

No More Tall Buildings: American Superhero Comics and the Shadow of 9/11

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Synopsis

This essay explores reactions to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 in superhero comics published by Marvel and DC Comics. It outlines how these publishers largely avoided engaging the meanings of the attacks and focused instead on their impact on American society and politics. It traces commonalities between storylines in *Amazing Spider-Man*, *Ex Machina*, and *The Boys*, contrasting them with the work of John Ney Rieber and John Cassaday on *Captain America*. It concludes that these corporate entities likely shied away from controversy that might have harmed their industry status and stunted the possibilities of their emerging multi-media presence.

Biography

Mauricio Castro received a BA from Vassar College and an MA in American history from Purdue University, where he is a Ph.D. candidate. His dissertation focuses on Miami's urban development following the arrival of the Cuban exiles in 1959. His academic interests include political economy, gender, nationalism, and popular culture.

Essay

The two pages which open issue number 36 of *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Volume 2) show the titular hero gripping his own head in horror and impotence as he looks down upon the burning wreckage of the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11th, 2001. Written by J. Michael Straczynski, illustrated by John Romita Jr., and published on November 14th of that same year, *Amazing Spider-Man* #36 was meant to directly address the events of the previous September through the eyes of Marvel Comic's everyman New Yorker, Peter Parker. As Spider-Man launches himself towards the smoldering wreckage of the twin towers he is greeted by the incredulous questions of terrified New Yorkers who ask him, "Where were you?!" and, "How could you let this happen?" (Straczynski and Romita 4). The couple is gone before Spider-Man can answer and before long he has joined the other fictional characters of the Marvel universe in assisting the illustrated counterparts of the very mortal first responders who sought to save lives that morning.

Parker's internal monologue continues throughout the issue however, and he considers the question posed to him, wondering how he might answer that we could not know this might happen. He muses that only madmen could, "contain the thought, execute the act, fly the planes" (Straczynski and Romita 5). "The sane world will always be vulnerable to madmen," he decides, "because we cannot go where they go to conceive of such things" (Straczynski and Romita 5). This sentiment, when coupled with a single image some four pages later, tends to encapsulate much of the response to the events of September 11th in American superhero comics. The panel shows the *Fantastic Four* super villain Doctor Doom surveying the devastation and tearing up, "because even the worst of us, however scarred, are still human. Still feel. Still mourn the death of innocents" (Straczynski and Romita 9). Doctor Doom, while a character possessed of some personal honor, has been portrayed as a ruthless despot who consistently and brutally represses dissent in his eastern European kingdom, who ruthlessly seeks power through any means necessary, who constantly endangered innocents in his schemes, and who had collected a massive stockpile of WMD. By having Doom demonstrate an emotional reaction to the events of 9/11, Straczynski and Romita Jr. place the acts of terrorism perpetrated on that day outside the scope of traditional morality as illustrated in superhero comics. Whether intentional or not, the creators are adhering to a structured, rational view to the world in their reaction to the destruction of the World Trade Center. The issue focuses on the reaction to these attacks, offering hope and advocating unity and understanding, but it does not assign meaning to the events themselves because some things are "beyond words. Beyond comprehension. Beyond forgiveness" (Straczynski and Romita 2-3).

This sequence is largely representative of the stance taken by the two biggest comic book publishers in the United States in the months and years following the events of September 11th, 2001. The attack on the Pentagon and the destruction of the Twin Towers left a hole in the world that shattered any sense of security Americans may have had in the years prior to the attacks. While terrorist attacks had occurred in American soil, even at the World Trade Center, the events of 9/11 captured the attention and the imagination of the world. The seeming enormity of the events led to a somewhat stunted reaction to them in popular culture generally, and in superhero comic books specifically. As with the outright banishing of a direct understanding of the events of that day in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, the overwhelming reaction within the industry was to capture either the reaction to these events or the mood that immediately followed. Corporate restrictions might have allowed creators to process part of their own trauma through their work-for-hire comics, but these constraints prevented a rational exploration of the actual events of September 11th, 2001. Each corporate reaction seemed either emotional or wholly preoccupied with an emotional response by audiences. Where Marvel Comics largely focused on the bravery of the first responders and sought to encourage a feeling of unity, DC Comics would almost completely ignore the attacks for the first few years that followed and would eventually deal with their effects in American society through creator driven works outside of their main publishing universe.¹ With the exception of a story published in Marvel's *Captain America*, the sheer otherness of the attacks ensured that creators would write and draw around the hole left by the terrorist attacks rather than filling it with an exploration of its meaning.

