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Controlling Migration:
How *Martha of the North* and *Exile* Reclaim Inuit Sovereignty

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Abstract: In the twenty-first century, there is increased awareness in Canada about the horrors of residential schools and the destructive actions of the government towards First Nations peoples. But this education has not extended to the histories of Arctic Indigenous peoples, whose experience of settler colonialism is different because of their geographical location. Until outside intervention, Inuit had been semi-nomadic, populating the North with small, mobile communities, as this way of life was best suited for hunting and traditional practices. Beginning in the 1950s, the Canadian government forced Inuit into centralized communities, pressuring them to leave their lands and thereby destroying a traditional way of life that had been in place for thousands of years. This article will explore the negative consequences of 'domicide', or the killing of one's home, and the cultural devastation that followed. Years later, the relocation and its impacts were depicted in Inuit-made documentaries, such as Marquise Lepage's *Martha of the North* in 2008, and *Exile* by Zacharias Kunuk in 2009. In this chapter, I will detail how Inuit-made film is helping Northerners reclaim Arctic sovereignty, documenting for future generations how their ancestors lived.

Introduction

Despite the significance of the Canadian Arctic in documentary history and its importance in our collective imagining of Canada, Arctic and Inuit histories are scarcely taught in the South. Because of their geographical location, Inuit in Canada experienced colonialism differently than other Indigenous peoples in North America/Turtle Island.[1] It was not until there was interest in the Far North during World War II, in part because of the newly perceived value of the region, that "the Inuit way of life was profoundly disrupted by government control" (Bertrand 353).

Though the interference of the Canadian government impacted all aspects of Indigenous life, one of the most damaging for Inuit was related to altered mobility and migration because of

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how this changed their communities and connection to their territories. I will discuss the impact of “domicide,” or the killing of one’s home, that took place when Inuit were forced to leave their lands (Davey-Quantick 68). This forced migration was not simply the loss of a dwelling, but was “a disruption of a critical relationship of people with the land and animals,” effectively eliminating their independence and transforming their way of life for the worse (“Nuutauniq: Mobility and Inuit Life” 43). Years later, the relocation of Inuit to the High Arctic and the resulting impacts were depicted in Inuit-made documentaries, such as Marquise Lepage’s *Martha of the North* in 2008 and Zacharias Kunuk’s *Exile* in 2009 (Bertrand 356).

The Canadian Arctic: A Brief History

The way that news about Inuit traditions and cultures first reached Southern Canada was through documentary films and videos taken by “generally well-meaning missionaries and ethnographers” (Bertrand 353). Through this documentation, these white outsiders perpetuated the “romanticized image of the luminous and desolate Northern landscapes” and its “‘courageous and stoic’ inhabitants” (Simard qtd. by Bertrand 354). Since then, outsiders have continued to make films about Inuit life, to varying degrees of accuracy and authenticity.

The Arctic itself has long been subject to conversations about sovereignty, with multiple countries fighting to lay claim to the region in the twentieth century, continuing on into the height of the Cold War. Having control over the North had become important, and Canada’s perception of the Arctic had changed from viewing it as a remote, desolate, empty region, to one of military importance (Kaganovsky, MacKenzie and Westerstahl Stenport 17). This had to do with both the government’s defense strategy (MacKenzie and Stenport 131) and because of potential resource extraction (Kaganovsky, MacKenzie and Westerstahl Stenport 15). This latter reason remains salient today.

Cinema became a tool in service of this narrative of Canadian sovereignty; as films from the Far North were paramount to the outside world’s understanding of the Arctic, they were used both “to promote state and corporate interests” and “as a means of protest and dissent” (Kaganovsky, MacKenzie and Westerstahl Stenport 24). When Canada’s National Film Board began making films about the Arctic, such as the *Netsilik* series—which showcased the lives of Inuit families in the late 1960s[2]—there was likely an ulterior motive; helping affirm the people in

the North as Canadian citizens. *Netsilik* was a "de facto political statement" that helped lay the groundwork to "ensure Canada's historical claims of inhabiting the Arctic" (MacKenzie and Stenport 130).

