Testimonies are viewed as essential for recording the experience of atomic warfare. However, hibakusha Keiko Ogura expresses the need for something more than recording and translating these testimonies. She highlights the need for an understanding of the hibakusha experience through a form of virtual collaboration with hibakusha and their stories. Ogura states that this is best achieved via ‘literature, art and poetry’ (Ogura 2015: n.pag.).

This paper discusses why and how we speak about the atomic bomb and argues that virtual collaboration with hibakusha, by writing poetry based on their experiences and publishing it online, encourages empathy and keeps the experience alive for future generations. This paper uses Brandon Shimoda's curated issue—entitled ‘Hiroshima/Nagasaki’—of Evening Will Come, a monthly online journal of poetics, as a case study.

Keywords: hibakusha poetry—atomic bomb literature—public intellectuals—poets as public intellectuals

On August 6, I attended the Peace Memorial for the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima at the city's Peace Memorial Park. At 8.15 am, along with 55,000 other people, I observed one minute’s silence, to mourn the victims and the dawning of the atomic age. Standing not far from the cenotaph, I watched as wreaths were placed in front of the eternal flame where the inscription reads: ‘Rest in peace. We will not make the same mistake again.’ In an effort to enforce this, after the ceremony, the leaders of seven groups representing survivors of the atomic bomb delivered a letter to Japanese Prime Minister Abe demanding that he withdraw the proposed legislation on military deployments.[1]

Many hibakusha (atomic bomb affected people) can be identified as public intellectuals for their role in public affairs, most often in public debates concerning social justice and world peace. As Tak Uesugi argues, ‘how can there be hibakusha experiences without politics?’ (2009: 11) Indeed, public intellectual hibakusha argue that it is their duty to intervene in issues of discrimination, war and peace; identifying this as a response to survivor guilt. These hibakusha prioritise public visibility and the public dissemination of their testimony to pass on the legacy of the atomic bombings to a new generation and to lobby for world peace. The death toll from the atomic bombing of Hiroshima stands at 297,684 and the average age of survivors now exceeds 80, renewing discussion both in the press and in scholarship concerning the importance of hibakusha passing on their stories ‘as the world at large grows increasingly cavalier about using nuclear weapons again’ (Mason 2005: 411).
Testimonies are viewed as essential for recording the experience of atomic warfare. However, hibakusha Keiko Ogura expresses the need for something more than recording and translating these attestations. She argues, ‘Imagination is key. It is important to empathize with people affected by disaster, imagine how they survived, how they suffered. I want the young people to be caring. Those who are rich in imagination can relate to others’ pain easily’ (Ogura 2015 n.pag). In this way, she highlights the need for an understanding of the hibakusha experience through a form of virtual collaboration with hibakusha and their stories. Ogura states that this is best achieved via ‘literature, art and poetry’ (Ogura 2015, n.pag). Robert Jay Lifton has written about poetry’s important role after the dropping of the bomb, despite its censorship during the Allied Occupation of Japan. Many hibakusha chronicled their experiences in poetry they wrote in the months and years after the bombing. This paper discusses why and how we speak about the bomb and argues that virtual collaboration with hibakusha in online publications keeps the experience alive for future generations. This paper uses Brandon Shimoda’s curated issue—entitled ‘Hiroshima/Nagasaki’—of Evening Will Come, a monthly online journal of poetics, as a case study.

1. Post-atomic ineffability

Pikadon is a word that entered the Japanese vocabulary after the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Translated, ‘pika’ means brilliant light and ‘don’ means boom. It represents what was immediately seen and heard when the first atomic bomb was detonated above the A-bomb dome in Hiroshima: there was a boom followed by a bright flash of light.

