains multiple specificities depending on the relations with the migrants (social, political, linguistic proximity/distance, etc.), but also numerous expectations, fantasies, etc. These variations by no means prevent us from distinguishing the recurrent discursive processes in language practices that shed light on the understanding of social rationales. One of these processes concerns “silencing” (Orlandi, 1994/1996), which can be detected in everyday life, but which emerges in accounts and discussions with researchers. The unspoken and even silences are part of the analysis in that they make sense in the context of the production of speech, the

utterable and the unspeakable being part of the “same discursive space” (Pollak, 1990: 201). In the context of migration, the circulation of information spread by migrants is accentuated by the use of new technologies and social networks, including in poor travel conditions. Nevertheless, the selection of what *can be said*, or even *heard*, by the recipients of the message is permanent. As Sayad (1999) pointed out, the migratory experience is made up of many things that go unsaid, whether to family back home, between fellow travellers, etc. However, due to his/her position of exteriority putting him/her in a sense “out of play” (Schwartz, 1993), the researcher with whom a relationship of trust is established can become the receptor of that which has gone unsaid. Without falling under the illusion that everything can or could be said to the researcher, ethnography over a long period, which is moreover multi-situated at varying scales, draws out different forms of speech, of varying degrees of intimacy, but whose strategic considerations should not be underestimated in certain situations (Maitilasso, 2014).

- 9 The production of migrants’ discourses, in the course of their journeys, must also be linked to the production of institutional discourses which partly permeate individual positions. From the point of view of international, political or media institutions, the usefulness of language for putting the social world in order is permanent. To put into words is above all, through the act of designation and categorisation applied, to make hitherto unnamed realities exist. The debate launched by *Al Jazeera* on the terms “migrants” and “refugees” in the summer of 2015 (Canut, 2016; Akoka, 2016) showed just how effective the performative utterance of the categories is: the media and politicians employed a distinction in value that became very clearly established in public discourse (the “good” refugees who flee war and are justified in obtaining asylum versus the “bad” economic migrants who must return home).
- 10 All these creations of social borders lead to real distinctions, the self-evident nature of which eventually prevails without the premises of such divisions being questioned any longer. In this regard, we share the approach advocated by Leimdorfer (2010: 4) when he wrote: “the words and discourses of the speakers are constitutive elements of social facts and relationships: they organise and represent them, but also produce, cancel or update them”. It is therefore a question of considering what is said about borders as social praxis (Boutet, 2016 and 2015): language not only describes the world but has a concrete performative effect on practices and actions. This perspective implies paying as much attention to the *treatment of discourse about borders* as to the *discourse about the treatment of borders*: on the one hand, the management of borders is based on discourses that make them exist, or even legitimise them to the entire world; on the other hand, migrants face the circulation (and all the distortions) of these discourses and other types of narratives along their journey, in the spaces they travel through. These words, stories, instructions, injunctions, etc., can have direct effects on their bodies, the most extreme of which is death. More broadly, they have effects on the perception of their position and the meaning given to their lives, in the context of a journey where laws, rules and logics are constantly changing.

How death at the borders is put into words

- 11 In the area of migration, the discursive dimension plays a decisive role in the making of migration policies as well as in the circulation of narratives between migrants, or

between migrants and non-migrants. The inclusion/exclusion processes produced by the discourses contribute to the construction of the relationship to the other. While, on the one hand, leaders in Europe are constructing categories, hierarchies and new modalities to make the movement of people into a “migration problem”, on the other hand, migrants must constantly adapt to these new directives, discourses, categories, etc. Whether migrants recount their difficulties or their successes, whether they exchange tactics or stratagems, whether they are silenced or confronted with incomprehensible bureaucratic discourse, they never stop looking for solutions, positions, places, routes, *between languages and between discourses*. This dossier gives an account of these processes of production and circulation of expression in words from three complementary angles.