In a comment posted in his moderated usenet group within two weeks of the events, Straczynski commented on his reticence to address what had transpired: "Ever since the events surrounding the WTC, I have said little because, as noted in response to another note, I simply didn't have the words and didn't know where to look for them. And consequently declined invitations to make a statement, on the further grounds that I'm not qualified" (Yarbrough, "Marvel to Take on World Trade Center Attack in 'Amazing Spider-Man'"). The author would accept the assignment to write *The Amazing Spider-Man #36* when offered it by Marvel, however, and seek to address the attacks regardless of his qualifications. It should be taken into account that Straczynski and Romita Jr. were writing and illustrating *Amazing Spider-Man #36* in the weeks immediately following the attacks without the distance and hindsight that might allow for a better understanding of what had just transpired. Some accommodation should be made for these circumstances in evaluating the work. As the issue goes on, it becomes clear that Straczynski is attempting to make sense of the attacks in relation to previous events in American history. As Spider-Man quietly watches an anguished Captain America stand among the wreckage of Ground Zero his internal monologue notes that only the World War II hero could possibly understand the events of the day because he had been there before, a clear reference to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (Straczynski and Romita 16). While there are some clear parallels between the events of December 7th, 1941 and those of September 11th, 2001, particularly in regards to both being surprise attacks occurring on American soil, Straczynski is not making a key distinction between the events: where the former was an act of open warfare perpetrated by one sovereign nation upon another, the latter consisted of an attack by an extremist group less defined by national borders than by political and religious ideology.

Straczynski is setting the attacks in a context that might best be understood by his readers and himself; he directly equates the targeting of the symbols of American power to a previous attack upon key military installations by a rival national power. This reaction was hardly unique. The United States seemed ill prepared, culturally and in matters of policy, to deal with a different form of international conflict which no longer fit within the model of international warfare that came to mind when Americans thought of "war."² What had previously been regarded as a matter for law enforcement, both domestically and internationally, became a matter couched in military terms as the "War on Terror" was announced. Rather than attempting to understand the murky, grey space between law enforcement and military action that anti-terrorism occupied it simply went from one extreme to the other.

If Straczynski was not equipped with the rhetorical or conceptual tools by which to immediately understand the attacks, at the very least he and Marvel Comics did attempt to directly address the trauma and shock of these events. Marvel had long claimed a greater degree of legitimacy in their comics based on the nebulous claim they took place in "the real world." That is to say, for example, that whoever was president of the United States at the time of a comic's publication was also president in the Marvel Universe. This long-standing claim necessitated some form of response to these events

in-universe. The publishers of DC Comics, by contrast, had tended to keep their universe largely separate from real-world events. They had recently run a story, for example, in which Superman's nemesis Lex Luthor was elected president of the United States. Thus, aside from engaging in the same sort of charitable publications that Marvel and other industry rivals had, DC Comics did not reflect the attacks of September 11th, 2001. Not intentionally, in any case.

Much was made in some quarters about the strange coincidences between the attacks on September 11th and devastation shown in *The Adventures of Superman #596*, a comic that reached stores on September 12th, 2001. This comic showed the aftermath of an alien invasion which had been depicted in the Superman titles and other crossover books. Within the comic's pages were images of the extensive damage to Metropolis's "Lexcorp" building, an image found disturbingly similar to the damage done to the World Trade Center. The twin towers themselves appeared in the issue as well, sporting structural damage in spots that were eerily similar to the points of impacts of the airliners that were flown into them. The comic in question had been written, edited, penciled, inked, colored, lettered, printed, and shipped by the morning of September 11th, however. Unintentional as it was, the aftermath of this storyline, and the losses encountered by the characters involved would help to set the tone for an indirect engagement of the events of 9/11, if DC's current co-publisher Dan DiDio is to be believed.

