

Introduction: the politics of whiteness in Africa

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This part issue presents the first comparative conversation on the politics of whiteness in Africa.¹ It draws together a collection of ethnographic studies that reveal the multifarious manifestations of white African subjectivities, power and privilege in their historical and geographical specificity. This initiates a wider discussion that places the heterogeneity of African whiteness in minority contexts alongside the staying power of white power, privilege and supremacy. In this way, this collection provides insight into the ways in which the shift from colonial-era political dominance to postcolonial minority status has affected issues of race on the continent. This moves Africa to the forefront of the study of race, power and the post-colonial moment.

Since the end of white colonial rule in Africa, the racial divide between white and black no longer neatly maps onto the divide between dominator and dominated. Racist, colonial-era regimes have been replaced by black, majority governments. Yet historical, racialized inequalities persist on the continent, and new social arrangements and institutions, as well as the global reach of capitalism, seem to reproduce racial disparities on the ground.

Recent events in South Africa demonstrate the urgency of this reality. In early 2015, a movement largely made up of black students mobilized against the memorialization of imperialist Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town. What became known as the #RhodesMustFall movement set in motion a series of similar protests across and beyond campuses, some turning violent and

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¹This discussion originated as a three-panel session at the fifth European Conference on African Studies (ECAS), Lisbon, in 2013. The session drew together Africanists from a variety of disciplines working on issues of whiteness throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Certainly, the field of critical whiteness studies has seen the publication of comparative conversations on whiteness before – yet these have taken little or indeed no account of Africa, and no collection has thus far focused on the African continent as such. See, for instance, the special issue ‘Whiteness in the field’ (2000) of *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 7 (3) and ‘Whiteness and white identities’ (2008) of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31 (1). While 2013 saw the congregation of whiteness scholars at the University of Johannesburg for ‘Whitewash: negotiating whiteness in twenty-first-century South Africa’, this two-day workshop presented – as the title suggests – a collective conversation on whiteness in South Africa only. In light of concerns about deteriorating race relations and social cohesion in South Africa, a more broad-based conversation on whiteness in South Africa, particularly with regard to Afrikaans whites, was hosted by the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection in November 2015 (see <<http://www.mistra.org.za/Events/Pages/Whiteness-Roundtable.aspx>>, accessed 28 July 2017).

threatening already-fragile social cohesion in the country. While initially directed against conspicuous monuments to white power, these movements gave voice to discontent about persisting patterns of racial as well as class and gender inequality, which continue to shape South African society more than twenty years after the official end of apartheid. In many cases, this translated into a call for the ‘decolonization’ of the South African academy, and society at large.

While such emancipatory language is politically evocative, it has, however, only limited ability to effectively explain and challenge prevailing structures of racialized power and meaning in the absence of minority rule.

How, then, are we to understand the manner in which ideas of and practices surrounding race continue to shape political, economic and cultural processes in Africa – either implicitly or explicitly? Why do powerful white minorities remain a reality in various black majority contexts? And, crucially, how should racialized inequality in the postcolony be studied, its continuities and discontinuities analysed, conceptualized, and explained? Certainly, in the light of recent events in South Africa – from #RhodesMustFall² to recurring xenophobic violence – these are apposite and timely questions.

We argue that the use of whiteness as a conceptual prism to study race offers a productive way to analyse the contemporary operation of race and manifestations of racial inequality on the African continent. Whiteness is here understood as a configuration of power, privilege and identity consisting of white racialized ideologies and practices, with material and social ramifications. This focus on racialization and how power and privilege are bound up with the social construction of identity – that is, on the distinct yet connected constitutive elements of whiteness – is an important conceptual move. It allows us to begin to answer questions of how race operates in postcolonial contexts and how its power and meaning-making is contested. Moreover, as the articles show, it brings the heterogeneity of whiteness and of white communities into view, thus working against the essentializing tendencies that in the past have earned whiteness studies the ire of some scholars.