Putting into words by politicians and international organisations

- 12 The role of States and international organisations in relation to the arrival of migrants is crucial to understanding border violence. For the purposes of this analysis, the focus will be to consider it through their discursive practices and resulting acts. Two situations, symptomatic of the latest developments in European “integrated border management”, will be discussed in the first part: counting the numbers of deaths in the Mediterranean, on the one hand, and the anti-migrant policy adopted by the Hungarian government, on the other.
- 13 The article by Antoine Pécoud and Charles Heller focuses on the migration statistics produced on border deaths in the Mediterranean. A comparative analysis of the practices of international organisations and those of civil society leads to focusing attention on the changes in the strategies employed by each, in relation to each other. The counting of the dead, hitherto the preserve of NGOs, was a strong means of challenging European policies on migration, until the IOM (International Organisation for Migration), in the name of an alleged “humanisation” of European policies, made it a major component of its new policy, effectively transforming its relationship to the migration issue and to NGOs. Considered to be the outcome of migration policies, the high numbers of deaths at the borders have been repeatedly denounced by activists involved in counter-statistical activity; an activity that the authors call a “disobedient” perspective as opposed to the “policing” perspective of States. When the IOM in turn gets involved (*Missing Migrant* project) in a statistical activity of counting deaths accompanied by a “humanitarian” discourse, it endorses the need for counting while justifying the border controls put in place insofar as, in its view, they make it possible to “save lives”. Both a product of migration policies and a setting value of these same policies in the Mediterranean, IOM’s counting activity is leading to new statistical standards. Beyond the highly ambiguous mandate and activities of this organisation, the authors show how the IOM tries to neutralise the figures, or even to reclaim them in order to strengthen State order. The very definition of “death” at the borders thus becomes a political issue: rather than a sanitised categorisation – which drastically limits the conditions in which “deaths” are recognised, thus avoiding national or European controversy – NGOs promote another way of counting, defining and interpreting deaths at the borders.
- 14 The study of this political sequence is not without implications for the formulation of discourse and political action that it initiates: by attempting to downplay the criticism

made by activists, the IOM has led NGOs to produce new discourse and to find new modalities of action.

- 15 The political role of States is also at the centre of Annastiina Kallius' article, in another context, on the Balkan route, and more precisely in 2014-2015 in Hungary, at the time of the arrival of thousands of migrants. The author analyses the political context of the production of the syntagma "Hungarian solution", which manifested itself in three types of practices: selective closure of borders, dissuasive measures towards migrants (construction of walls, confinement in detention centres, mistreatment, etc.) and xenophobic discourse extolling the nation and Christianity. The rhetoric on which such an ultra-national policy is based is part of a broader context, linked to Hungary's geopolitical position within the European space. The author explains that it is in the name of the process of orientalising and balkanising Eastern and Central Europe (generally considered "backward" or "uncivilised"), that the government was able to take such a set of measures, acting as the guarantor of the values of a white and Christian Europe. This discourse is based, on the one hand, on the interactions of different dichotomies within the European space (East-West and North-South divisions) and, on the other hand, on a long-standing domestic policy process, namely the exclusion and criminalisation of marginalised populations (including the Roma). In fact, the harsh repression against migrants in Hungary is the result of a hegemonic conception of citizenship which has made it possible, in the context of a divided Europe, to promote a conservative and anti-migrant discourse that can indeed be found in a different form, but with equally tragic consequences, in certain Balkan countries such as Bulgaria, where militias operate to "hunt down migrants" at the borders, without being disavowed or condemned by the Bulgarian State.

Putting into words by those attempting to cross European borders

- 16 Faced with the multiple discourses and practices of European Organisations and States, migrants are constantly adapting their journeys and adjusting their tactics. Work based on long ethnographic studies compiling the speeches, accounts or fantasies of those most concerned has mainly been carried out in Africa or Europe by anthropologists, sociolinguists or sociologists (Fouquet, 2009; Pian, 2009; Kobelinsky, 2010; Mazzocchi, 2014; Le Courant, 2014; Lecadet, 2015; Canut, 2014; Canut and Sow, 2014; Canut and Ramos, 2014; Timera, 2014). While accounts are now very often produced as testimonies for associations or NGOs (Migreurop et al., 2007), the discursive analysis of them has yet to be done in the context of more recent arrivals from Syria, Afghanistan or Eritrea via the Balkan route (Kallius et al., 2016).
- 17 Moreover, the specific issue of death is still rarely addressed from the point of view of migrants themselves. The three texts dealing specifically with this issue are based on long ethnographic studies carried out in West Africa, the Maghreb and Spain. The times and places of production of these discourses are not without bearing on the form of words: before, during or after the migratory journey, the relationship to death is not expressed in the same way. In addition, the situations in which they are uttered change their very content: violence *at or by borders*, physical or social death, institutional or subjective dissolution, the way in which they are put into words reveals the polysemy of death facing those who have decided to leave their country. In order to understand these discursive processes, the consideration of social imaginings (Castoriadis, 1975)

involves the researcher in an interpretative⁸ and discursive analysis which makes it possible to break with an analysis of content in which language is transparent. Focusing on the dynamics of migrants' discursive practices, which stem from the circulation of discourses and narratives and which endlessly constitute new ones, implies questioning the very materiality of the experiences and words that constitute them. If language is a practice, it is precisely because the use made of it does not have the same meaning in each interaction: in fact the approach is necessarily comprehensive, with ethnographic survey methods and interpretative analyses. The ways in which things are put into words are the very substance of the investigation.

