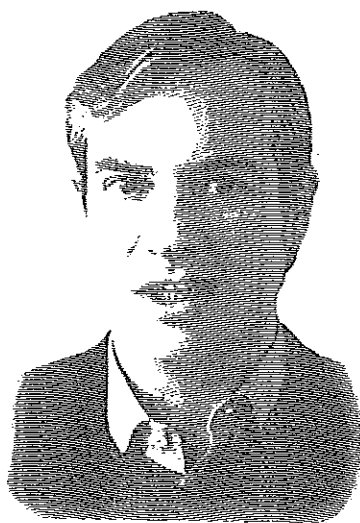


From the Traumatic Realism to the Multidirectionnal Memory, and Beyond

Interview of Michael Rothberg
by Philippe Mesnard (November 2nd 2016, Berlin)



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Michael Rothberg, professeur de littérature anglaise et comparée, est titulaire de la chaire « 1939 Society Samuel Goetz » à UCLA (Los Angeles). Il est l'un des intellectuels les plus représentatifs des études mémorielles dans le vaste monde anglo-saxon. Œuvrant pour le rapprochement des différents champs d'études dédiés aux violences collectives, il s'est fait internationalement connaître par le concept de « mémoire multidirectionnelle » qu'il a forgé dans une étude éponyme. Les principes de ce concept s'opposent

radicalement à la notion de « concurrence des victimes », devenue un des clichés du discours sur la mémoire collective. Huit ans après la publication de *Multidirectionnal Memory* (2009), l'ouvrage paraît en français (traduction Luba Jurgenson, éditions Petra). Les pages qui suivent présentent le parcours de son auteur, sa démarche et son projet.

Une version intégrale de cet entretien est accessible sur le site de la revue : www.memoires-en-jeu.com/varia/entretien-avec-michael-rothberg-version-integrale/

Could you say something about your intellectual itinerary and how you came to work in Holocaust studies?

Michael Rothberg: I attended a small college outside of Philadelphia called Swarthmore College, and it was while I was there that I first discovered Literary Theory. That was my first intellectual passion, which came through my first college course. I became quite interested in a lot of the French thinkers of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism. My father gave me a copy of Jonathan Culler's book about Saussure when I was in my first year in college, and that made a very big impression. So, all through college, I was reading people like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan—thinkers whom I did not always understand when I first read them, but whom I found intellectually exciting. My undergraduate training was, I think, very strongly marked by Post-Structuralism (what we considered “French Theory,” at the time). And it was only at the very end of college that I had a professor who was more influenced by a historical

> approach—by New Historicism—and I started becoming more interested in historical questions. When I started graduate school, those historical questions became more and more important to me. I spent the first year of graduate school at Duke University, where I had the opportunity to study with Fredric Jameson, among other people. At that point, Marxist theory became a more important element of my thinking.

I took a couple of years off from school in order to do other things, and when I returned to graduate school (to the CUNY Graduate Center in New York), that was a turning point. It was only then that I really started to become interested in the Holocaust and questions of memory; and that was especially through my work with Nancy K. Miller, a very important Feminist critic who had done a lot of important research on autobiography, and at the time was becoming more interested in memoirs. It was through memoirs, and the study of contemporary memoirs, that I started to get interested in the question of testimony, and to link that to growing interest in the Holocaust. It was in a seminar with Nancy Miller that I read *Maus*—not for the first time, but together with her—and wrote a paper on it, which later became a chapter of my dissertation, and then an article—one of my first publications—and a piece of my first book, *Traumatic Realism* (2000). So, I guess what I found compelling was the way this topic—this historical topic, the Holocaust—challenged the education that I had received so far. It challenged, in particular, the focus on language that had come through my interest in Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, and the focus on class and capitalism that came through my interest in Marxism, and the time that I spent studying with Jameson. Here was something—an event, a history—that did not really fit well into those categories, or that could not be fully explained by a kind of linguistic determinism, or by class politics or the critique of capitalism. And I found that challenging, but also very exciting to think about.

Let us talk about your first book, *Traumatic Realism*, where you wrote about *Maus*. Can you define what you mean by "traumatic realism?"