In an interview conducted in December of 2008, DiDio commented on the fact that DC Comics had not addressed the events of September 11th. DiDio, who joined DC comics as Editorial Vice President in January of 2002, was discussing how using real world personalities and events in comics tended to date those stories. He pointed to the comics that the company published in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks as an example of a less direct motivation for their stories. He suggested that the interviewer "look at our comics coming out of 9-11 – we don't reference 9-11, but there was a sense of a feeling of dread or anger that permeated that material. That wasn't just because we were looking to reflect a period of time, but more because the people who create these comics were feeling that" (Brady, "Dan Didio: 20 Answers, 1 Question"). DiDio suggests that while the terrorist attacks had a definite influence on the themes of DC's output during this era, the company was reluctant to publish material that addressed the attacks. Occasionally some vague reference to the attacks would be made in one of DC's comics. Just a few weeks before DiDio's interview, DC published the *Justice Society of America Kingdom Come Special Magog*. In this story, the protagonist, Magog, briefly remembers how he did nothing on "that September day" (Tomas et al. 95). The panel this caption accompanies simply shows a younger version of Magog watching a television set along with other young people in what looks like a high school chemistry lab. There is no direct recounting of the attacks, but this reference serves as motivation for the character later enlisting into the United States Marines.

While DC Comics did not deal with 9/11 and its aftermath in its main universe, they did publish stories through subsidiary imprints that had the terrorist attacks and their aftermath as a centerpiece. In 2004 Brian K. Vaughan and Tony Harris began

publishing a comic entitled *Ex Machina* through DC's Wildstorm imprint. *Ex Machina* took place in its own separate story universe and centered on a man named Mitchell Hundred, who, following an accident that grants him powers over technology, becomes a superhero and later mayor of New York City. At the core of Vaughan and Harris's *Ex Machina* is an exploration of American politics in the years following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Upon opening the first issue of the comic the reader was welcomed by a splash page depicting Hundred in his superhero guise rocketing towards an airliner. The next page shows a dejected Hundred sitting in a dark room and asking "You're probably sick of the picture by now, huh? Christ knows I am" (Vaughan and Harris 1-2). Hundred then mentions the image of George W. Bush in his flight suit and how many hold him responsible for it, deciding that this exploitation of circumstances would have happened without him. He states that "everyone was scared back then, and when folks are scared, they want to be surrounded by heroes. But Heroes are just a fiction we create. They don't exist outside of comic books" (Vaughan and Harris 2). Through a series of flashbacks Vaughan and Harris show the reader how Hundred got to this bitter denunciation of the political capital amassed by politicians who sold themselves as the heroes of the attacks on September 11th and their aftermath. The reader learns that Hundred became mayor of New York City after running as an independent, following his career as the world's only superhero. By the end of the issue, however, the creators show how Hundred is the ultimate example of a politician rising to power in the aftermath of these attacks, revealing that in that version of reality Hundred used his power over machines to stop United Airlines Flight 175 from crashing into the South Tower of the World Trade Center. This act of heroism allowed Hundred, previously dead last in the polls, to surge ahead and win the election for mayor of New York City in 2001.

Ex Machina ran for fifty regular issues along with four special issues and concluded in August of 2010. The series mixed political intrigue with science fiction storytelling to trace Hundred's career as both a superhero and as a politician. While later storylines suggested that Hundred used his powers to create a mysterious white box that may have swayed the results of the mayoral election, the book remained a thematic exploration of post-9/11 politics. Hundred parlays his newfound popularity into political office not only at city level, but later becomes the vice president to a triumphant John McCain in 2008. Hundred is driven to seek out greater political power by the appearance during his time as mayor of others augmented by the same forces that empower him and which are preparing the earth for an extra-dimensional invasion. Along the way Hundred sacrifices nearly every single friend he has in order to gain the political capital he needs in order to prevent this invasion. The parallels drawn by Vaughan here are simple: Hundred, while well intentioned, comes to compromise almost every principle that made him who he was in order to gain power in the name of security. Vaughan is reflecting the way in which fear and political expediency led many politicians to sacrifice civil liberties in the pursuit of the "War on Terror." His portrayal is not entirely unsympathetic to these individuals, as the threat Hundred faces is very real, but he also shows Hundred as a man willing to kill his surrogate father to silence him and to let his best friend go to prison in his stead.