- 18 This is first and foremost the subject of Anaïk Pian's work, which offers an analysis of the productions of discourses about death in several utterance frameworks in order to show the variation according to situations of interaction, places, instants, etc. From slogans to peer-to-peer discourses, to accounts produced for a researcher, the construction of discourses on death varies. Based on various fieldwork studies carried out with Senegalese people seeking to reach Europe irregularly, the author shows the extent to which the different registers of discourse evoking death or the risk of death contain profound nuances, depending on whether the aim is to legitimise, justify or even rationalise emigration, to describe extreme experiences in the face of natural obstacles or to describe the forms of institutional violence experienced in the course of the journey made. Considering these discourses as "events" of speech, which bring about "irruption, discordance" (Leclerc-Olive, 1997: 20) in the way of thinking about one's place and one's relationship with the world, Anaïk Pian focuses her attention on an essential dimension of the experience: the perception of institutional arbitrariness and the opaque management of migration, which is a powerful generator of discourse. The context of generalised uncertainty throughout the journey fuels the production and circulation of rumours, which themselves construct the perception of borders, or even perform their role. This institutional uncertainty is at the root of power and domination relationships (extending to the discretionary power over the right to life and death). When legality and law are no longer clear, when coastguards can kill wantonly, when the State only manifests itself in disorder, the way in which narratives about borders are constructed also takes the form of struggle and resistance. Talking, bearing witness (to researchers, NGOs, associations), is a means of countering the mortification of bodies, escaping from the "naked reality" to which the position of migrants at the borders confines them, claiming a presence and simply existing.
- 19 Using the same starting point as Anaïk Pian in relation to Senegal and Morocco - and also echoing Cécile Canut's observations in Mali - Carolina Kobelinsky establishes a link between the evocation of "social death" which governs at the outset and the encounter with physical death throughout the journey. Based on discussions, stories and discourses gathered in Melilla, a Spanish enclave located on Moroccan territory, the author shows how expressions such as "living dead" refer to the condition of young people without work who can no longer stand their position and decide to leave in order to gain recognition, not only to help their families financially, but also to show everyone that they are capable of becoming "someone". Escaping from boredom and leaving nothingness, however, implies encountering another type of death, no longer the "social death" experienced there, but the one that provokes unprecedented fear: that of disappearing without a trace. More so than physical death, disappearance, whether death by drowning, in the desert or under fire by coastguards, etc., is a silent disappearance, imposed by "the contemporary border regime". The anxiety is indeed

that of disappearing without anyone knowing it, like all those who have been abandoned, in the silence of the deserts, totally exhausted. Talking about this kind of fear can only happen in the aftermath, once it is far from you, sometimes in the form of an emotional release by trying to make people laugh, in the face of adversity, about scenes of beatings at the border (in particular in Morocco) where the police sometimes beat to the point of death: it is a way of dedramatising, of playing with fear to quell it or suppress it more effectively. “Becoming someone” will therefore have meant coming close to different types of death, and fleeing from them at the same time, and, after all the hardships endured, sharing through words, with fellow travellers, a kind of common destiny.

- 20 Evoked by those interviewed by Anaïk Pian (who used the metaphor of the *Sirat*, the very narrow bridge that Muslims must take to reach paradise, to describe the passage between Morocco and Europe), the question of the relationship to religion is at the centre of Cécile Canut’s article. Firstly, Cécile Canut observes that the emergence of words about death seems to be a kind of ineffable and takes place in the total absence of *pathos*. Secondly, she shows that the metaphysical and religious dimension is essential to capture this absence of *pathos* in accounts of extreme scenes (of violence and death) to which the travellers have been exposed. Beyond the study of the social, political and economic reasons that push the inhabitants of West Africa to leave, this article therefore focuses on the existential dimension that emerges from the forms of language used by the adventurers in their narratives or discourses, by linking passages evoking death and those referring to the place of God in several corpora from various fieldwork studies. Through the construction of narratives, the discursive modalities or forms of dialogism, it can be observed that death assumes a subsidiary character in the journey as it is put into words. Since, although the adventurers, from the outset, use multiple formulae such as “*Saya ka fisa ni maloya*” (“Death rather than shame”), they are nevertheless not “ready” to die in order to reach Europe and therefore do not dwell on what seems to others to be a determining factor: the possibility of disappearance. On the contrary, it is with the force of life that they construct their story, their journey and their existence, that they actively invent their future by submitting to the test of the obstacles they encounter. In this quest, is God the guarantor of a future? The author shows how, caught in the contradiction between a divine injunction calling for submission to the law of fate and the immeasurable desire to move in order to force that fate, adventurers constantly experience a tension between profane and sacred, between earthly and divine, between relative and absolute, between trivial and sublime, which can only have two outcomes: either death (the product of anger and divine condemnation) or entry into “another world”, and the success of the crossing. On reading Cécile Canut’s article, it is clear how reductive it is to believe that migrants are unaware of the extreme conditions of the crossings they are embarking on or, conversely, that they are suicidal because they embark on an adventure recklessly: these overhasty interpretations do not allow the complexity of migration dreams to be taken into account. Responsible and conscious of the decision they are making, travellers/adventurers embark on their new lives with their eyes wide open, with the will to face the worst, but with the hope of being reborn elsewhere, differently, in a globalised world in which they must participate.

