theories and methodologies

# Drawing Is a Way of Thinking

HILLARY CHUTE

I'M GRATIFIED THAT THE MOST WIDELY CIRCULATED JOURNAL IN LITERARY STUDIES HAS SOLICITED THE SKILL AND ATTENTION OF NINE SUCH erudite interlocutors, including both critics and creators, to formally respond to my book *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*. It's also a bit of a surprise, albeit a pleasing one, since *Why Comics?* is my first single-authored book *not* aimed at the readership of *PMLA*.

Published by HarperCollins—also the publisher of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993)—it is rather addressed to a nonacademic audience. I'm honored by the academic uptake of my public-facing book, for which I strove to eliminate specialized lexicons and debates (it felt strange to write a book without footnotes), and for which I decided, in the interest of attempting something that departed from my academic training, to practice getting comfortable with the first person and, even more crucially, with telling stories about people's lives and careers in addition to conceptualizing texts and practices of reading. What I've learned from cartoonists about their working methods and their approaches to personal storytelling has informed my own attempt to capture the excitement and diversity of the contemporary world of comics and to describe it in ways that are meaningful for nonspecialists. I am pleased that Chris Ware, in his response, picks up on the importance of storytelling to my book—which not only explores the storytelling capacities of comics but also uncovers the critical value in telling the life stories of the book's subjects, including his own.

The participants in this forum raise important questions about academic institutionalization, canon formation, the state of comics criticism relative to other fields, the relation of critic to artist, and the ways humanists should address the many publics now invested in the world of contemporary comics. The structure of the various academic and artistic responses in this forum reveals an aspect of my scholarship I try to model in the book itself: the intertwining of theory and practice, something that Patrick Jagoda and I, in our special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, named "the critical work of making"

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(3) and that Amy Elias, writing here in her thoughtful take on the book's methodology, names a "dialogic engagement."

The very idea of this cluster, then, demonstrates to me that the book has succeeded in making its most important argument, regardless of disagreements about particular readings of works (e.g., by R. Crumb) or perceived structures of value (e.g., whether "high-literary" is an honorific).[1] The fact that *PMLA* is even responding to a nonacademic book about comics is a sign of the democratization and expansion of the field of literature—a widening of categories and loosening of constraints at a moment when the humanities urgently needs more public-facing work. Add to that the fact that three of the respondents are cartoonists (Ware, Matt Silady, and Alison Bechdel) and that two of them (Ware and Bechdel) submitted comics-form commentaries. "In what ways can we suture the split between creative writing and criticism," Elias asks, "between artists with their language of craft and critics with their language of analysis? . . . [R]esistance to the neoliberal university demands that we forge new intellectual communities that bring artists and scholars together and that are based on trust and open interchange, instead of retreat to separate spheres competing for institutional resources or professional prestige and remaining siloed by institutional structures."[2] This dialogics—the stakes of which Elias describes so well—animates my thinking for both my academic and my mainstream writing.

A brief history of the academic institutionalization of comics through the Modern Language Association's convention and publications may help clarify some of the insights the respondents here bring to the table about the field and about field building. Although panels at the MLA Annual Convention had sporadically addressed comics since the 1970s, MLA institutional culture around comics shifted with the publication of the October 2004 issue of *PMLA*, in which the editor, Marianne Hirsch, published "Collateral Damage," an influential column that analyzed post-9/11, post–Abu Ghraib popular and philosophical concepts of vision alongside Art Spiegelman's experimental comics work *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), an excerpt from which appeared on that issue's cover. This sustained, inclusive critique—which conveyed the urgent need for a renewed attention to media aesthetics after 9/11 and Abu Ghraib—opened a sense of possibility for many, including me, then a graduate student. In 2007 Nancy K. Miller published an essay in *PMLA*'s ongoing feature the Changing Profession called "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir," in which she analyzed several works of comics along with more conventional literary writing. The next year I published "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative" in the same section of the journal, marking a change in the profession with the journal's first dedicated essay on comics as a narrative form.