The conceptualization of race by whiteness studies offers a vocabulary that challenges the unmarked and normative nature of racial hegemony, thus rendering its racial politics analytically tangible. Empirically, this collection’s focus on the African context in which whites are a small minority, but have historically exercised power disproportionate to their size, provides a unique opportunity to study the changing dynamics of whiteness in a context in which it is often explicit and self-conscious – in contrast, arguably, to that of the global North. Existing scholarship on whiteness in Africa has been concentrated on South Africa, while research further afield has remained relatively isolated or confined to regional scholarship. In this part issue, we initiate a comparative discussion on

²The #RhodesMustFall movement reached its immediate goal: Rhodes’ statue at the University of Cape Town did literally fall in April 2015. But already Rhodes had been overtaken by other campus issues, such as demands for free education at universities across South Africa (#FeesMustFall). In also taking up the issue of the outsourcing and exploitation of university support staff, the student movement was hailed in some quarters as a great democratic force for the future, evoking comparisons with Germany’s 1968 student movement or the Arab Spring, and eliciting global solidarity. In the face of the salience of racialized inequalities, structural or social, institutional or ideological, in post-apartheid South Africa, these young Africans were seeking to reimagine South African society as inclusive, egalitarian and assertively African.

African whiteness beyond South Africa by placing research from Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zimbabwe into the conversation. The articles in this collection analyse a variety of white communities to enquire into the political and structural consequences of racial subjectivities in contemporary Africa. This provides insight into three interconnected themes: the role of global racial hegemonies and local realities in shaping whiteness; current debates on whites' citizenship and belonging on the continent; and questions on the cohesiveness of white communities in postcolonial Africa. This conceptual and empirical focus thus moves the study of white identity and racism – the construction of race – to a deeper and more pertinent examination of the racialization of power and privilege.

Whiteness scholarship

The origin of critical whiteness studies is often traced mainly to the United States. Building on explorations of white identity, early race scholars such as African-American historian and activist W. E. B. Du Bois (1903; 1920) and labour historians such as David Roediger (1991) introduced whiteness to explore the process through which European immigrant populations constructed a white racial identity in the New World. At the same time, cultural critics including Richard Dyer (1988) and Toni Morrison (1992) investigated whiteness as a tacit norm in the production of white cultural discourse, while legal scholar Cheryl Harris (1993) defined whiteness as property as she traced the historical incorporation of white racial identity in American law and its resulting consequences for the racialization of privilege. In the social sciences, Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) exploration of white women's lived experience of race highlighted the assumed and naturalized understanding of whiteness and its enmeshment with issues of class, gender and sexuality. The variety of disciplines, contexts and manners in which whiteness was being applied as an analytical tool in the 1990s stood united around a political agenda proposing that racial inequality and white prejudice be identified, challenged and ultimately 'abolished' (Roediger 1994). Since these early studies, whiteness has continued to gain traction in an array of disciplines and we have seen the establishment of a productive interdisciplinary field engaged in studying the interconnections between the formation of white racial identity and continuing white racial domination and privilege. Despite a concentration in the US in its first decade, the concept has now also been productively applied in European and Australian contexts (Garner 2006; Moreton-Robinson 2004), and its uses and usefulness have been anthologized in various reviews and edited volumes (Hund *et al.* 2010; Lewis 2004; McDermott and Samson 2005; Roediger 1998; Steyn and Conway 2010).

At the same time, the field has been subjected to stark criticism. This has often revolved around the opaqueness of the concept of 'whiteness' and its inconsistent application – perhaps a consequence of its adoption across such a broad range of disciplines and methodologies. Arnesen branded whiteness a 'blank screen onto which those who claim to analyse it can project their own meanings' (2001: 8), and questioned its analytical and explanatory value. Others have criticized whiteness scholars for reifying whiteness, 'portraying race as a ubiquitous and

unchanging transhistorical force rather than a shifting and contingent construction' characterized by a specific social and historical context (Kolchin 2002: 159; see also Andersen 2003). Normative stances in whiteness studies have also been criticized for over-theorizing and posturing while neglecting rigorous empirical analysis (McDermott and Samson 2005).