Contemporary Arctic cinema differs from historical Arctic film in significant ways. Narrative, aesthetic, and ideological differences can be explained by one key shift: older films were made from an outside perspective, whereas today's films are generally created by insiders. A prominent example of early Arctic cinema is Robert Flaherty's 1922 film *Nanook of the North*; to this day, it is perhaps the best-known Arctic film ever made, despite being made by an outsider, and its paternalistic (at best) depictions of the Inuit. In stark contrast to the work of Flaherty and his contemporaries, which depicted the lifestyles and customs of Inuit through a white Southern lens, today, "Indigenous artists, scholars, film critics and filmmakers are finding innovative ways of using cinema" (Bertrand 365). Rather than reinforcing negative stereotypes and serving a colonial government's calculated attempt to claim so-called "valuable" Northern land, Inuit filmmakers are able to deconstruct "white-generated representations" of Indigenous peoples (Raheja, *Reservation Reelism* 193) through narrative tools and strategies of resistance like survivance and visual sovereignty (Bertrand 365).

Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor coined the term "survivance" to describe the shift in Indigenous storytelling from a focus on "victimhood and loss" to empowerment and vitality (Bertrand 354). "Visual sovereignty," coined by Tuscarora historian Jolene Rickard, is explained by Seneca scholar Michelle Raheja as a way of "reimagining Native-centered articulations of self-representation and autonomy" through mediums such as film and TV (Raheja, "Reading Nanook's Smile" 1163). This articulation has been helpful as a way of understanding how "cultural practices can be used as political mobilization" and how sovereignty can become "a creative act of self representation" (Kaganovsky, MacKenzie and Westerstahl Stenport 17).

The emergence of Arnait Video Productions and Igloolik Isuma Productions in the early 1990s was arguably the factor that had the biggest impact on modern Arctic cinema. These Inuit-founded film collectives differ significantly from those made or funded by the NFB in both their goals and their specific approaches to filmmaking. Isuma was founded in 1990 by Inuk filmmaker, community leader and cultural activist Zacharias Kunuk, late Inuk writer Paul Apak Angilirq, Inuk elder Paulossie Qulitalik, and American filmmaker Norman Cohn (Ginsburg, "Isuma TV" 319). Arnait, Isuma's partner group and the first Inuit women's independent production company, was

formed the following year, and creates works that have an "explicit focus on gender that challenges long-standing assumptions of male normativity in the Arctic" (Ginsburg, "Isuma TV" 320).

These companies have had profound impacts on the film industry in the North. Far from destroying a traditional way of life, Isuma's media has been able to document the legacy of the Inuit as a means of cultural expression and identity, in order to demonstrate to future generations how their ancestors lived (Ginsburg, "Screen Memories" 54). In its overarching work, Isuma explicitly makes use of videography "as a political tool" and aims to "offer an alternative voice" to the works of Robert Flaherty and other ethnographers and white filmmakers (Evans 150). Thus, video—rather than separating Northerners from their histories as a white tool—has been used in recent years as a way to revive facets of Inuit culture. *Exile*, directed by Isuma co-founder Zacharias Kunuk, is one of the films that I will explore shortly, in greater detail.

Controlled Migration and Forced Relocations

As mentioned above, the interference of the Canadian government in the lives of the Inuit has been harmful in myriad ways, and one manifestation was through enforced migration. Prior to outside intervention, for thousands of years, small, mobile communities had populated the North, as traditional living "required mobility and semi-permanent or impermanent dwellings to survive" (Davey-Quantick 82). This changed abruptly in the early 1950s, when many Inuit communities were forced to give up their semi-nomadic lifestyles and move into permanent, government-created settlements (Evans 4). The primary reason was that it made more economic sense to the government to have concentrated communities; it would be simpler to monitor the population and easier to provide administrative support and services ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 38). But this centralization was effectively enforced relocation for everyone living semi-nomadic lifestyles, and it eliminated a fundamental aspect of Inuit culture: mobility. Mobility was not random, but based on familiar routes that hunting families would follow annually, reoccupying sites that had been significant for generations and drawing upon "archives of experience and knowledge" ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 9).