As some respondents note, that essay from over a decade ago led to an exchange of letters in the *PMLA* Forum, in which Ben Saunders claimed that reading the essay was like reading "a history of television written by someone who watches only award-winning PBS documentaries" (293). It was, I replied, a rare experience for me as a scholar of comics to be accused of being too highbrow; I also stated that I welcomed debate in the field as a sign of its tensile strength—and I still do (Chute, Reply). I have never wanted the field to look like a cheerleading squad for the medium, and my goal has always been to open doors rather than close them. In that spirit, I organized a new discussion group (later renamed a forum) at the 2009 MLA convention called Comics and Graphic Narratives, and I have been proud of its diverse programming ever since. That banner year for comics in academia also saw the publication of the MLA's *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (edited by Stephen E. Tabachnick).

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Since then, programming around comics in- and outside the Comics and Graphic Narratives forum has flourished at the convention—including, memorably, in Narrating Lives, the 2011 Presidential Forum presided over by then–MLA president Sidonie Smith, and in the ensuing issue of *Profession* (Chute, "Comics Form"). We can also witness a growing effort to bring scholars and artists together at the convention: in 2018, for instance, the cartoonist Josh Neufeld (*A.D.: After the Deluge*) joined a group of graduate students and scholars at the panel Graphic States of Insecurity, for which I was a respondent. But *PMLA*, specifically, has not published widely on comics. By my reckoning, there have been three dedicated essays on comics works in the ten years leading up to this cluster on *Why Comics?* (Pizzino; Clewell; Ostby). Hence I disagree with my interlocutor Ramzi Fawaz's claim that "the journal [has] chosen to foreground a book that argues something its readers already know (or should know) about comics." While comics as a form may be "everywhere" in culture, as my book's subtitle suggests, from Hollywood blockbusters to hospital care manuals, this does not, I believe, automatically translate into academic knowledge or into imperatives for gaining such knowledge in the realm of scholarship.[3] Comics, as Stephanie Burt points out, "now have more readers, fans, creators, and critics than ever before," but in English departments, where both Fawaz and I teach, they do not yet appear widely on introduction-to-literature syllabi, on oral-examination lists, or in history-of-criticism courses. And the performance of knowingness around comics—a medium perceived historically as both mass-market and deeply esoteric—is something *Why Comics?* seeks to avoid.

Some respondents tend to exaggerate features of the contemporary scholarly landscape of comics. For years I have found it curious that scholars of comics are so preoccupied with the status of the creation of a comics canon, since the field is essentially wide open, and work like Fawaz's own *The New Mutants* (2017) or my respondent Andrew Hoberek's *Considering* Watchmen (2014) proves that the best way to make people pay attention to the value of particular comics—a first step in any canonization effort—is to model through scholarly rigor why any particular work or genre is worth studying. A year after my initial exchange with Saunders in *PMLA*, I published *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, and a year later Saunders published *Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes*, demonstrating the diversity of the field's objects of inquiry. When everyone agrees, you have a squad; when scholars articulate and explain disagreement as interlocutors, you have a field of inquiry.

That is how fields grow—through intellectual and contextual distinctions as well as through groupings and agreement. The proportion-focused anxiety about the amount of critical attention paid to graphic narratives such as Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Bechdel's *Fun Home*—all of which I explore in *Why Comics?*—feels misplaced to me, like the short view of a young field. Consider that, for example, Spiegelman's graphic narrative *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale* came out in 1986, while Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* appeared in 1987; both works are narratively experimental and face the presence of the historical past across traumatized generations. Both Spiegelman and Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize. Yet I have never heard a single scholar complain that there is too much scholarship on *Beloved*, and, as of this writing, the essays one finds searching the *MLA International Bibliography* for that title far outnumber the essays on *Maus*. It is accepted that ongoing, robust *Beloved* criticism productively adds to our knowledge of that text and of other works: it helps us to understand the gothic, magical realism, slave narratives, and historical fiction. Similarly,

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ongoing *Maus* criticism doesn't mean other works receive less critical attention; rather, it creates broadly applicable frames and theories. Scholars of contemporary fiction (or contemporary poetry, or contemporary art) don't seem to share the notion of a limited critical-imaginative appetite for an entire medium or the fear that appreciation for one work or kind of work—say, comics nonfiction, one of my primary interests—will preclude appreciation for another.