Whiteness scholars have been responsive to such criticisms of their field. American ethnographers such as Hartigan and McDermott, for instance, sought to explore in a much more nuanced manner how racial interactions and racial identity are influenced by local context, and how the meaning of whiteness and the everyday lived experience of it intersect with gender and class (Hartigan 1999; McDermott 2006). Attention has also increasingly shifted beyond the insular US context, with the understanding that local manifestations of racial power, privilege and subjectivities cannot be understood in isolation from global racial ideologies and hierarchies, and vice versa (Hartigan 2000). A number of recent historical studies of whiteness have taken great care to place the construction of white identity and its ramifications in broader transnational and historical context (Lake and Reynolds 2008; Boucher *et al.* 2009). In this sense, whiteness studies increasingly display an affinity with the critical reconsideration of historical and contemporary power relations associated with post-colonial studies and the new imperial history.

Yet the surge of whiteness studies in white majority contexts such as the US, Europe and Australia contrasts sharply with the relative dearth of whiteness research across the African continent. The notable exceptions in this regard are the cases of post-apartheid South Africa and, to a lesser extent, postcolonial Zimbabwe. Here, scholars have applied the concept in exploring white minorities' position in and response to democratization in these countries (Fisher 2010; Hughes 2010; Nuttall 2001; Steyn 2001; 2004a; 2004b; Steyn and Foster 2008; Verwey and Quayle 2012). Like their colleagues studying the West, Southern African whiteness scholars have been motivated by political ideals, arguing that non-racial democratic societies cannot be attained if present racialized inequalities are not probed, explained and exposed. Writing on whiteness as a racist ideology of white privilege and superiority in post-apartheid South Africa, Melissa Steyn explains that 'the only long-term prospect [for white South Africans] for coming to terms with the loss of privileged positioning is seeing the ideology for what it is, and being prepared to let it go' (Steyn 2001: 99).

This part issue seeks to develop a broader narrative on whiteness in sub-Saharan Africa by investigating whiteness in Zimbabwe, Kenya and Congo (DRC). The articles in the issue form part of the current momentum to push whiteness studies beyond a national focus on the US and, in this case, towards the global South, initiating a comparative approach to sub-Saharan Africa. Thus far, comparative whiteness studies have paid only peripheral attention to Africa – and again, particularly South Africa – in as far as they have sought to track the transnational spread of whiteness as a racialized ideology of power and privilege during the colonial era (see, for example, Lake and Reynolds 2008; Hyslop 1999). This part issue, by contrast, develops a comparative conversation on African whitenesses in the postcolonial present – in which whiteness is hypervisible – thus stimulating a broader narrative on the state and operation of whiteness on the continent in minority contexts beyond South Africa.

Whiteness in Africa

Race matters in postcolonial Africa. The articles collected here show that, more often than not, white skin in Africa denotes a position of privilege and power. Although European imperialism has been ousted, white settler-descended communities retain considerable wealth. Moreover, in the context of globalization and the neoliberal world economy, global capital brings white Americans and Europeans to the continent as expat workers, thus recalling colonial-era racial divisions of labour and patterns of power and privilege. The contexts explored by our authors show that racialized discourses continue to be used – by white and black Africans alike – to make sense of local, postcolonial situations.

Moreover, whiteness is contested and challenged in contemporary Africa. In the context of black majority government, the Africanization of the state, and efforts at economic redress, continued white power and privilege fly in the face of the goals of governing liberation movements and postcolonial ideals. As a result, white land ownership and discourses of belonging, white economic and cultural power, and hypervisible manifestations of white privilege come under pressure. Global human rights and equality discourses advanced by NGOs and global institutions – with tangible results demanded – add to this pressure. The articles presented here reveal how in three African countries whites react to such challenges. Through the articles, we see the ingenuity of white communities attempting to negotiate their new political context in an effort to sustain their privileged position. At the same time, we see the limits of such efforts. As whiteness is challenged, it is fractured and rendered fragile. The articles reveal how white identities and ideologies start to diverge, how communities turn against each other in the face of the postcolonial challenge, and how contradictions and vulnerabilities arise, threatening the cohesion of white communities – and, indeed, the white self. This collection therefore displays an interest in the construction, representation and functioning of whiteness vis-à-vis the *white* other as well as vis-à-vis the racial other.