Additionally, the locations for these proposed settlements were not chosen in accordance with Inuit knowledge or seasonal habitation, and, thus, did not in any way benefit *Qikiqtaalummiut*, people of the Qikiqtani region (Davey-Quantick 58). In fact, there was no care

given to the hunting needs of the Inuit in planning the layouts of these communities, as is illustrated by the fact that "the single most important criterion for government was that they were accessible by sea or would fit into planned air routes" ("Final Report: Achieving Saimaqatiqiingniq" 22). As a result, these moves were culturally devastating, destroying a "traditional livelihood based on hunting, fishing, and gathering, and in its place came a dependence on a cash-based economy in a region virtually devoid of paying jobs" (Evans 4). Still, the government was convinced that these relocations were in the best interest of the Inuit, despite a total lack of consultation.

In 1950, there were over one hundred seasonally inhabited *ilagiit nunagivaktangit* or Inuit settlements, but, twenty-five years later, almost all Inuit were concentrated within one city and twelve hamlets ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 15). Thus, these changes took place very quickly; as Davey-Quantick argues, "this was colonization at a rapid, immediate pace, and the trauma of that shift is still being felt today" (67). Canadian Inuk activist Sheila Watts-Cloutier, who grew up in Kuujaaruk, Nunavik, details the changes that took place during her childhood in her memoir: "the modern world arrived slowly in some places in the world, and quickly in others. But in the Arctic, it appeared in a single generation" (40). It was not merely that the Inuit were dealing with issues that typically befell isolated, rural populations, but that "they were a culture in the middle of radical social change, besieged by assimilation pressures and a rapidly changing world" (Davey-Quantick 52). As testimonies and reports demonstrate, government officials had complete control, and Inuit were powerless against these outside pressures.

The most damning of accounts came from the Qikiqtani Inuit Association's report titled "Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life," which documents how lives were impacted, through both first-person statements and research studies. It makes explicit how integral the environment was to the Inuit way of life, and that the government used coercion to move the inhabitants. As explained by the report, "Qikiqtaalummiut suffered what scholars have called 'domicide' (the killing of one's home) when they left the land. For Inuit, the loss of home is more than the loss of a dwelling; it is a disruption of a critical relationship of people with the land and animals. It represents the loss of independence and replacement of a way of life" (43). These moves resulted in less frequent hunting excursions, and a generational divide between Inuit who had been raised on the land and those who were born post-relocation:

> The interconnectedness of kinship and place is central to the Inuit worldview…. As Inuit travel across the land, sea, and ice, they strengthen their relationships with each other and deepen their understanding of their own pasts and kin. Qallunaat [non-Inuit] often mistook and continue to mistake the semi-nomadic history of Inuit as evidence of a lack of attachment to place. In fact, the ability to move to follow game while also maintaining connections with kin who live over a wide geographic area is the result of an intimate experience of place. ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 13)

When *Qikiqtaalummiut* were moved to modern, centralized communities, one of the customs lost was "the flexibility and purposeful seasonal movements" that for eons had been integral to their culture ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 15). There was an abrupt disconnection from the land, which was only compounded by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's (RCMP) mass killing of *qimmit* or sled dogs, which directly affected Inuit ability to travel across the tundra and hunt.

Ultimately, the government's act of controlling the migration of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic was done because Southerners could not conceive that the Inuit way of governing, educating, feeding, and transporting themselves was optimal. Despite officials' presumption of knowing best, Inuit had inhabited the Canadian North for thousands of years, and "were not only able to survive in the Arctic but thrive, in large part because they lived in small, highly mobile communities" (Davey-Quantick 28). The needs of people habitating the North were different, and Northerners had figured out how to live. Simply sending "the imperfect institutions of Southern Canada… to the North" was not only insufficient, but dangerously naïve and paternalistic (Davey-Quantick 60).

***Martha of the North*: The Impact of Relocation on Family and Kin**

Another change imposed upon Inuit populations was the government-orchestrated act of transporting a select number of families to the far northern reaches of the continent; these individuals came to be known as High Arctic Exiles. These particular relocations were the result of Canada's perception of a political threat: that another country would attempt to claim the Arctic.