It is impossible to describe the suffering that ensued after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Indeed, Theodor Adorno’s response to Paul Celan’s holocaust poetry is most often invoked in discussions of tragedy and the ineffable: ‘After Auschwitz to write a poem is barbaric’ (1983: 34). However, as many scholars have pointed out since then, Adorno reconsidered and reworked his statement to acknowledge:

The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting … that this suffering … demands the continued existence of art even as … it prohibits it. It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice of consolation without immediately being betrayed by it. (1962: 87-8)

Scholar Daniela Tan acknowledges this conflict in literary expressions of the atomic bomb, arguing:

writing about the unspeakable means to speak out and by doing so to fall short—a paradox that authors of atomic bomb literature confront. (2014: n.pag)

In this way, writers attempting to write about the experience are presented with a double bind. On one hand they are thwarted by the argument that tragedy is ‘unspeakable’, however, if writers do not attempt to write about these tragic events, then the horrors of war are silenced. Many hibakusha were initially driven by survivor guilt and many used writing about their experiences—in part to help work through some of the trauma and fulfil responsibilities they believed they had to those who did not survive and to future generations. Kurihara Sadako, a public intellectual hibakusha poet stated: ‘That is the responsibility the duty that survivors owe to those who died. The atomic landscape does not allow me to rest’ (Dougherty n.d.: 3).

Interestingly, writers have managed to write about the atomic bomb while simultaneously calling attention to the impossibility of translating the suffering into words. This is achieved, in part, through what Tan
identifies as ‘a lexical level [where] expressions of inchoateness and amorphousness serve the depiction of things that are hard to verbalize’ (2014: n.pag.). In this way, hibakusha poets acknowledge the ineffability of this experience and yet, simultaneously, point to the importance of attempting to do so through poetic techniques such as repetition, fragmentation and disjunction. Therefore, poetry best acknowledges the argument that the experience is, indeed, ineffable. This is because of all atomic bomb literature, poetry captures the devastation of atomic warfare with an emphasis on the economy of expression and, as Robert Jay Lifton argues, ‘symbolic transformation’ (1991: 21). Jan Zwicky takes this a step further to argue for the ineffability of the poetry itself:

There is, however, an interesting sense in which poetry is ineffable: it is often said to be untranslatable, and it is famously resistant to paraphrase. That is, it is made of language, but in an odd and peculiar way. (2012: 205)

Indeed, Stephanie Houston Grey has articulated, ‘The efforts of those who portrayed the attack using verse and associate imagery … became known as the “nuclear sublime”’ (Grey 2002: 13).

While traditional Japanese short forms of poetry following a strict set of guidelines, such as the 5-7-5 syllable (or onji) haiku or 31 syllable tanka (Cheney 2002: 79) were initially popular after the dropping of the atomic bomb, hibakusha poets quickly moved into experimentation with free verse to capture the atomic rupture. Karen Thornber argues:

Poets felt that haiku and tanka (two of the most popular forms of poetry that were initially used by hibakusha) were taming the experience of atomic warfare beyond recognition and were inadequate for this reason (qtd in Stahl and Williams 2010: n.pag.).

Interestingly, Yoneda Eisaku’s poems provide an interesting bridge between traditional verse and free verse after the A-bomb. This is because Yoneda’s poetry often conforms to stanzas and he prefers to write elegiac poetry. Robert Jay Lifton argues that many considered Yoneda to be ‘Hiroshima’s outstanding A-bomb poet’ (1991: 446) and John Whittier Treat discusses the way in which the Hiroshima Poets Society was ‘formed around prominent local poet Yoneda Eisaku’ and ‘membership … carried an implicit commitment to left-wing political activism’ (1995: 176). While Yoneda’s poetry focuses on beauty, rather than violence, it is protest poetry in the way it laments the victims of the atomic bomb. In ‘Standing in the Ruins’, renewal and regeneration are emphasised:

Going along the dirt road,  
I see the winter sun shine brightly;  
The young shoots are through already,  
Steadily pushing between the ashes.

And yet look in vain for my young one,  
Hearing only the far sound of a cold wind.

I stand on the Aioi Bridge, sick at heart.  
In the deep waters something flashes!  
Ah! It is but an image.  
An image of his childhood.
The first stanza prioritises new life in the image of ‘young shoots / Steadily pushing between the ashes.’ In this poem, the world continues even when individual lives do not. There is new life among the ashes as images of burial and going back to the earth are foregrounded with the emphasis on ‘dirt’ and ‘ashes’. The beauty in nature, ‘the winter sun shining brightly’, lightens the scene with a seasonal reference. As Yoneda stated, his poetry explores the way in which, metaphorically, ‘his wife and children were somehow absorbed by the beauty of nature’, rather than destroyed by the ugliness of atomic warfare (Lifton 1991: 446).