Two years after the first issue of *Ex Machina* hit the stands another comics series debuted through DC's Wildstorm in imprint which dealt with the attacks. Though Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson's *The Boys* moved to Dynamite Publishing after their first story arc with Wildstorm, this first storyline already planted the seeds for the mystery of what happened on September 11th, 2001 in the cynical universe of this series when it showed that the New York landmark which had been destroyed was not the World Trade Center, but the Brooklyn Bridge (*The Boys: The Name of the Game* 52-53). *The Boys* centers around a CIA contracted black ops squad tasked with keeping superheroes and the corporation that created them in check. While the main group of superheroes *The Boys* must contend with, *The Seven*, are modeled after DC's Justice League of America, they exhibit none of the usual competence, nobility, and heroism of that group. This group's lack of competence, in fact, would be revealed to be a factor in that universe's version of these attacks.

The full story of what happened on September 11th, 2001 in the world of *The Boys* would not be revealed until August of 2009 when the fourth issue of the spinoff mini-series *The Boys: Herogasm* was released. In this issue the members of the team interrogated a secret service agent who was present at the White House situation room during the attacks. During the course of the interrogation the agent reveals that the fictional president of the United States, a Republican named Robert "Dakota Bob" Shaefer, was prepared for the terrorist attacks and had military aircraft shoot down three of the four airliners involved in the attacks. As the crisis unfolded and the final plane was being targeted, Shaefer's half-wit vice-president, Victor K. Neuman incapacitated the president on orders from his corporate masters at Vought American, the company that created superhumans, and ordered NORAD to hold their fire on the final plane (Ennis et al., *The Boys: Herogasm* 85-86). What follows is a botched attempt by *The Seven* to stop the last plane that results in the loss of every life on the aircraft and the destruction of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Throughout his run on *The Boys* Ennis has skewered the superhero genre in almost every single way imaginable. While most of the book's storylines tend to focus on the sadism, incompetence, and sexual deviancy of most of the "supes," the larger plot involves *The Boys'* fight against the Vought American as a corporate entity and its influence on the U.S. government. This longer arc criticizes the privatization of the military, tracing corporate influence on the American armed since the Second World War through the fictitious Vought American. The parallels to reality run stronger when Ennis shows how Vought American, their security subsidiary Red River, and their super-teams are part of a plan to replace accountable, well trained, professional military units with corporate mercenaries.

There is a common thread running between *Ex Machina* and *The Boys*. It lies in the way in which both stories focus on an aspect of American politics and foreign policy that saw changes in the aftermath of 9/11. Whether it is the building of political fortunes in the aftermath of the attacks or the millions of dollars funneled into private military contractors as part of the "War on Terror," the creators of these two titles present a version of real world events cosmetically altered by science fiction elements. These

stories, much like the *The Amazing Spider-Man* #36, or DC's refusal to address the attacks in their main comics universe, do not attempt to understand the reasons for the attacks or their meanings. Like Straczynski before them, Vaughan and Ennis focus on the events and circumstances surrounding the attacks. In these stories the attacks themselves have left a hole in the world that has created ripples in American society. These ripples have occupied much of our attention in the ten years since September 11th, 2001, but it still peculiar that the most superhero comics by the big two failed to directly address the causes and meanings of the attacks.

There is one fairly prominent story that featured an earnest attempt by the creators to question the motivations behind the attacks, the importance of symbolism, and American foreign policy. Writer John Ney Rieber and artist John Cassaday were selected by Marvel to start a new volume of *Captain America* with a story featuring the titular character in the days and weeks after the attacks. The story, in fact, starts with images of the inside of an airliner as hijackers rise from their seats brandishing box cutters. The next two pages then move elsewhere in the world where Cassaday illustrates how Osama Bin Laden presumably received the news of the successful attacks on New York and Washington while Rieber accompanies the silent panels with the following description:

A handful of men with famished eyes sit around a radio --
Or a telephone.
Waiting.
Twenty minutes --
Four thousand murders later --
They praise God for the blood that stains their hands (Rieber and Cassaday 2-3).