The government's first relocation attempt took place in 1934, when ten Inuit families were moved to Dundas Harbour (Devon Island) from their communities in Cape Dorset, Pangnirtung,

and Pond Inlet ("QTC Resolute Bay" 21). The experiment was quickly recognized as unsuccessful, as the families were unhappy in part due to the severe new environment ("QTC Resolute Bay" 21). However, despite this short-lived failed relocation, a similar maneuver was attempted in 1952, this time from Inukjuak and Pond Inlet to Ellesmere Island and Cornwallis Island ("QTC Resolute Bay" 22). According to the government, those relocated were not taken against their will, but recent reports suggest that "the question of consent … is a contentious issue" ("QTC Resolute Bay" 22).

Officials claimed that these regions were plentiful in game, despite a complete lack of wildlife studies and no Inuit presence in the area for centuries ("QTC Resolute Bay" 22). Once again, those relocated were dissatisfied, having experienced a drastic lifestyle change. Resolute Bay, for example, "experienced three months of total darkness, much more extreme temperatures, different ice conditions, and different animal patterns" than the home communities ("QTC Resolute Bay" 25). The new inhabitants were unable to use their skills in these far colder regions, and with no game to hunt, never had enough to eat (Evans 4). Robust support in the form of housing, health care, schools, jobs and food that had been promised was never delivered (Evans 30). Despite this, yet another group of Inuit were moved to Resolute Bay and Ellesmere Island in the High Arctic in 1955 ("QTC Resolute Bay" 29). This final group included Martha Flaherty, co-writer and subject of the film *Martha of the North.*

Marquise Lepage's 2009 NFB documentary follows Martha Flaherty, an Inuk woman who also happens to be one of Robert Flaherty's grandchildren. Martha's homeland was Inukjuak, Nunavik, in northern Quebec, and her family was resettled 2,250 kilometres away in Grise Fiord (Ellesmere Island) when she was very young ("QTC Resolute Bay" 24). Her father's stepfather (Paddy) and family had been relocated two years prior, and Martha's family moved at Paddy's urging. However, when Martha's family finally arrived at Ellesmere Island, they found out Paddy had died one year after arriving on the island. He had quickly requested to return home, but was informed that he would have to cover the cost of the return trip for himself and his relatives; this was an impossible feat. Paddy's daughter describes his realization that he would never again return to his homeland, which contributed to his failing health and early death. Had Paddy not been deceived into thinking it was an exceptional opportunity, neither family would have left Inukjuak. Martha, too, describes wanting to turn around as soon as she realized that the land was not the wonderful bounty that officials had described.

In the film, many of the original relocated individuals are interviewed, and they speak in detail about the hardships experienced. Martha's experience of being unable to return home was not unique; those relocated were promised that they would be brought home if, after one year, they were unhappy, but this commitment was not honored ("QTC Resolute Bay" 27). Once in Grise Fiord, like the other families, Martha's family had to spend the winter months in a canvas tent, as no permanent housing had been built. Some Inuit would put up *qarmaqs*, dwellings covered with hides that provided better shelter against the elements. This new region had fierce winds that blew for much of the year and prevented snow build up, so, despite the northern location, there was insufficient snow on the ground to build igloos. Thus, families were forced to move from one makeshift shelter to the next, depending on the season.

These long-term separations affected not just those who were forced to leave, but everyone in the home communities: friends, family, and kin left behind ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 9). The "lingering effects of unexpected moves" impacted subsequent generations as well, as relocation not only separated the Inuit from their wider communities, but from "the cultural practices that were central to a worldview rooted in their land and its resources" ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 9). Martha affirms this in a voiceover, when she explains that what the relocated families left behind was not material possessions, but the people who were dear to them. As the narrator says, family and community are the heart and soul of Inuit life and moving far away from both one's territory and loved ones would have been frightening, but the RCMP reassured the Inuit by insisting that they were being relocated to a place chosen by individuals with so-called "expert knowledge" of the Arctic. The irony that a non-Inuk could claim to be an expert of the Arctic can only truly be appreciated after this ordeal.