This is strongly reflected in the only couplet in the poem where the narrator listens for his ‘young one’ in the ‘far sound of the cold wind’. It is a mournful image but one that twins death with nature, lending the dead an otherwise unattainable immortality. This sentiment continues in the final stanza of the poem where the ‘flash’ in the ‘deep waters’ suggests that his child’s death is not the end. The poem concludes with the image of the dead boy’s childhood reflected in the mirrored water’s surface. In this way, the water has cleansed the earth and triumphed over the destruction of the bomb. Yoneda’s poetry replaces the ugliness of war with a future built on peace. William H. Davenport goes as far as to argue that in Yoneda’s poetry, ‘annihilation [is] part of a bio-spiritual continuum looking toward reconstruction’ (70).

By contrast, Tōge Sankichi’s poem ‘Give Back the Human’ is an elegiac poem written in free verse that mourns the world’s loss of innocence. He was 24 when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and died in 1953 from leukemia caused by radiation. ‘Give Back the Human’ is one of the most famous atomic bomb poems and is engraved on a monument dedicated to him at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. It is a short poem composed using repetition and metaphor to convey a political message:

**Give Back the Human**

Give back my father, give back my mother;  
Give grandpa back, grandma back;  
Give my sons and daughters back.

Give me back myself,  
Give back the human race.

As long as this life lasts, this life,  
Give back peace  
That will never end.

The repetition not only works to emphasise what has been taken away or lost, it also suggests that there are few words that can capture a post-atomic world by invoking the same words over and over. It acknowledges the sublimity of nuclear warfare.

While hibakusha poets like Yoneda and Tōge found ways to work with the ineffability of surviving the bomb and of poetic form, they also had to contend with being silenced by censorship during the Allied Occupation of Japan by US forces. Censorship was enacted by the Supreme Command for Allied Powers from September 1945 to September 1947 and, during this period, all printed matter in Japan was subject to Civil Censorship Detachment. While censorship continued after this period, it did lessen after 1947. Nonetheless, censorship under this regime assured that people across the world, and also in Japan itself, did not understand the scope of the devastation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the significance of the
dawning of an atomic age.

2. Virtual collaboration

The 70th anniversary is seen by many hibakusha who have been silent as the moment to tell their stories. Hibakusha Keiko Ogura states, ‘We struggle whether to tell or not but we must tell on behalf of the dead. To survive means to tell our story’ (Ogura 2015: n.pag.). This means overcoming survivor guilt and ongoing discrimination. Robert Jacobs best encapsulates the enduring prejudice against hibakusha and their families, focusing on their outsidersness as a result of radiation poisoning:

People who may have been exposed to radiation often experience discrimination in their new homes and may become social pariahs. We first saw this dynamic with the hibakusha in Hiroshima and Nagasaki who found it very difficult to find marriage partners, since prospective spouses feared they would have malformed children, and found it difficult to find jobs since employers assumed that they would be chronically sick. Hibakusha children, moreover, often become the targets of bullying. It became very common to attempt to hide the fact that one’s family had been among those exposed to radiation. (2014: n.pag.)

Many hibakusha have remained silent to protect their children from this kind of discrimination. Indeed, there is still fear concerning grandchildren of hibakusha being born with defects associated with the DNA changes created by radiation, and therefore continuing reluctance for some to speak about their experiences (Hooper 2015: n.pag.).

In a call to action, Ogura is adamant that:

Forgetting is not the way to conquer suffering. Rather, [hibakusha] need to think about reasons why they survived and tell people why they survived. This is important. Many victims in despair overcame their problems by drawing, writing a poem and telling their stories (2015: n.pag.).

The way she privileges art, literature and poetry is important. This is because she believes that it is through these art forms and their appeal to the imagination of the reader, that the theme of nuclear disarmament is most effectively transmitted. Ogura argues that this is the best way to keep the dangers of nuclear warfare circulating. Indeed, she prioritises the arts over eyewitness testimony for its ability to reach a broad audience and make a lasting impact (2015: n.pag.).