The this minimalist two page sequence ends with a tight focus on the thin smile on Osama Bin Laden's mouth and an AK-47 and several fists raised in the air in celebration. The scene immediately transitions to a sequence depicting the lonely silhouette of the title character in his civilian guise of Steve Rogers moving through the oppressive greyness of Ground Zero, seeking survivors. The text that accompanies those images reflects the themes of Straczynski's Spider-Man story as Captain America asks himself could such a thing could happen here and thinks that hope and strength are more important than ever otherwise "they've **won**" (Rieber and Cassaday 4-5). These themes carry through the first issue as Captain America experiences powerlessness in the face of time as he seeks to dig survivors out of the rubble and finds he is too late time and time again. Before the issue is out he has prevented a crime against an American born Muslim on the streets of Manhattan and he provides hope and reconciliation for the parties involved. Had it stopped at this, the storyline might have amounted to little more than the mourning of the death on that September morning, an affirmation of righteousness of the American cause, and a simple message of hope.

Rieber, however, moves the story forward seven months to show how Captain America is called in to the scene of a new terrorist attack. When a terrorist named Faysal al-Tariq drops cluster bomblets and sets up landmines all over the fictional town of Centerville on Easter morning, he demands the presence of Captain America “the man known throughout the **world** as the **defender** of the American dream” (Rieber and Cassaday 45), or he will kill all the hostages trapped within a church. He intends for Rogers “to pay with **his** blood for the crimes of a **nation** of blood” (Rieber and Cassaday 45). Rieber has the terrorists make a series of very obvious symbolic choices. The time, place, and target of the attacks are all meant as an attack on particular American phenomena and institutions: small town life, Protestant Christianity, and patriotism. The story, then, could easily have become one in which cherished institutions are senselessly attacked by a caricature of a Muslim extremist and in which the patriotic hero arrives in time to save the day; a story meant to reassure an uneasy reader in the months following the attacks of September 11th. The story that follows, however, is not nearly so simple. At the end of the second issue Al-Tariq forces Captain America to do battle with cybernetically enhanced children, another taboo, but as the third issue begins these children are revealed to have been the victims of American built landmines in conflicts throughout the world.

This revelation is compounded by another, when Al-Tariq reveals that Centerville was targeted because it is the site of an explosives manufacturing facility. This causes one of the shocked hostages to ask her husband “**This** is how you feed our **baby**? With **bombs**? You make **bombs**?” to which he defensively responds “**No! Components...** We make **components**” (Rieber and Cassaday 71). Rieber is asking the very difficult question of why the people of other nations might hate Americans and whether all Americans are innocent of engendering that hate. He and Cassaday answer that question when, through Captain America, they assert that individual responsibility far outweighs any sort of group responsibility.

When Rogers has his final confrontation with Al-Tariq and the latter ends up dead, Captain America turns to face the cameras that have been broadcasting the fight to the world. He states that from where he stands he does not see war, but rather hate. He sees men and women and children dying because hate is blind, blind enough “to hold a **nation** accountable for the actions of a **man**” (Rieber and Cassaday 81-82). He refuses to be a part of this after what he has seen that day and as he pulls off his mask, exposing his face to the camera. He tells the world that “My name is **Steve Rogers**. I am a **citizen** of the United States of America. But I’m not America. My **country’s** not to blame for what I’ve done today. I killed Faysal al-Tariq. The **responsibility** - - the failure is **mine**” (Rieber and Cassaday 85). This theme is carried through the rest of the storyline as his identity reveal causes anger from some in the government but it inspires individuals to take greater responsibility for their lives. Rogers would come to a culmination of this difference when he tracks the mastermind behind the Centerville attack to Dresden, Germany.

As he arrives in the German city in 2002 he ponders that before September 11th, 2001 he had not understood what the United States had done in Dresden. Before that, he

tells himself, he would have said the United States was doing what it had to do to defeat Hitler, crush the Axis, and end their evil (Rieber and Cassaday 127). After the attacks on the United States, however, he sees that during the raids in February of 1945, “these people weren’t soldiers. But they died” (Rieber and Cassaday 127). He thinks on the suffering of the civilian population of Dresden and in the context of the recent past he decides that history repeats itself, that a madman lights the spark and people pay the price (Rieber and Cassaday 128). The comparison between Adolf Hitler and Bin Laden is clear; however Rieber is beginning to develop a subtext in which he prescribes vigilance against excesses in the pursuit of an enemy. His use of the word evil so soon after describing Hitler’s own Axis was likely a response to President George W. Bush’s use of the phrase Axis of Evil in his State of the Union Address and throughout 2002. This subtext becomes explicit as Captain America has his final confrontation with the terrorist leader.

