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Anna C. Tybinko
Duke University, anna.tybinko@duke.edu

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Abstract

This article compares Agnès Agboton's memoirs *Más allá del mar de arena: Una mujer africana en España* ('Beyond the Sea of Sand: An African Woman in Spain,' 2005) to Najat El Hachmi's novel, *La filla estrangera* ('The Foreign Daughter,' 2015) to illustrate how these seemingly dissimilar works serve to make space for their author's first languages in peninsular letters. Applying Rebecca Walkowitz's conception of born-translated literature to the case of these Spanish and Catalan texts, it argues that the migratory tales of these two women writers constitute a contribution to the Global Hispanaphone. This rubric is typically conceived of as a decolonial framework that accounts for the diverse geographies, cultures, and languages formerly united under Spanish colonial rule. However, these two literary works are involved in a similar interrogation of the hegemony of Castilian Spanish via content, form, and, above all, self-translation.

Keywords

born-translated, Global Hispanophone, Castilian, Catalan, Gun, Tamazight, Najat El Hachmi, Agnès Agboton

Decolonizing the Metropole: The Born-Translated Works of Najat El Hachmi and Agnès Agboton as Literary Activism

Anna Tybinko
Duke University

As the European Union's only land border with Africa, the massive fences that divide Morocco from the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla have dominated the optics of African migration to Europe since the 1990s. This highly militarized frontier zone is a prime example of the performativity of national boundaries in an era of late capitalist globalization (Brown 32). What, then, is the potential of aesthetic production to counter such border regimes and their prominence in popular discourse? This article responds to this question by exploring the Global Hispanophone as a vital organizational framework for reorienting how we theorize the movement of both authors and texts in the larger Spanish-speaking world (Campoy-Cubillo and Sampedro Vizcaya). Within the U.S. academy, the "Global Hispanophone" has emerged as an area of study over the past decade, to "bundle together" the disparate "cultures and historical experiences of North Africa, Equatorial Guinea and the Philippines, among other geographic entities: all territories that were once bound by the Spanish Empire, particularly as it existed beyond Latin America, the Caribbean and the Iberian Peninsula itself" (Campoy-Cubillo and Sampedro Vizcaya 1). As Adolfo Campoy-Cubillo and Benita Sampedro Vizcaya suggest, the Global Hispanophone proposes a serious reconfiguration of the approach to Spanish-language studies by prioritizing geographies previously treated as marginal (4). One of the exciting possibilities of thinking through the Global Hispanophone—especially for the purposes of this study—is to further examine how the hegemonic and imperial imposition of Spanish has conversely served to preserve a multitude of indigenous languages that now find a conduit for greater recognition worldwide.

Accounting for migration and its impact on cultural production within the Global Hispanophone is no easy feat. If inquiry in this burgeoning field is driven by a centrifugal force that steers away from the Iberian Peninsula and challenges its role as the linchpin of Hispanism, how do we theorize texts and translations that target this same space? The starting point, I wager, is to re-conceptualize what constitutes a "migrant narrative" in the first place. More often than not, this label is pinned on authors who have undergone the migratory process themselves and who, having left the postcolonial context, take up residence in the former metropole. At its most generous it describes texts with migrants as their protagonists and migration as their focus, regardless of the author's biography (Vega-Durán xxxii). If we want to avoid the trap of presuming cultural equivalency between the diverse plurality of sending societies, then the only way to read these narratives of

migration in unison is to accept that together they offer a unique portrait of the host country rather than of migrancy itself.

To this end, I employ Rebecca Walkowitz's novel conception of "born-translated literature," to revisit two works that have been received as "migrant narrative" with an eye to what they tell us about Spain as a destination. Walkowitz's premise is that "an acknowledgment of translation's central role—as spur, problem and opportunity—has to change what the anglophone novel is" (Walkowitz 23). In the case of migrant narratives in the Global Hispanophone, we can also see translation as a challenge to what "Spanish" literature is. As Walkowitz asserts, "Literature in dominant languages tends to 'forget' that it has benefitted from literary works in other languages." I contend that born-translated works are therefore engaged in "a project of unforgetting" (23), of reminding readers of the many ways "Spanishness" (and its linguistic valences) was and is constructed in relation to Africa.[1]

During Spain's transition to democracy (1978-1985), the massive waves of emigration that had characterized the Franco dictatorship dissipated. The tide turned completely with the adoption of the first unified immigration law, the *Ley Orgánica 7/1985, de 1 de julio, sobre derechos y libertades de los extranjero en España* ('Organic Law 7/1985 of July 1st, on the Rights and Freedoms of Foreigners in Spain' or LOE), in 1985—which notoriously paved the way for Spain's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) the following year. Literary scholarship has been particularly instrumental for addressing how an influx of diverse migrant groups subsequently served to confirm Spain's status as "First World" destination, while also placing stress on the already embattled question of what it means to be Spanish.[2] However, less attention has been paid to what this

[1] I am grateful for feedback from Adolfo Campoy-Cubillo, Joyce Tolliver, and Jessica Folkart on my presentation of this material as part of the Global Hispanophone Forum's panel on "Scholarship and Activism in the Global Hispanophone," chaired by Elisa Rizo during the Modern Language Association's 2021 convention.