However, this leads to the question of the ethics of non-hibakusha imaginatively re-creating the atomic experience. Many non-hibakusha writers have already stepped into this space, generating discussions concerning co-opting or appropriating the hibakusha experience in atomic bomb literature.

Karen Thorber writes:

There has been much discussion in Japan and in the English-language scholarly world about the inconsistencies between hibakusha accounts of the bombing and representations by people who did not experience the bombings first hand. The legitimacy of non-hibakusha writings was of particular concern in the decades following the bombings (qtd in Stahl and Williams 2010: 272).
Indeed, Uesugi has flagged further issues with non-hibakusha stepping into this post-atomic space. Silence prevents the hibakusha experience from being passed on to future generations, however, non-hibakusha writers are unsure of how to traverse this terrain:

Oppressive silence demands speech; forgetfulness must be warded off by remembrance … yet how can we write ethnographies in such a way that informant’s lives are not reified in our writings, so that we do not, through our writing, construct a monument of their suffering … Can we, rather than simply interpreting the Others’ silence, communicate their silence through silence, by silence, so that our ethnographic characters remain enigmatic … genres such as literature and film [use these] strategies. (Uesugi 2009: 11)

It is not only ethnographers who struggle with these issues but also writers. Gregory Mason argues for appropriation by the writer, stating: ‘the first task of the writer is to bear witness … the writer attempts to understand the subject and to make it knowable; to appropriate it (internalise their full meaning)’ (2005: 412). However, there is an important difference between empathising and appropriating tragedy, largely because ‘the idea of appropriation implies taking possession of something, taking something for one’s own use’ (411). Mason argues this is a positive aspect of appropriation and that it should occur in order to accurately comment on and re-tell the experience to a new audience. However, this can also be misread as an attempt to claim that the non-hibakusha writer understands the experience of surviving the atomic bomb. Instead of interpreting appropriation either way, it is Mason’s emphasis on silence and enigma that is most useful to this study. A way of legitimising and working with the silence and enigma of many hibakusha is through collaboration. While this process of collaboration is clear in the translation and creation of online repositories of these testimonies, such as The Voice of Hibakusha and Hibakusha Testimony Videos, the process is not as clear in the creation of literature and poetry.

It is difficult to argue for any kind of collaboration with the dead because collaboration is generally thought of as working together. However, ‘collaboration with dead writers’ as Darren Sean Wershler-Henry posits (2005: 114), is now understood more in terms of working with dead writers’ texts and biography, to create a new text that is ‘in harmony’ (Guerra 1998: 387) with the writer:

One trend is that adaptations of Dickinson’s life and poetry signal a collaborative effort. This collaboration occurs between the dead poet and the living artist as well as between their ‘texts’ and often also involves biographers, other artists, and/or performers. (Guerra 1998: 387)

This is best labeled virtual collaboration. Allen J Kuharski uses this term when he discusses dramaturgy and ‘virtual collaboration with dead or otherwise absent playwrights’, whereby original works are made from classic literature. ‘Such translation’, he argues, ‘is the most intimate form of dramaturgical collaboration with a dead or otherwise absent playwright writing in a foreign language’ (139).

While there are still hibakusha alive today, their advanced age and the language barrier suggests that English speaking writers may have to virtually collaborate with hibakusha testimony, literature, poetry and artwork rather than work side by side with them to create a new text. Indeed, choreographer and dancer Twyla Tharp has modified the more traditional ideas of virtual collaboration to include technology:

Virtual collaboration means for most of us—email, with attached documents or videos or MP3s. The Internet is the greatest literary project since Gutenberg invented movable type in the 1400s.
Collaborative projects offer tutorials in reality. And that tutorial always presents the unexpected. (2009: 62-3)

Writers collaborating virtually with hibakusha’s texts and publishing new artforms on the internet is an effective way of reaching a broad audience and communicating a message of peace to younger generations. In this way, the hibakusha’s silence is both respected and reinterpreted.