I do not believe the patience and attention of the academy (or the public) is so restricted. The best remedy for over- or underemphasis is an alternative conference, syllabus, book, or essay—projects, of course, in which many of my interlocutors are involved. In this feature I learned enormously from Laurence Grove's essay on Scottish comics, and I was glad that my book, with its different concerns, offered him a platform here to express his own account of the transnational history of the medium. "I am only too aware that my account is highly personal," he writes, "but then so is Chute's." Of course; as is all our research and scholarship.

My work seeks to encourage a proliferation of knowledge and voices—the opposite of "gatekeeping," to invoke a phrase from Jared Gardner's essay. Grove responds to the set of texts animating *Why Comics?* by offering and explicating a competing (or perhaps complementary) set. Matt Silady's attentive "Three Wishes for *Why Comics?*" outlines something similar, describing my chosen group of texts and asking for "even greater representation" of certain cartoonists—specifically black, trans, and nonbinary cartoonists—in accounts of contemporary comics. Right now is the moment to proliferate and pluralize critical voices—at a minimum, to reflect the multiplicity that the form itself has always instantiated and provoked. The academy's curiosity about comics is as strong as it has ever been, and we need all sorts of perspectives to help build a canon, if one should exist at all. Canons should be dynamic; they should shift and grow and constantly be rebuilt. I want to second the title question of Burt's contribution, "Why Not More Comics?" And also: Why not more critics? and kinds of comics theory and criticism?

Speaking of critics: I am delighted that two separate respondents, Gardner and Hoberek, compare me with the brilliant Hugh Kenner. For Gardner, the intimacy of Kenner's relationships with his subjects—including, of course, Ezra Pound—rhymes with *Why Comics?*: "Studying modernism with Kenner was like studying modernism with an actual modernist."[4] Hoberek hears in *Why Comics?* echoes of Kenner's famous *The Pound Era* (1971), since both center on "a coherent, aesthetically adventurous artistic movement populated by artists who know and interact with each other in various ways" and since both display the author's personal relationships with their subjects, helping to establish a canon and an implicit, if not overt, aesthetic theory.

It is certainly true that many cartoonists whose work I analyze—say, Spiegelman and Bechdel—openly align themselves with high modernism, as I noted at this past year's Modernist Studies Association conference, whose theme was "Graphic Modernisms" (Keynote Roundtable). It is also true that plenty of the figures I write about are nearly as coterie as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. But a more apt analogue than the formalist-biographical criticism produced by the influential scholars of modernism—and modernist poetry specifically—is criticism oriented toward the visual.[5] This includes criticism undertaking the early work of mapping visual and other media, such as criticism engaging with the early days of contemporary photography, for example, or even with video art. Art criticism has demarcated interpretive zones that have deeply influenced *Why Comics?*, which contains over one hundred hand-drawn images, most of them full-page—roughly a quarter of the book. Especially given some of my interlocutors' stated

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concern about comics being subsumed into the literary, the (prose-only) responses give surprisingly little attention to visuality—and to the question of whether *reading* is the appropriate or sufficient term for what happens when one engages with comics.

In a roundtable discussion on the conditions of art criticism in the Spring 2002 issue of *October*, Rosalind Krauss asserts that a good critic maintains a "historical sense of shifts in direction of the large part of art practitioners" and "produces as well as reports on phenomena, including categories of analysis" (Baker et al. 216–17). I aim to do this myself in my earlier, academic books *Graphic Women* and *Disaster Drawn*, identifying and pressurizing the historicity of discourse around the medium of comics: this commitment is reflected as well in *Why Comics?* At the end of the *October* roundtable, the art historians Hal Foster and David Joselit outline critical aims—specifically, a kind of dialogics—that align with those motivating my book. Foster proposes that the critic is "the advocate of artistic practice," on the one hand, and, on the other, that criticism "opens onto a critique of visual culture." Joselit, who posits that "knowledge is produced as much through images as through texts," affirms, in response, "I don't see these models as contradictory, and in fact I have learned a lot from artistic practice on this issue. One can follow a number of strategies at once, some of which may seem to contradict others" (Baker et al. 228). Joselit's sense of being an art critic who learns, in part, from artistic practices themselves—specifically, the proposition that knowledge is produced through images—reminds me of the notion that Ware has often articulated and that animates *Why Comics?*: that drawing is a way of thinking.