The heterogeneity of whiteness we encounter in contemporary Africa is therefore due not simply to disparate geographical contexts but also to variation or difference *within* white communities. In other words, white subjectivities or patterns of white power and privilege both assume different forms in, say, Kenya than they do in Zimbabwe, and differ between, for instance, urban and rural white communities *within* Zimbabwe. As different white communities seek to negotiate the challenges posed by the postcolonial context in particular ways, we thus see a multiplicity of configurations of white identity and power. At the same time, the articles reveal similarities in racist ideologies, cultural repertoires and material practices of domination across varying African contexts. Whiteness in postcolonial Africa emerges as dynamic and constantly adapting.

Three interconnected themes

Global–local whiteness

The era of European imperialism saw ideologies of white racial superiority, along with claims to white power and privilege, exported to Africa and other parts of the

world. Lake and Reynolds (2008) have tracked the global ascendancy of whiteness as a form of racial identification in the nineteenth century and the development of 'white man's countries' and racial exclusion in countries such as Australia, South Africa and the United States. Their work traces historically and transnationally how seemingly non-racial systems or institutions, such as democratization, citizenship and immigration, were often at the heart of the politics of whiteness.

Now that white-dominated regimes no longer shore up whiteness on the continent, global forces have taken their place. This part issue demonstrates how, today, transnational capital, the media, and even seemingly progressive projects such as conservationism equally shape – and are shaped by – the politics of whiteness. In this sense, race in contemporary Africa articulates not only postcolonial struggles but also new, racialized forms of globalization.

Africa remains a site for investment and disinvestment of global capital. The success of multinationals lies in their ability to coordinate people and resources on a transnational scale, in the process creating investment enclaves, sites of resource extraction and – as Thomas Hendriks shows – new forms of African whiteness. Transnational economic exploits have made white expats, despite their mobility, a permanent fixture on the continent. Hendriks' ethnography focuses on a small band of expats running a multinational timber concession on the Congo River in the DRC. He demonstrates how this investment enclave produces racialized labour patterns, power structures and exploitation reminiscent of colonialism, thus reproducing whiteness as 'an everyday mechanism of privilege'. Hendriks analyses the interactions, discourses and spatial dynamics manifesting around the expats in the concession, showing how these reveal a whiteness that is also rendered permanently vulnerable and ambivalent – in the subjectivities of the white expats and in the perceptions of the local black labour force.

Dominated by Western interests, transnational media displays a prejudicial interest in white victimhood in Africa. From poor whites to prominent white murder trials, the distant white is typically portrayed as under threat and in need of Western sympathy, if not protection. Through media representation, white sensibilities can be roused around a politics of whiteness that leaves little room for considerations of racial privilege.

Rory Pilossof and Jacob Boersema argue here that the disproportionate attention paid to the plight of Zimbabwe's white farmers – a small minority of the country's total white population – reflects both the Western media's fascination with and excessive sympathy for white experience and suffering in Africa and the ability of the farmers themselves to tap into this Western fascination to promote their own interests. Crucially, this overemphasis on white farmers skews our understanding of the operation of whiteness in Zimbabwe by focusing solely on land ownership. Combining a historical and ethnographic approach, these authors expose the complicated relationship that exists between urban and rural white Zimbabweans, and how urbanites' disavowal of an association with farmers forms part of an alternative strategy to safeguard the power, privileges and status they, as whites, have long enjoyed in Zimbabwe.

Finally, the politics of whiteness is also transformed by global forces such as environmentalism and conservationism – with uncertain results. The contemporary international conservation movement in Africa promotes community-based conservation initiatives – typically in an effort to move away from criticized Western-led attempts to protect biodiversity in Africa, themselves fed by

decades of plunder of the environment by European colonialism. These developments place pressure on white power and privilege in contemporary Africa. In recent years, Kenya has seen the growing influence of international conservation movements promoting local community-based conservation (CBC) initiatives, as well as NGOs supporting local activism and autochthonous claims to the land. This poses a concerted challenge not only to white land ownership, but also to white Kenyans' sense of belonging and claim to cultural citizenship. Janet McIntosh uses such challenges as a lens for exploring the continuities and differences between colonial-era and contemporary forms of whiteness in Kenya. She identifies 'structural oblivion', an ideology of elite ignorance and denial among white Kenyans, which serves to dismiss autochthonous challenges in defence of colonial-era patterns of racialized power and privilege. At the same time, McIntosh provides evidence of shifting white epistemologies, with some white Kenyans emerging from a position of structural oblivion to make preliminary concessions to black Kenyan points of view. This shift, she argues, is in part a product of the global ascension of liberal humanism, which itself underlies the development of CBC in Kenya. But, thus far, the process is only partial: McIntosh shows how even these new epistemologies contain in them the potential to foster new forms of whiteness, as some whites (re)present their stewardship of the land as being in the interests of the postcolonial nation.