3. Evening Will Come

In August 2015, *Evening Will Come*, an online monthly journal of poetics, published a special edition responding to the 70th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: http://www.thevolta.org/ewc-mainpage56.html. The curator and editor of this edition is Brandon Shimoda, an American poet and writer who has written extensively about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Shimoda has emotional links with Hiroshima. His grandfather, Midori Shimoda was born in Hiroshima Prefecture and immigrated to the US in 1919, aged nine. Shimoda charts his obsession with the city to the time he first visited, when he was ten years old (Rabasca 2012: n.pag.). His writing and his special edition of *Evening Will Come* link to the aforementioned issues in three important ways. First, he argues for the way in which the arts enable thinking about atomic warfare and trauma; second, he uses poetry to approach the ineffable; and third, he encourages and participates in virtual collaboration.

Shimoda’s childhood visit to Hiroshima had an enduring impact in the way in which it first made him aware of the bombings. Most importantly, he states, ‘I have been thinking about it since. Poetry (and art) has been a way for me to think about it’ (2015c: n.pag.). His comment about poetry and art connects with Ogura’s statements about the ways in which literature, art and poetry are the most effective forms with which to interact with the hibakusha experience. With their emphasis on the imagination, these forms create new ways for writers, artists and readers to better understand the implications of atomic warfare and collaborate virtually with the hibakusha experience. Poetry, in particular, is Shimoda’s preferred form: ‘I am a poet, and poetry is my lens. I use that word (poetry) somewhat broadly, because I feel that poetry encompasses much more than poems. The lens is capacious …’ (n.pag.). This reference to capaciousness is an acknowledgement of poetry’s ability to embrace and express that which is perhaps too large to comprehend; something bordering on ineffable. Indeed, Shimoda is always working on ‘projects [that] are long-form attempts to answer questions that are inexpressible, still forming’ (n.pag.)[2] For example, in his book of poetry, *Inland Sea*[3], Shimoda experiments with poetry’s ability to express the inexpressible, by creating ruptures in language:

The difficulty of writing this journey perhaps leads to Shimoda’s use of fragment, amputated imagery, and atmospheric tones. Overall, though, the *Inland Sea* becomes a space where the imagination of trauma is ‘a procession of waves / drawing piles of stone, piles of stone.’ (Perez 2009 n.pag.)

This is comparable to the hibakusha’s poetic approach when they experimented with free verse to respond to the horrors of a post-atomic world.

Finally, Shimoda’s ‘engagement with his grandfather’s history’ has been described by Sara Renee Marshall as ‘not a mere curiosity but a lifestyle—an ongoing excavation, a way to visit and be visited’ (Marshall 2013:
Just as writers who, in their view, collaborate with dead authors or poets, Shimoda’s relationship with his dead grandfather is collaborative. Similarly, the way in which he writes about the atomic bomb suggests, as Ogura was endorsing, that on some level, he is collaborating virtually with hibakusha and their experiences.

There are many levels of collaboration in the Hiroshima/Nagasaki issue of *Evening Will Come*. While Shimoda approached people to contribute to this issue, he also ‘invited contributors to recommend people’ (Shimoda 2015a: n.pag.) in a kind of snowball sampling of writers. Furthermore, he celebrated the multifarious levels of referencing and/or collaboration in the issue:

Some contributions were included in reference to other works in the issue. For example: Kenji Yanobe’s work is referenced in David Buuck’s piece; Roland Barthes and Joy Division are referenced in Elin Slavick’s pieces; and so on ... I wanted there to be correspondences, both overt and subliminal. (n.pag.)

Not all of the contributions are strictly poetry. The edition contains art, music, photography and essays—however, they are all poetic in their approach and in their responses to the atomic bomb. I want to focus, specifically, on two contributions. The first is by Yukiyo Kawano who identifies herself in her biographical note as ‘a third generation hibakusha’ (Shimoda 2015a: n.pag.). This is particularly interesting, given the discrimination the hibakusha and their relatives still face in Japan. While Kawano lives in America, her decision to state her connection to the hibakusha is an important step in resolving this prejudice. Her contribution, ‘Black Rain’ connects with her ongoing project where:

she uses pieces of translucent kimono fabric and sewed together with strands of her hair (the artist’s DNA as a third generation hibakusha) to form a suspended soft silk sculpture of a life size atomic bomb. (Shimoda 2015a: n.pag.)