The succinct epigraph to Ware's "Panels and Pens" contribution—from Vladimir Nabokov's lecture "James Joyce"—states, "Man thinks not always in words but also in images. . . ." (Fawaz worries about the field's having "assimilated comics into English curricula by flattening the medium's long-form expressions into just another iteration of the novel"; I don't share this concern, instead believing, along with Ware, that comics' word-image hybridity broadens understandings of what constitutes literature and how literature works on a sociohistorical and political-aesthetic level.) Ware's reference returns us to modernism, by way of Nabokov and Joyce, but it further reminds us, as I would also remind some of my respondents—whose modernist reference points are in the realm of poetry—that the discursive-sensory register of the visual cannot be ignored when we consider comics, both for readers in general and for comics scholars.[6]

"[R]eading and seeing operate at parity" in comics, Ware states in the remarks that accompany his comic strip here. Comics teaches us to pay attention to the knowledge produced by images, and to consider, in our analytic models, not only the dialogics noted by the *October* participants above (and in Elias's outlining of method) but, further, W. J. T. Mitchell's classic question *What do pictures want?* Mitchell, one of my mentors, models this analysis for comics in his 2014 *Critical Inquiry* essay "Comics as Media," interpreting the desire of a letter written to him in comics form; and his 2003 *PMLA* essay "The Commitment to Form; or, Still Crazy after All These Years" is one of the best articulations of the political-aesthetic potential of comics form, though he doesn't name that potential directly. All my writing has been motivated by the political and ethical valences of comics form, along the lines that Mitchell sketches in "The Commitment to Form," as characterized by Adorno's claiming as radical the "very features defamed as formalism" in his famous 1964 essay "Commitment" (qtd. in Mitchell, "Commitment" 322). For me, and for Mitchell, form (and being a "formalist") does not have to be voided of politics—quite the opposite: as he writes,

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"the modernist moment of form, whether modeled on organisms, perceptual gestalten, or structural coherence, may be behind us, but that only means that some new notion of form, and thus a new kind of formalism, lies before us" (324).[7] The embodied engagement demanded by comics's duotexturality, or biocularity, shows how aesthetic and political values cannot be disentangled.

How can we incorporate the desires of images on their own terms into an approach to the hybrid medium of comics? Writing about *Maus*, Hirsch suggests that "[s]ome of the observations that come out of film and film theory and narrative work only to a degree. I almost think," she goes on, "that the best reading strategies are taken from the text, rather than the other way around."[8]

Hirsch's comments provide a context for one of my approaches to comics form, which is also contextualized by Joselit and others. And in interpreting the desires of the (verbal *and* visual) text, I have found that an analytic purview can be enriched by knowledge and engagement with practices of production. Part of the pleasure of writing about comics is the absence of an analogous discipline that provides a ready-made, fully importable lexicon—not film studies, despite its useful language of framing, view, temporality, and visual pleasure; nor literary studies, despite its helpful iterations of narrative theory; nor even art history, despite its rigorous attention to spatiotemporal form. Given the range of discourse that provides insight into comics, to consider its wildly variegated processes and techniques—artistic practice, in other words—is to introduce a suggestive critical language for thinking about how comics works.