Citizenship and belonging

Whiteness in Africa is not insulated, but it does reflect a particular dynamic directly related to its colonial history and geography not characteristic of the global North – although nevertheless intimately linked to it. This regards contestations surrounding white belonging and citizenship in postcolonial Africa. For whites in Africa, the changed political imperatives of the postcolony include not only the reality of black majority rule but also perpetual confrontation with discourses of and policies geared towards racial redress and empowering the previously disadvantaged. Such pressures spotlight already hypervisible whites, and may see populist, autochthonous movements in Africa portray, and sometimes exclude, white settler communities as supposed 'strangers' or 'fake' autochthons.

Thus, the postcolonial context becomes characterized by 'moral pressure', in McIntosh's words, for whites to demonstrate or perform their loyalty and commitment to Africa and the majority-ruled state through changed subjectivities. In Kenya's Rift Valley, therefore, McIntosh's white informants are anxious to demonstrate that they are good nationalists, committed to the country's development. Such political imperatives also echo in Mugabe's Zimbabwe, where Pilosof and Boersema read them as informing shifts in intra-white relations and subjectivities, first in the reconciliatory years after independence, and again when land invasions started in 2000. In both countries, however, the authors show how changed white subjectivities constituted in response to this moral pressure nevertheless still serve to protect white power and privilege.

But while the postcolonial context exerts pressure on white subjectivities, we would be wise not to lose sight of the way in which the very nature of the current late modern moment in turn provides a degree of flexibility or potential for white subjectivities to be (re)constituted in Africa. Since the latter part of

the twentieth century, and accompanying the shift in the regime of accumulation towards neoliberalism and its market imperatives, identity politics have rendered the self as not only invented or appropriated, but increasingly conceptualized as self-made. In this process, identity – like labour – is rendered flexible and commodified in order to be chosen (and, of course, discarded) as desired (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). This pliable and relativist approach to identity in fact makes it possible for, say, white South Africans to reject challenges to their autochthony and to claim belonging in Africa (Coetzee 1988; Steyn 2001; van Zyl-Hermann 2014). In this part issue, this is perhaps most strikingly demonstrated by the unlikely ‘white Africans’ who claim belonging to the continent and a love for it in order to justify their presence in the Congo, even as they retain uneasy ties to Europe. Hendriks argues that such complicated and often ambiguous white subjectivities constructed by white expats in the neoliberal African context allow them to capitalize on the privileges and superior power relations afforded by whiteness. His insights provide a welcome corrective to the myth of the cosmopolitan expat in Africa, showing that some genuinely feel a sense of belonging to contemporary Africa. Nonetheless, the manner in which global capital increasingly bypasses the state to substitute traditional citizenship rights with economic privileges for white expats draws their role in African societies into question. Indeed, Hendriks shows that, to the Congolese labourers employed on the logging concession, white expats presented the most visible manifestation of the West – at once a promise of modernity and opportunity coming to the Congo, but also a reminder of colonial-era exploitation. Thus, the ostensible late modern freedom to choose one’s identity and express this identification runs up uncomfortably against contestation surrounding white presence in Africa. Whites in Africa may claim belonging and African identity, but they nevertheless remain part of structures of racialized power and privilege that mean they carry little of the burden African identity may otherwise entail.