M. R.: This book emerged out of my dissertation but the dimension of "traumatic realism" was not part of the dissertation—that came afterwards, as I was revising the dissertation and turning it into a book. It is a concept that had a lot to do with my readings of some important Holocaust testimonies that I was discovering around that time: the work of Charlotte Delbo, her trilogy, *Auschwitz and After* (*Auschwitz et après*), and also the work of Ruth Klüger, particularly her book *Weiter Leben*, translated into English as *Still Alive*. The concept came out of my engagement with those testimonies, but "traumatic realism," as a framework, was also something that I developed in thinking about what I saw as the field of intellectual work on Holocaust at the time, which struck me as divided into two camps. It is a generalization, but it seemed to me that there was a split between what I called



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"anti-realist" approaches and "realist" approaches. The anti-realist approaches I associated with certain survivors, someone like Elie Wiesel, but also literary critics and literary theorists, and certain kinds of psychoanalytic thinkers, who talked about the Holocaust as something that was incomprehensible, un-representable, fundamentally ungraspable, and in some radical way, outside of history. This is what I called the anti-realist approach. And it was very strong, to a certain extent, in scholarly work, and also very much in the public image of what the Holocaust was—this notion of an un-representable event. On the other side, you had what I considered a body—an important and strong body—of realist scholarship, in which most historians would fit, which is to say the Holocaust was a historical event, and important historical event embedded in history, and should be explained like any other historical event. It does not require any tools that are special. It does not require breaking out of the normal methodologies that are used in narrating any kind of historical event. And that was what I called the "realist school." It seemed to me that there were important dimensions of both of those approaches that are true, but that both also have their limits. On the one hand, I think there is an anti-realist dimension of the Holocaust, or other traumatic events—because for me, it is important to think about the Holocaust relationally. There are elements that elude a realist narration, or a normative historical approach. And so, there is something to that anti-realist side. On the other hand, there is a need to be able to provide a historical narrative and a historical contextualization for these events, even if that narrative—that contextualization—cannot give us the whole story. There is a need for a kind of realism, but there is also a need to acknowledge these excessive, traumatic elements of the history that do not quite fit into those ordinary frameworks. So, it was in trying to negotiate

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Usages de la mémoire

Michael ROTHBERG

MÉMOIRE MULTIDIRECTIONNELLE
Repenser l'Holocauste
à l'aune de la décolonisation

Traduit de l'américain par
Luba Jurgenson

Éditions PETRA

between these two positions that I came to a third way, which I called "traumatic realism."

In the book, I talk about three different demands that histories like the Holocaust—traumatic histories—place on representation. On the one hand—and this would be close to the realist school—there is a demand for some sort of documentation: these events took place, we want to confront forgetting, we want to confront denial, we need to narrate them, we need to document them, we need to tell these stories. Therefore, we need to put them into some sort of narrative. On the other hand—and this would be addressing some of the concerns of the anti-realist approach—there is a need to be reflexive, to be self-reflexive about the modes of representation we use, and not to assume that any kind of straight-forward narrative realist account is going to capture what we want to capture in the Holocaust. So, there is a self-reflexivity that is necessary about representation—that is a demand that traumatic histories also place on us. And third—and this comes a little out of the more Marxist

side of my thinking—there is also a need to engage with the public sphere. Once these stories are told, they have to circulate. They have to circulate publicly. They are not just of scholarly interest, they are not just of personal interest; they need to find their way into the public sphere and into public culture. Once they do that, they necessarily enter into a commodified, capitalist culture. That is the world that we live in, that is where the stories and these narratives are going to circulate—we need to engage with that. Now, that does not mean that we reject this realm. We can not simply ignore it, we can not bypass it, but we have to think about the effects that circulation and consumption have on those stories and those narratives. These were the three demands that I formulated in *Traumatic Realism*: a demand for documentation, a demand for self-reflexivity about our narrative strategies, and a demand to engage with commodification and with the public sphere.

In the middle of that, then, is what I call "traumatic realism." And traumatic realism, in this sense, is a mode of representation that I found especially in testimonies by Holocaust survivors, but also goes beyond that. There are moments in Spiegelman's *Maus*, for instance, where you have these traumatic realist dimensions, as well. For me, traumatic realism, then, was a mode of representation that, on the one hand, tries to meet the demand for documenting history—which all testimonies, in a sense, are trying to do—and, on the other hand, attempts to represent that history in a self-reflexive way that marks the absences, the traumatic losses, and the gaps that necessarily inhere in attempt to write about the Holocaust or other traumatic histories.