The landscape itself is a character in *Martha of the North*, as is common in Inuit films because of the intertwined nature of people and place. Subjects talk about their homeland with love, remembering the soft grass and flowers, the vegetation, the wide variety of food to harvest, and plentiful game. Ellesmere Island, in contrast, was the land of mountains, glaciers, and fjords. The pain of leaving their homeland is clear in interviews with the subjects; as scholar Karine Bertrand writes of the film, "land is connected to language, culture and spirituality. These different layers of relationships to familiar spaces …. can be felt in the testimonies that connect the physical and psychological suffering of the protagonists to the separation of the body from the land where they were born, as though the body itself was an extension of the territory" (364). This

characterization of place helps illustrate how world-altering it was to remove Inuit from their relations and their homes.

Outside of the Arctic, director Lepage claims that the film was ultimately the reason for the Canadian government's long-awaited public apology and for its recognition of the damage caused to the families (Bertrand 361). *Martha of the North* helped make public the news of the forced relocations and the profound impact of this film is clear, both on the families who lived through the events and to a broader populace (Southerners) who had previously been ignorant. Perhaps most importantly, Lepage stated that the film "generated overwhelming reactions from the people who had lived through the relocations," and that a number of Elders felt that, with their testimonies having been validated, "they were ready to die in peace" (Bertrand 362).

***Exile*: Leveraging Film to Advocate for One's Community**

Zacharias Kunuk's documentary *Exile* is similarly about Inuit families who were relocated; the majority of the film consists of extensive in-person interviews with those who were forcibly moved. *Exile* opens with one of the interviewees and her (presumed) granddaughter throat singing, and the narrator rhetorically asking us what really happened to those relocated. The statement that this is the Inuit side of the story establishes the film as both storytelling and testimony. The stories captured are extremely valuable, as the High Arctic Exiles are aging and have a limited time during which they are able to pass on their memories and knowledge. Through these interviews, *Exile* demonstrates Kunuk's conviction that film is an important means of sharing Inuit histories and culture. The QIA reports are similarly essential, but hearing the events from first-hand experiences is vastly more effective and affecting than absorbing information by reading documents and studies. In 1996, after explicit recommendations by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, those who had been relocated were provided monetary compensation and the opportunity to return home ("QTC Resolute Bay" 23). Despite this admission of guilt, the Canadian government still did not apologize for their actions. The High Arctic relocations had been justified in the minds of officials because of a notion "that all Inuit were semi-nomadic hunters who could live anywhere in the Arctic" ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 16). This film was an intervention, reframing the relocations and making explicit their injustice.

The government viewed the Inuit as pawns to be moved wherever they were most useful; "the individuals involved didn't matter so much as planting human flags in the High Arctic" (Davey-Quantick 62). This complete disregard for the well-being of those relocated is clear from the way they were treated after officials had achieved their goals. In both this film and *Martha of the North*, interviewees verbalize the constant cold and hunger they experienced in the Far North and the challenge of simply finding drinking water. They discuss being so desperate for food that they would resort to eating scraps from the RCMP garbage dump. Even worse, they had to do so discreetly, because the officers (rather than recognizing their plight—which they themselves had a hand in causing—and providing them with food) forbade them from rooting through the dump.

Those relocated felt betrayed by the people who were meant to keep them safe, and many Inuit died, in part because of poor nutrition and unsafe living conditions. Over and over, Inuit interviewees recount the ways that the officers directly and indirectly hurt them—the RCMP did not send their mail south as pledged, the officers shot their dogs, which were necessary for hunting, Inuit were not paid for work they had done; the stories go on. One of the individuals interviewed, Dora Pudluk, remembers feeling that no one cared if they died, if they starved to death. It was a complete breach of trust and Inuit never forgot the broken promises. They only learned the true reason for the relocations decades later.