Her contribution to the ‘Hiroshima/Nagasaki’ edition of *Evening Will Come* begins with a series of images from her journal capturing her project in artwork and photographs and moves fluidly into a short discussion of her process, ending with Kawano’s unpicking of her grandmother’s kimono at the seams. Importantly, her work can be identified as collaboration between Kawano, her grandmother and the hibakusha experience. She states: ‘It has become a ritual-like practice, almost passive or unconscious. Of forgetting nothing, leaving out nothing’ (Shimoda 2015a: n.pag.). In this way, Kawano has taken up the main concern of the hibakusha—forgetting—and is reworking their fears into something imaginative that will endure. Indeed, she summarises this process in a moving poem of three unrhyming tercets mirroring English language haiku:

Uranium bomb
Kimono of Cyan Blue
a gentle sadness

A thread of hand stitch
act of undoing realizes
foreboding darkness

whisper in the wind

&

tei-uni ito
bodo-ke-shi ki-aku
bito no kage

ka ze so yo gu
made of Shinbashi-iro color
the atomic bomb

(Shimoda 2015: n.pag.)

In Kawano’s poem, undoing the kimono emphasises the way in which the dropping of the atomic bomb is an act that cannot be undone; it is a historical moment that needs to be remembered and not repeated. In this way, the wind is shinbashi-iro, or a bright blue-green colour, matching her grandmother’s cyan kimono. Kawano uses ‘the atomic bomb’ as the last line of her poem, leaving it hanging in the air, both metaphorically and literally. It’s an exceedingly clever and moving moment where the suggestion is that if we don't remember the devastation of the atomic bomb, then it may once again sail through blue skies and be dropped on an innocent community. In this way, the atomic bomb is poised for attack and only in the act of remembering can it be stopped from being dropped.

Similarly, Shimoda’s own contribution addresses the hibakusha’s fear of forgetting. This paragraph could be identified as a prose poem for its lyricism, fragmentation and final poetic line:

The voices of the hibakusha are silenced when the lights are turned off. Mrs. Yamashita, hanging on a wall deep inside the museum, is talking about the delirium she experienced while wrapped in a mosquito net. She lifted her index finger into the air to signal for help, and her finger became infected. Her story can only be heard when the museum is open, the same story repeated endlessly. She is not allowed to move on with her life, if that is the point, and that's not even Mrs. Yamashita, but an encapsulation, a specter, of a woman who has already died. (Shimoda 2015a: n.pag.)

This piece is an excerpt from Shimoda’s The Grave on the Wall, a non-fiction memoir about his grandfather. It is a phrase that haunts him and one to which he continually returns in his writing. This is apparent from the way in which The Grave on the Wall is also the title of a typewritten project by Shimoda. It has been reviewed as ‘transfus[ing] the language of witness account into the poetic process … A mirror of Brandon's experience absorbing the accounts of the hibakusha, it's also a mirror of our own experience, as readers and humans...' (Claudia 2013: n.pag.). This demonstrates what Ogura stated about poetry and imagination providing people with ways to keep the hibakusha experience alive. This ‘transfusion’ can be seen as virtual collaboration where post-atomic devastation is decanted through the artist, and then shared with a reader.

In Shimoda’s piece, above, he captures the essence of the hibakusha repeating their ‘same story repeated endlessly’. Indeed, he expresses the way in which the hibakusha feel they cannot ‘move on with … life’, because as survivors they must tell their story on behalf of the victims who cannot. The irony of this is that Mrs Yamashita is an ‘encapsulation, a specter, of a woman who has already died’. As poets explore ways of writing about atomic warfare through virtual collaboration with hibakusha testimonies, they avoid limiting the story to being told only ‘when the museum is open’.

Poetic works like Kawano’s and Shimoda’s and the ‘Hiroshima/Nagasaki’ online edition of Evening Will Come are important responses to the hibakusha experience. The virtual collaboration that underpins these contributions ensures that future generations are made aware of the devastation of atomic warfare. Poetry and imagination, as Ogura argues, can overcome the ineffability of the experience and the ageing and eventual death of the hibakusha community.
Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party are drawing up a new law that accelerates the deployment of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces for peacekeeping operations.

Shimoda’s most recent publication is *Evening Oracle*, an edited book of poetry, emails and epistolary set in Japan.

This book is now out of print but *Inland Sea* is available within Shimoda’s book *O Bon* (2011).

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