You know that when French people hear "traumatic realism," they hear "trauma." We know that Trauma Theory comes from the U.S., mainly—it is very much associated with US academic culture. How does Trauma Theory fit into your research?

M. R.: What does Trauma Theory have to do with traumatic realism? It is an important question. Trauma Theory was something that developed at exactly the moment that I was working on the dissertation and on the book, *Traumatic Realism*. I found the work of people like Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth very compelling at the time, as I was discovering it in the '90s. Felman's work had already been important to me in college. I always say that it was through her famous reading of *The Turn of the Screw* that I learned to read (Felman). It was such an incredible tour de force. So Felman's work I was already aware of, but in the '90s, with *Testimony*, her work took a turn in the '90s in her book, *Testimony*—a kind of an ethical turn, a kind of historical turn. There were a lot of complicated reasons for that, I think having to do with de Man, etc. For Caruth, it is a similar thing.

So, in the book *Traumatic Realism* I was engaging with this new body of theory that was emerging that came to be called Trauma Theory. And it is true that it is very American, on the one hand, but as usual, what is American is always >

> mediated through the European; so, it was, in some sense, an American rewriting of certain French and German texts. Derrida and de Man were very important to the original trauma theorists—people like Caruth and Felman—and so, of course, was Freud. It was an American version of a certain kind of European tradition, and an American engagement, I think, with a certain European history. Because Trauma Theory, not uniquely, but importantly, was very much a post-Holocaust theory, especially for someone like Felman. I think for Caruth, you also see it is a post-Vietnam theory. There is no single origin for it, obviously, but it is a kind of mediation and reflection on these various histories of the 20th century, and very much explicitly so. Caruth and Felman are both saying as much in their work. Now, I was very compelled by Trauma Theory; I still find myself drawn to it in certain ways. But I was never a proponent of Trauma Theory in any straightforward way, and with the concept of traumatic realism, I am precisely trying to work out a kind of critical relation to the theory. Because I think in some versions of Trauma Theory—and I especially associate that with Felman, and to a certain degree with Caruth, again, both of whom I respect greatly—there is a kind of absolutization of trauma that takes place. All of history becomes traumatic, and that seemed to me not quite right. Certainly, if you are talking about the Holocaust, you are talking about a traumatic history; but even in the context of the Holocaust—and I have tried to evoke that a little bit in the scenes from Klüger and Delbo that I have just described—there is also an everyday dimension. The camps, themselves, were integrated into local economies, into local landscapes. They were complicated, complex spaces; they were grey-zones, in a certain sense, to use Primo Levi's term, and to use his description in the preface to *The Drowned and the Saved*, there is a really important passage, for me, where he talks about how, yes, perhaps the camps were a sort of universe, a kind of concentrationary universe, as we might describe them, but they were not an autonomous universe. They were not a universe that was separated altogether from history and from geography. They were in fact integrated into history. In that place, something was created, something was produced that went beyond the everyday, to be sure, but it was still part of our world. And I think, in Trauma Theory, that dimension—the everyday dimension, the realist dimension, as I described it earlier—often gets completely put aside, and there is an exaggerated sense of history as trauma that I was also trying to respond to.

In *Traumatic Realism*, the way I wanted to talk about trauma was as a kind of conjunction of the everyday and the extreme, and it was through that conjunction that I was trying to evade some of these more extreme, absolutist, understandings of trauma that I think followed from some of that early work. And here, I would put myself closer to the work of someone like Dominick LaCapra, who is certainly very much associated with Trauma Theory, but has always engaged with it in a critical fashion, and has warned against

certain kinds of absolutization of the concept of trauma, and of conceiving of history as only catastrophe, as only trauma. Because I think one of the important lessons that I take from LaCapra is the importance of making distinctions; and distinctions are not binary oppositions. There is a tendency in Post-Structuralist Theory to take any kind of distinction, declare that it is a binary opposition, and then try to undo it. LaCapra says that, no, we need to be able to hold onto distinctions. And one of the distinctions, I suppose, that it is important to hold onto, is that between the traumatic and non-traumatic. The trauma cannot take over the entire field of our thinking, especially our thinking about history.