In the gap between arrival and possible expulsion

- 21 At the interface between two discursive spaces (formal/informal, institutional/daily), Jacinthe Mazzocchi's article offers a intersectional analysis of the official and administrative discourse of the authorities towards asylum seekers in Belgium, and the narrative productions of asylum seekers facing a very specific discursive framework. To do so, the author uses the case of Ali, a young Afghan asylum seeker. This perspective enables Jacynthe Mazzochetti to explain the many misunderstandings or incompatibilities between the criteria of the institutions in charge of examining asylum applications and the putting into words of an often-traumatic experience that cannot be expressed in the imposed frameworks. The "credibility judgment" passed on the narrative is based on the perception of what is plausible, made according to a principle of objectivity, whereas researchers' observations show that, on the contrary, subjectivity, ethno-centrism, a positivist approach or "denial of culture" are systematically embedded in judges' practices. The permanent suspicion of lying leads the judges to direct the narratives or their explanations in order to track down alleged "liars" and finally express value judgements ("This is not serious!" Ali is told). The hegemonic relationship in the case of judgements, whatever the doxic assumptions in terms of origin in particular, has unprecedented performative effects: it is one word judging another (which can be summed up in the case studied by "You are lying"), in a profoundly unbalanced socio-discursive framework that shapes the border violence. Although other forms of discourse (associative, media, volunteer, etc.) are regularly used to highlight what, on the contrary, is perceived to be "injustice" (as in Ali's case), the fact remains that border violence lies as much in their physical materiality as in their language-based and discursive existence, which can lead to questioning what makes up identity.
- 22 In conclusion, this dossier shows how the materiality of language-based experiences transforms social spaces by producing performative effects which themselves influence migration processes. Ultimately, putting the violence of borders and at borders into words provides a framework for understanding socio-spatial inequalities in a globalised world.

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NOTES

1. The emotion, including political, aroused by the photo of the little Syrian child, Aylan, found drowned on a beach in Turkey in September 2015, is one example.
2. See Babels (2017a: 70-73) for the testimony of Nan Suel, member of *Terre d'Errance*.
3. For example, the "Aware Migrants" information campaign set up by the IOM in June 2017 in Egypt with the support of the Italian Ministry of the Interior and the Egyptian National Coordinating Committee.
4. On the diversity and ambiguities of the figure of the smuggler, see Pian (2010).
5. These can indeed be accused of "opening the floodgates" by rescuing boats in difficulty too close to departure points. See the article published in *Libération* on 6 July 2017.
6. Including other migrants, but also agents of State institutions that can even cause death, as in Ceuta and Melilla in 2005 or again at the beginning of 2014, when members of the *Guardia Civil* are alleged to have fired rubber bullets to prevent sub-Saharan nationals from reaching Ceuta by sea.
7. See, for example, the case of the boat that left Libya for Lampedusa in March 2011, which was not rescued when it went adrift, in a maritime zone that was monitored by NATO as part of a military operation. Sixty-three of the seventy-two passengers on board, including three children, died. For more details, see the summary by Heller and Pezzani (Babels, 2017a: 31-36).
8. We refer here to the "interpretative shift" in the analysis of discourse in the 1980s, which "dismisses the closed corpus, questions the confrontation between corpus and non-corpus, and finally refuses the referential presentation of the conditions of production, in favour of a description of the reflexivity of discourse based on a configurational work on archival statements, situated at the crossroads between the work of Michel Foucault and that of ethno-methodologists" (Guilhaumou, 2002).

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