I have, as many respondents noted, interviewed and observed cartoonists as subjects who describe and reveal, in their studios, artistic practice (some, such as Gary Panter, I interviewed specifically for *Why Comics?*, while others, like Spiegelman, I had already interviewed).[9] Creators' words, as Ware's remarks show, are always suggestive, often provocative, but never definitive or determinative. Contrary to Elias's suggestion, in *Why Comics?* I am not a mouthpiece for their authorial intentions but rather an interpreter of their practices, and of the tools that the material-culture scholar in me finds especially alluring—their writing and drawing implements and grades and weights of paper—alongside the aesthetico-political worlds their marks and lines create. As I tell my students, the creator's voice is one among many in the interpretation of a work. In her comics response here, Bechdel parodies the idea that a critic should be the conduit of the creator's interior reality. Her panels, which all portray herself directly gazing out at the readers, end with a playful series of three frames: in the first, writing in a speech balloon, Bechdel explains, "Despite Chute's many thoughtful observations on the ways comics can deftly convey interior reality, you can't really know what I'm thinking." In the second, she teases readers by offering a thought balloon ("Is it lunchtime?"), and in the third and final panel, she simply stares in silence at the reader.

In her contribution, Bechdel presciently—and parodically—identifies tropes of academic writing on comics that appear in this cluster. She mentions, for instance, "fanboys sniffing Jack Kirby's eraser crumbs," anticipating Hoberek's turn to Kirby: "But what if you believe that Jack Kirby is one of the greatest artists—not just one of the greatest comics artists—of the twentieth century?" Bechdel also spoofs the approaches to early comics by historians who "[go] on" about spatiotemporality, and she tackles the issue of comics collaboration, a topic of concern in Burt's, Gardner's, and Hoberek's responses, with a simple statement—"I . . . prefer the work of . . . auteurs"—although her own comics response itself pays homage to a comics collaboration between the comics writer Harvey Pekar and the artist R. Crumb. With the boldness of a nonacademic—that is, simply stating and

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not defending her preferences—Bechdel reminds us, again, how desirable alternative approaches are; there is no one-size-fits-all canon or comprehensive hermeneutic. And, further, as we in academia ponder how to take up comics discourse, it's useful to be reminded about the other side of the equation: how those in the comics world ponder how to take up academic discourse. Bechdel has even spoofed the MLA convention in her serial comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*.[10]

The medium of comics today—the wide range and thrilling quality of work and its ability to seize the attention of readers, students, and fans of all ages—and the excitement in the academy, palpable here in *PMLA*'s rich selection of responses, is, for me, evidence against Gardner's prognosis of what he calls "dark days for our broader enterprise." By this, he may mean literary studies generally, the humanities, perhaps even higher-education models and funding. The enthusiasm around comics—reading them, teaching them, writing about them, arguing about them, and, sometimes, creating them—gives me hope for an invigorated humanities: specifically, a public humanities. I disagree with Gardner that comics studies has arrived at "precisely the worst possible moment." From first-year undergraduates to graduate students, in my classes students show no sign of weariness with studying comics; they understand the form as evolving, current, and continuous with memes and movies like *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* and a whole range of dynamic verbal-visual phenomena they encounter in their everyday lives, much of it digital, that I can't keep up with. Literature and arts departments, among others, have been adding comics courses steadily for years, largely because of students' interest in thinking meaningfully about stories that feel vital to them and their lives—whatever form those stories take or genre they belong to; as Burt points out, for many that genre is fantasy as opposed to autobiography.[11]

Comics, as I argue in *Why Comics?*, is a democratic art form, and its roots and history place a productive demand on scholars, one to which I have always tried to attend: an ethic of writing for an audience beyond *PMLA*. Comics has inspired me to recognize the power of finding audiences in many different places. Paying attention to comics's unusual and sometimes surprising reach, its accessibility and sophistication, its rhythms of articulation and evocation, has allowed me to publish university-press books inspired by comics works and also a *New York Times Book Review* column titled "Graphic Content."[12] The form inspired me even as a graduate student, when I developed a dissertation about nonfiction comics and often wrote about those same works—say, by Joe Sacco—in *The Village Voice*. The more opportunities we have to address diverse readerships, the more we model, and keep relevant, the work of the humanities, and literature's powerful and productive elasticity.

## Notes

Thank you to Maureen McLane, Eric Slauter, and Chris Spaide for their feedback.