In your book, *Multidirectional Memory*, you coin this new concept...

M. R.: This second book really grew out of the thinking that I was doing in *Traumatic Realism*, but also what was happening as I was writing *Traumatic Realism*. When I was working on the dissertation and my first book, in the mid-90s., I came to realize that, although I was very focused on the Holocaust, there were other genocides that were taking place literally as I was writing: there was the genocide in Rwanda, and the events in Bosnia and elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia. In that context, it became clear to me that a comparative approach to genocide was necessary as well as a comparative approach to trauma. When I wrote *Traumatic Realism*, it was focused on the Holocaust, specifically, and I certainly think there is nothing wrong with that; but I also wanted it to provide a framework that could be useful for other histories. I did not think this approach was unique to the Holocaust, but rather that there were other kinds of traumatic histories that would also benefit from reflection on the different modes of representations and the demands on representation. In the book, itself, I stick pretty closely to the Holocaust; but I started to feel compelled, as I was working on it, to broaden the scope, and to look beyond the Holocaust and to think about the Holocaust in relationship to other histories that were unfolding at that time. That was one of the impetuses for *Multidirectional Memory*: to take the focus off the Holocaust and to make it more comparative—to bring it into dialogue with other histories of extreme violence or genocide. The other thing that then propelled me toward the context of *Multidirectional Memory* was that, when I started to consider how other people were talking comparatively about the Holocaust and genocide, I found myself troubled by the way framework in which it was taking place. It seemed to me that the dominant way—and this was true both for scholarship and in the public sphere—that people were talking about the relationship between the Holocaust and other histories was as a kind of zero-sum game. That is, there was a sense that, if you were talking about the Holocaust, that meant you could not be talking about some other event, like, say, trans-Atlantic slavery, or colonialism, or the war in Bosnia, or the Rwandan genocide. There was a sense that the Holocaust was crowding other histories out of the



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discussion. On the other hand, there was a sense, especially among Holocaust scholars or people for whom Holocaust memory was important, that if you tried to talk about the Holocaust in relationship with any other event, you were, in fact, doing some damage to the Holocaust. You were relativizing the Holocaust. You were taking away from the position that it should hold in the public sphere. There was a sense, from both sides, if you will, that a zero-sum game was being played out—that you could only talk about one history at once, and it was either the Holocaust or it was going to be one of these other histories of violence or trauma.

That just seemed wrong, to me; so, what I tried to do in *Multidirectional Memory* was to develop a framework that would provide an alternative way of thinking comparatively about traumatic histories. To think about them in terms that I came to call “productive,” as opposed to privative; in other words, that talking about one history can, in fact, also be a way of talking about other histories at the same time; that it can promote or propel the discussion of other histories, instead of taking away from them or relativizing them, or even denying them, at the most extreme, as some people sometimes claimed. *Multidirectional Memory*, then, as a concept, says that memories emerge dialogically. Memories emerge in contact with each other—they even grow out of conflicts. It is not that I am saying there are no conflicts between memories, or even competition, to a certain extent, but that those competitions, those conflicts, are productive. They create more memory, not less memory. What I came to call “competitive memory” in the book was memory modeled on the notion of the zero-sum game—the idea that if you have Holocaust memory, you can not have memory of slavery. If you have memory of slavery, you cannot have memory of the Holocaust. What I tried to say is that no memory ever works that way, it is not quite so simple. In fact, memory of the Holocaust can become a vehicle for thinking

about and remembering the history of slavery, or the history of the Armenian genocide, or other genocides that happened after the Holocaust. And that happens through a process of borrowing, of cross-referencing, of citation, of shared memorial forms—all of these different means that make one history available to other histories.

How was the reception of *Multidirectional Memory*?