As the terrorist goads Rogers with atrocities done in the name of the American people in the age of empire he shoots back that “**My** people never knew!” (Rieber and Cassaday 148). He tells his opponent that the American people have changed and learned, bringing to the forefront the idea that the public is better able now to demand that atrocities not be committed in their name. After he has won the physical confrontation he comes to the conclusion that “We, the **people** - - We **all** have the **freedom** and the **power** to fight - - For **peace**” (Rieber and Cassaday 152). Rieber suggests that American military and political intervention abroad has often caused damage to peoples and individuals who were not intended as a target, creating a pool of potential extremists with reason to hate the United States. In exploring these reasons, however, he does not suggest that events like the attacks of September 11th, 2001 were justified. Instead, through Captain America, he suggests that the United States should remain vigilant against extremists who would seek out the death of innocents in retribution for previous crimes both among foreign terrorists and in the United States’ own response. To prevent future terrorist attacks he proposes vigilance against terrorist cells and vigilance by the American people against acts committed in their name.

In some ways, it is too simple an answer. Rogers’s assertion that *his* people did not know about what transpired in foreign lands seems to excuse ignorance. Given his rumination on the fact that he had convinced himself of the necessity of bombing Dresden, it could be taken as an excuse for willful ignorance. Similarly, Rieber does not explore how acquiescence with a larger political and economic system might allow for complicity with flawed foreign policy initiatives. It is, however, the most earnest exploration of the attacks of September 11th in a comic published by the “Big Two.”

The reluctance of these two corporate entities to engage in a deeper exploration of the attacks and the most likely resulted from a fear of being seen as justifying the unjustifiable. Popular entertainment produced by corporations often has the power to reach greater audiences than that produced by independent means. This greater reach also comes with the possibility for scandal and for corporate entities to alter content in an attempt to avoid such scandals. Commercially speaking, Marvel Entertainment and

Time Warner, parent company of DC Comics, had little to gain by deeper explorations of what had transpired on September 11th in their superhero comics.

If anything, these corporations had much to lose from a scandal unfolding in the midst of the inflamed rhetoric and outpouring of national grief that accompanied these terrorist attacks. The full potential of both superhero universes as sources of popular film properties was beginning to be seen after the success of 1998's *Blade* and 2000's *X-Men*. With Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* well into production by the time of the attacks and other film opportunities on the horizon, it is safe to assume that neither of these companies was eager to poison the box office well with stories that might invite controversy.

Superhero comics remain escapist literature to this day, but their publishers also have a tendency to oversell the legitimacy of comics as a "grown up" medium. These tend to be rather defensive assertions, born out of lingering insecurities about the legitimacy of comics as an art form and meant to show how the medium is capable of so much more than it is given credit for by the general public. The comics discussed above show an aspect of this growth by trying to help the healing process after a national horror, asking tough questions about our political life, and even questioning why others might hate the United States. They are also examples of the strange space between corporate product and art form that superhero comics from the big two occupy. Comics may have grown up as a medium, but the best known exponents this particular genre is still forced to walk a tightrope because of who draws the purse strings. Ultimately, critics might be right to question just how much the super hero genre has matured if it has been forced to grow in so tightly constrained a space.

Notes

1. DC Comics, like Marvel Comics and other competitors, did publish a volume entitled *9-11: September 11, 2001 (The World's Finest Comic Book Writers & Artists Tell Stories to Remember)*. The proceeds from its sales would go to various funds and charitable organizations related to the attacks. This effort, however, was not a part of its main publishing universe were the day's attacks were not mentioned.

2. Attention should be paid here to the Vietnam War as a conflict that largely fell outside the parameters set in the American imagination by the previous wars of the twentieth century. As with the later campaign against terrorism, however, the lack of clearly uniformed combatants, the enemy's ease in gaining the support of civilian populations, and their ability to hide among those populations would add to the internal strife regarding the meanings and practices associated with that war.

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