1. In his response here, Matt Silady suggests that my *Why Comics?* chapter that analyzes the controversial underground cartoonist R. Crumb should be called "Why Misogyny?" In 2018 I organized a panel, Crumb, Race and Gender, at the Massachusetts Independent Comics Expo (MICE) on Crumb's complicated legacy, featuring booksellers, professors, and cartoonists. A video of the complete panel is available online (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDePN-swvuE).

2. Elias and I discussed the idea of the "open work" at a roundtable she organized, Open or Framed? What's at Stake for Interpreting Art?, at the Association for the Study of Arts of the Present annual conference in 2015 (Elias et al.).

3. The Web site *Graphic Medicine* explains the recent movement that tracks the intersection of comics and health care discourse (www.graphicmedicine.org). The surprise that greeted the Booker Prize longlisting of Nick Drnaso's acclaimed *Sabrina*—the first graphic novel to appear on the list, in 2018—demonstrated that

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the wide acceptance of comics that many aficionados take for granted, especially in literary-academic circles, isn't as wide as imagined (Flood).

4. Less clear to me is why Gardner compares me with William Pritchard, the author of *Lives of the Modern Poets* and a self-declared "old-fashioned humanist" who apparently rejected theory, while I embrace it—although not explicitly, at least, in this nonacademic book. I can relate to Pritchard's strong attraction to certain forms of serial popular culture—in his case, a love of soap operas. I have tried to consider, however, the intersection between popular or mainstream forms and theoretical discourse—for instance, in organizing a panel at the 2015 MLA convention called Theory, Popular, Culture, which featured Grant Farred, Jeffrey T. Nealon, and W. J. T. Mitchell (Farred et al.). Both Elias and Gardner call the method of *Why Comics?* "old-fashioned" (also the implication, as I read it, of Hoberek's invocation of Kenner). I'll accept the compliment as intended, although I resist any categorization of my scholarship as disengaged with theory. If my strategy for writing a mainstream book, which unlike my scholarly monographs focuses on personal stories and themes, feels old-fashioned, that kind of writing has persisted because it appeals to nonspecialized audiences.

5. That said, I am interested in exploring the formal connections between comics and poetry, the subject of a brief essay I wrote for *Poetry* ("Secret Labor") that was then rebutted by Noah Berlatsky in an online essay for *The Atlantic*.

6. Gardner and Hoberek discuss poets—specifically, the author's personal relationship with poets—in making their Pritchard and Kenner comparisons. A fruitful connection they do not remark upon is Kenner's own interest in modernist visual culture, evident in *The Pound Era*'s analysis of Wyndham Lewis's *Blast* and related graphic work (232–47).

7. In my first book, *Graphic Women*, I base my claim for the feminist potential of comics not on content but rather on the capacities of comics form: "The field of graphic narrative brings certain key constellations to the table: hybridity and autobiography, theorizing trauma in connection to the visual; textuality that takes the body seriously. I claim graphic narratives, as they exhibit these interests, 'feminist'" (3–4). For a recent iteration of the intertwining of the aesthetic and the political, see Levine's response to the *PMLA* cluster of essays on her book *Forms* (1242).

8. I also quote these comments in *Graphic Narrative*, a special issue of *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* that I coedited in 2006 (Chute and DeKoven 780).

9. I interviewed Spiegelman over several years for our 2011 volume *MetaMaus* and in my collection *Outside the Box: Interviews with Contemporary Cartoonists*.

10. See the collection *Invasion of the Dykes to Watch Out For* (2005) for the most prominent appearance of the MLA in Bechdel's work (127–55). In 2018 the MLA published *Approaches to Teaching Bechdel's* Fun Home (edited by Judith Kegan Gardiner), their first volume in the Approaches series on a single comics work.

11. In 2018, according to estimates by Griepp and Miller, sales of comics and graphic novels in the United States and Canada reached approximately 1.095 billion US dollars, an all-time high.

12. See also Burt's public-facing writing on comics for *The New York Times Book Review*, such as her essay "The Iceman Cometh Out," on queer Marvel characters.

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