M. R.: I think the reception of *Multidirectional Memory* has been very positive and it has been taken up in a lot of different contexts. That does not mean that there are not criticisms of it, of course, as one would expect and one would hope, in a certain sense. You never get anything right the first time. But what has been satisfying for me has been to see that, yes, in fact, this insight or this intuition that memory works in this more complicated way than we have been used to thinking—especially collective memories—seems to work in very different geographical or geopolitical contexts. There are people in Latin American Studies writing about Argentina, there are people in Australia, there are people working on very different histories—very different parts of the world—who seem to have found the concept productive. I think, even more broadly, what has emerged in the past few years has been a transnational and transcultural turn in Memory Studies, of which I think *Multidirectional Memory* is one part. So, I find myself in dialogue with other people, like Ann Rigney, Astrid Erll, and many others who are working on questions of transnational and transcultural memory.

Maybe your “multidirectional memory” concept responds to a demand to bring the memories together.

M. R.: I think one of the reasons that we might identify for the success of the concept of multidirectional memory is precisely that it answered to a demand that was out there in the world. I think that probably has a lot to do with globalization, in a certain sense—that in the kind of globalized world in which we live, in which different places and times are linked to each other, in so many different ways—through media, especially, through the internet—it is very, very difficult to maintain the uniqueness of any particular history; because any particular history is always going to be juxtaposed with other things that are going on at that moment, in the past, what have you. So, we need a way to think comparatively. We need a way to think in a global, transnational context about the juxtaposition of different histories and different memories. And while I think there are a lot of people who still would maintain that memory works more like the zero-sum game than I am arguing that it does, I think there are a lot of people who also felt confined by that model of competitive memory—who had a desire, at least, to move beyond this notion of competition and to try to find other ways of thinking about how different memory traditions relate to each other. I think partly, because it is such an urgent question, socially and politically, in so many different countries where you do have conflicts between >

> different communities and different groups, we need models for thinking about non-competitive, non-conflictual ways of bringing together different histories. And that is just a fact of multicultural societies—societies that are migration societies, like all of our modern societies are, whether it is Europe, whether it is the United States, or elsewhere in the world. We need models for thinking about that fundamental multiculturalism—multiculturality, transculturality—of modern societies. And I think we did not have the tools to do that a few years ago, or at least, when I started working on *Multidirectional Memory*. Now we have a lot of different concepts that can help us think about the issues that arise in those contexts.

In some texts, included *Multidirectional Memory*, you try to reconcile Postcolonial Studies with Memory Studies. What is your position regarding Postcolonial Studies?

M. R.: I think I was always interested in Postcolonial Studies from its emergence, which, in the US academy, started to become marked, I think, in the late '80s and early '90s. The key text, of course, is from earlier—that would be Edward Said's *Orientalism*, from 1978. But as a kind of discipline or inter-discipline in the academy, I think it really started to happen in the late '80s. I was interested in what was happening, there, but for a long time, I thought that was something separate from my interest in the Holocaust. What was exciting to me, then, about writing *Multidirectional Memory* was precisely the opportunity to bring together interests of my own that I had thought had been quite different—namely the Holocaust, Postcolonial Studies, and African American culture and history—and to realize that, in fact, these things were not as separate as I had been taught to expect (I think as we have all been taught to expect). Recently, I have thought more about Postcolonial Studies and Memory Studies as a whole—so not just Holocaust Studies, but Memory Studies more broadly—and it struck me that, on the one hand, in Memory Studies, until fairly recently, there had been very little engagement with Colonialism, and very little engagement with Postcolonial Studies. On the other hand, in Postcolonial Studies, there had not been as much explicit engagement with memory as you might expect to find. In other words, in Postcolonial Studies, all sorts of issues that one would associate with memory were very much present and were very much at the forefront of what Postcolonial Studies was about, but the category of "memory" was missing. So, I tried to figure out, for myself and for an essay I was writing, why that might be.

To me, ultimately, the problem lay more on the side of Memory Studies—that Memory Studies had developed certain concepts of memory that were not very productive for thinking about colonialism. So, it was not simply accidental that colonialism had not been an object for Memory Studies because, in some ways, the models of memory that were being used in Memory Studies did not fit very well in the colonial context. They are based on certain notions of group

homogeneity and national contexts that, precisely, the history of colonialism and imperialism violate. Colonialism and imperialism create all kinds of discontinuities, all kinds of transnational connections, all kinds of forms of transculturalism—not produced under equal circumstances, of course, as they are associated with various forms of violence; but nonetheless, they produce transcultural and transnational formations. And Memory Studies, as it had been developed by Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, among others, it seemed to me, was not well equipped for thinking about those histories and those relationships. It is only recently, with the kind of transcultural, transnational turn that has taken place in Memory Studies, that it is possible to think more about a *rapprochement*, a bringing together, of the post-colonial and the question of memory.