Martha Flaherty is interviewed in this film as well, and, though at last in 1996 the government provided financial compensation for the relocated families as mentioned, she stresses the importance of receiving an apology that had thus far been "adamantly withheld" (Wakeham 85)., "Ten million dollars was nothing. If we didn't come here, this would not be part of Canada today. When the Harper government talks about protecting our northwest passage, defending our Canadian sovereignty, what about us? Isn't that what we did? Don't we count?" (*Martha of the North*). The original statement that accompanied compensation payments to the survivors and descendants claimed that "government officials of the time were acting with honourable intentions in what was perceived to be in the best interests of the Inuit" (Wakeham 96). As scholar Pauline Wakeham writes, this statement "implicitly den[ied] the sovereignty motive behind the relocations [and] articulated that denial through the ventriloquized voice of the relocatees" (96). In order to receive remuneration, these individuals needed to sign the agreement, effectively preventing them from sharing their truth. *Exile* and *Martha of the North* provide them with this opportunity, giving the Inuit the final word, rather than a problematic and incomplete government document.

But the government did not escape responsibility as easily as that, as Inuit continued to campaign for formal acknowledgement. At long last, in August of 2019, the Canadian government "apologized for colonial practices and policies which radically transformed the Inuit homeland and traditional ways of life" (Qikiqtani Inuit Association website). As part of this apology, an agreement was signed whereby the government pledged to help build long-term and sustainable responses to the QTC findings, including investing in the region, implementing Inuit history and governance programs, and *qimmit* revitalization programs (Qikiqtani Inuit Association website).

Conclusion

Colonialism has looked different in the North compared to the South, but I do not mean to suggest that it was any less damaging. Inuit lifestyles were deeply misunderstood by *Qallunaat*, who believed Northerners to be detached from their habitats and sufficiently adaptive as to relocate to a distant island with which they had no familiarity ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 15). These "mistaken prejudices and beliefs" resulted in extreme colonial injustice ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 15).

A government that was willing to move people from one region of the North to another in order to strengthen Canadian sovereignty exhibited the clear Southern disdain for Inuit lifestyles (Davey-Quantick 61). As Davey-Quantick suggests, the act of "denying the difference in culture and territory different Inuit groups had" was simply another example of "devaluing that difference, and by extension, Northern or Inuit culture as a whole" (Davey-Quantick 62). Geographical challenges were compounded by the lack of support provided, and the people who had been forcibly relocated further north suffered drastic lifestyle changes (Evans 4), and this affected succeeding generations and all kin who had been left behind ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 23). Not only were the forced abandonments of their homes traumatic, but the circumstances endured by the inhabitants were unjust—they were not provided adequate food, housing, or basic necessities.

Over the past decade, the Qikiqtani Inuit Association has published a number of reports that explore the history of the government's actions towards Inuit. In the introduction to one of the reports, Josie Okalik Eegeesiak, president of the QIA, dedicates the writings to her grandmother, who passed away in a sanatorium in the south, and to her grandchildren, "so that they can

understand what our family has experienced … And it is also for the young people of Canada, so that they will also understand our story" ("Nuutauniq: Moves in Inuit Life" 7-8). Just as Josie felt that the reports were important in ensuring the history of the Inuit was enshrined for next of kin, films such as *Martha of the North* and *Exile* are similarly crucial for creating access points for future generations. This is a story of colonialism in Canada, one that has not yet been fully told. As the QTC is a legacy project for Inuit, so too are these documentaries a tool to share their experiences, and a key part of mobilizing the change that led to the government's apology. Lepage and Flaherty, as well as Kunuk and his team, successfully consulted Inuit to tell their stories, in both English and Inuktitut, in a way that the government never did. Looking ahead, this is not an isolated issue that affected Inuit solely in some historic past; the impacts of these events "continue to reverberate" seven decades later (Wakeham 84). Additionally, mobility will continue to have significance for inhabitants of the North in future, as multinational corporations peddle in resource extraction and force communities out of the homes that they were previously forced into by the Canadian government. The stewards of the land have not changed, but the antagonists pressuring them to move have. Thus, it will be vital for Inuit cinema to document the changing Arctic and its impacts. One can only hope that Inuit filmmakers, and film collectives such as Isuma and Arnait will be able to take up the charge.

[1] Inuit means "the people"; while "Inuit peoples" is commonly used, it is redundant. In this paper, I simply use "Inuit" to refer to the people.
[2] The series was set in the late 1910s, as it was putting on display a lifestyle that was no longer entirely accurate.

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