Despite displaying different strategies for navigating white belonging in the context of black majority rule, McIntosh’s and Pilosof and Boersema’s case studies both suggest that whiteness in Africa is increasingly emerging as victimhood or besiegement, albeit in a variety of different manifestations. The potent language of victimhood and the appropriation of the position of victim – mainly in relation to postcolonial policies of black majority regimes ostensibly disadvantaging or even threatening whites – seems to be an increasingly popular strategy for preserving structures of white privilege and spaces of white power in Africa. The effectiveness of this strategy – as the international attention to Zimbabwean farmers demonstrates – lies precisely in the hypervisibility of white skin in Africa. This strategy sees ‘white’ in Africa become defined by the ostensible absence of that which it historically entailed: status, the rights of citizenship and the favour of political elites; power, both hard and soft; and capital, whether economic, social or cultural. Indeed, whiteness-as-victimhood now explicitly connects race to power – while denying that this has always been the case – by upending colonial-era relations to represent ‘white’ as precarious and weak, and ‘black’ as powerful and secure. In the context of changed political arrangements, such representations belie the persistence of old racialized patterns of privilege. The white African voices recorded by the contributing authors often seem to sound in refrains of white insecurity, anxiety and defensiveness. These affective dimensions of whiteness echo in victimhood discourses as well as in the fragility of

white subjectivities, but they are also implicit in efforts to demonstrate a commitment to the continent and the majority-ruled nation. Reading our three case studies' insights surrounding the citizenship and belonging of whites on the continent in parallel, this close and uncomfortable relationship between vulnerability and power emerges as characteristic of the politics of whiteness in postcolonial Africa.

The cohesion of white communities

Finally, the articles provide a corrective critique to homogenizing tendencies in whiteness scholarship by exposing the fractures and frictions of whiteness in the postcolony. External challenges to white power and privilege, as well as generational, geographical and class differences, lead to internal tensions that test the cohesion of white communities.

This may loosen and open up the historically close linkages between power, privilege and white subjectivity constituting whiteness, producing new productive ways of seeing and being. McIntosh, for instance, sees younger, more educated and often non-landowning white Kenyans distance themselves from an older, 'racist' generation, claiming an inclusive Kenyan identity. A similar dynamic is evident in the way in which urban white Zimbabweans seek to distinguish themselves from their rural counterparts. In both these cases – both intimately tied up with land – divides within the white community are represented in conservative/liberal terms, with those who seem to cling to colonial-era lifestyles and race relations dubbed 'conservative'.

But limits to these productive frictions persist. McIntosh and Pilosof and Boersema argue that the 'liberals' among their informants remain implicated in colonial-era discourses, or make little effort to jettison the privileges of whiteness which they enjoy. As white communities fracture, we see the constitutive elements of whiteness loosening. Power, privilege and white subjectivities no longer sit together easily or unproblematically. Yet the resulting reconfiguration is not easy to predict. In Kenya, challenges to the power and privilege of landowning whites in turn impact on white subjectivities, forcing whites to make new claims to belonging. However, in the Congo, white European expats retain their privilege and continue to wield tremendous power, even though their racial subjectivities have become fragile and unstable. Contemporary challenges to whiteness reconfigure its elements, forcing whiteness scholars to precisely define and analyse the specific local relationships between power, privilege and white subjectivities within white communities.

It is too early to conclude what the outcome of these processes will be. Emerging divergences among whites, and the political and ideological tensions they cause, suggest a future prospect of white communities and subjectivities that are less predicated on racialized understandings and structures. But this remains an emerging possibility rather than an established fact, making it hard to predict whether we are witnessing a breakdown in the relations constituting whiteness, or their reconstruction. Indeed, as demonstrated by the events surrounding #RhodesMustFall in South Africa, and the articles in this part issue, whiteness in Africa is far from dead – yet, at the same time, whiteness is not going unchallenged or untested. This collection demonstrates how a conceptual approach that highlights racialized power, privilege and subjectivities as different yet interconnected

elements of whiteness, in concert with rigorous ethnographic analysis, provides an important contribution towards understanding the troubled politics of race in the postcolony.

The insights gained into whiteness and racialization from the global South move Africa to the forefront of the study of race, power and the postcolonial moment. Indeed, a focus on whiteness in Africa, and different white African communities' efforts to negotiate and retain their power and privilege as a minority, may soon hold important lessons for the global North. Population projections for the United States estimate that by 2042 whites will no longer form the majority of the population but will be outnumbered by Americans of other races (Roberts 2008). In many American and European cities, whites already form a minority in relation to labour migrants, immigrants and their descendants. Foreshadowing broader, global trends, the ethnographies collected in this part issue therefore illuminate aspects of future race relationships far beyond the African continent.

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