Could you discuss your new projects?

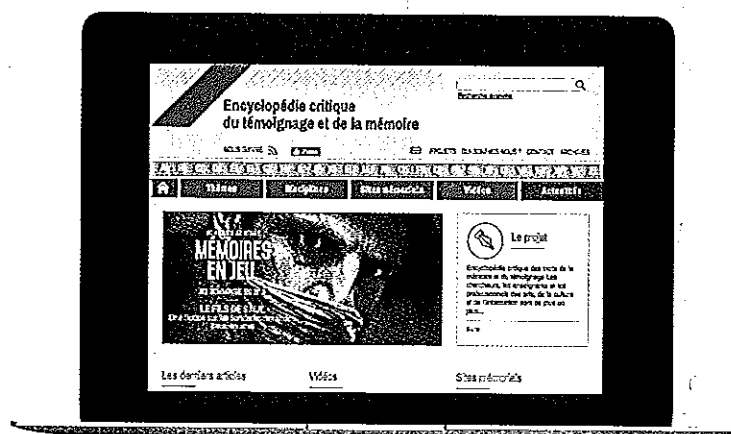
M. R.: After I finished *Multidirectional Memory*, I took a little time to figure out what I was doing next, but out of my continued thinking about some of those same issues in *Multidirectional Memory*, two projects emerged, which are very much related to each other. One is called, *The Implicated Subject*, which is an attempt to think beyond the categories of "victims" and "perpetrators" in discussions of violence and exploitation; the other project is a co-authored project with Yasemin Yildiz, who is a scholar of migration and literature in the German context, and that is about migration and Holocaust memory in contemporary Germany. Both projects are about how we might conceptualize the relationship of people who are neither victims nor perpetrators, nor necessarily the descendants of victims or perpetrators, with histories of violence or trauma. In the case of immigrants, we ask: what does it mean to migrate into a country where there is a very strong, if belatedly developed, culture of memory around the Holocaust, where Holocaust memory and taking responsibility for Holocaust memory, from the perspective of the perpetrators, is a foundational element of national identity? How do you migrate into such a context when you, yourself, are not the descendant of a perpetrator? You probably have no family connection to that perpetration. What we found is that migrants are in a double bind. On the one hand, in order to be German, you have to embrace a certain notion of Holocaust memory and responsibility for the Holocaust. On the other hand, if you are an immigrant, you are told again and again, in a certain sense, "It's not your history. You shouldn't be interested in this. Stay away." This double bind that leaves people in a position of exclusion and with a kind of impossible belonging *vis-à-vis* this history. But what really interested us, ultimately, was the fact that despite this difficult double bind that immigrants confronted, we were able to find what we consider a very interesting, very rich archive of materials in which immigrants precisely do engage with the history and memory of the Holocaust, and of the national socialist period and with World War II more generally, in very complex, productive ways. So, we

are interested in this archive of artistic work, of activist work, in certain instances, where immigrants—especially Turkish-German immigrants, that is the main focus of our project—have not so much taken on the memory or taken on responsibility for the past, but have engaged with the memory, with the questions of responsibility and come out with often very original and, you could say, multidirectional versions of Holocaust memory. And that is probably the link to my earlier work—that, of course, when you have a “migration background,” as they say in Germany today, it is also very likely that when you do confront German history, you are going to confront it in a very multidirectional way. You are going to bring it into dialogue with other histories, as well. While in Germany there is a very strong tendency—for reasons that are also understandable—to think of the Holocaust as unique and incomparable, so that one can take responsibility for that and re-found a more ethical German identity in the aftermath of the genocide, I think often in the work of immigrants, you find a more comparative, more multidirectional, more transcultural approach to the Holocaust, which can be a very productive way of engaging with that history at a moment of transition. /

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