[2] Daniela Flesler's *The Return of the Moor: Spanish Responses to Contemporary Moroccan Immigration* and Susan Martin-Márquez's *Disorientations: Spanish Colonialism in Africa and the Performance of Identity*, both published in 2008, are groundbreaking monographs with respect to the theme of immigration in contemporary Spanish literature. These two studies have been joined more recently by the likes of Raquel Vega-Durán's *Emigrant Dreams, Immigrant Borders: Migrants, Transnational Encounters, and Identity in Spain* which explores immigrant identity in relation to Spain's long history of emigration, Michelle Murray's *Home Away from Home: Immigrant Narratives, Domesticity, and Coloniality in Contemporary Spanish Culture* which looks at the case of immigrant domestic workers in a range of Spanish texts, and Jessica Folkart's *Liminal Fiction at the Edge of the Millennium: The Ends of Spanish Identity* which contends that liminality has been a unifying experience for autochthonous Spaniards and immigrants alike. Along with novel takes on contemporary literature and film, some studies branch out into other genres; of note are Silvia Bermúdez's *Rocking the Boat: Migration and Race in Contemporary Spanish Music* and Jeffrey Coleman's *The Necropolitical Theatre: Race and Immigration on the Contemporary*

veritable "return of the colonized" (De Genova 18) means in terms of political and epistemological insurrection. Claiming the former metropolitan center of what was once a vast empire as their locus of enunciation, migrant writers are challenging the colonial modes of thought that have heretofore defined the country's linguistic landscape.

Authors like the Moroccan-born Najat El Hachmi, who writes in Catalan, and Agnès Agboton (originally from Benin), who writes in Castilian and Catalan, use self-expression in a peninsular language as a means of foregrounding Tamazight and Gun oral traditions respectively. Agboton's memoirs, *Más allá del mar de arena: una mujer africana en España* ('Beyond the Sea of Sand: An African Woman in Spain,' 2005) and El Hachmi's *La filla estrangera* ('The Foreign Daughter,' 2015), the second novel in the triad that began with *L'últim patriarca* (*The Last Patriarch*) in 2008, demonstrate how these women writers expose the patriarchal underpinnings of nationalistic rhetoric by writing from translation—or its impossibilities—as a source of inspiration. By both transcribing and inscribing their native languages into the Hispanosphere, these two writers challenge the proprietary experience of a Spanish readership. They thus write against Spain's historical amnesia about its own past as a long-standing country of émigrés and in opposition to the myth of Spanish exceptionalism as a colonial power in Africa.

El Hachmi and Agboton may hail from countries with very distinct colonial histories, but they are united in their strategic use of translation as "border gnosis" that disrupts—and even reverses—the hegemonic role that Spanish has exercised within and beyond peninsular territory. Walter Mignolo reminds us that, in coining this very term, he is drawing on Valentin Y. Mudimbe's use of gnosis to capture the "undisciplined forms" of African thought that are otherwise excluded from the Western categories of "philosophy" and "epistemology" (Mignolo 10). For Mignolo, border gnoseology—or the discourse about gnosis—"is a critical reflection on knowledge production from both the interior borders of the modern/colonial world system (imperial conflicts, hegemonic languages, directionality of translations, etc.) and its exterior borders (imperial conflicts with cultures being colonized, as well as the subsequent stages of independence or decolonization)" (11). According to these definitions, El Hachmi and Agboton write from both the interior and exterior borderlands of Spain. Firmly located within the Global Hispanophone, they are very much engaged in Walkowitz's aforementioned "project of unforgetting." They engage in a creative endeavor that,

Spanish Stage. Lastly, volumes like *African Immigrants in Contemporary Spanish Texts: Crossing the Strait*, edited by Debra Faszer-McMahon and Victoria L. Ketz, have been essential for signaling new avenues of inquiry. Although migrant perspectives are key to bringing these arguments full circle—with the exception of the music that Bermúdez selects—they are often limited to single chapter or introduced as a final point of comparison. Thus, there is room for analyzing the work of "migrant writers" on their own or dialogue with others.

as suggested in the conclusion, can be conceived of as an effort to decolonize the metropole.

Previous scholarship on both writers has emphasized their hybrid identities. Whether in reference to *La filla estrangera* or her other works, critics have highlighted how El Hachmi's writing calls into question the relevance of larger nationalisms (Spanish, Moroccan) through the interplay of minority languages (Catalan, Tamazight).[3] In the case of Agboton, scholars such as Inmaculada Díaz Narbona (who wrote the preface to *Más allá del mar de arena: una mujer africana en España*), Maya García de Vinuesa, Julia Borst, Mar Gallego and Raquel Vega-Durán are particularly interested in her use of language to bridge the gap between the culture of her native Benin and adoptive Spain (Catalonia and, more specifically Barcelona) in particular. Building off these interpretations of the importance of self-translation and transliteration in the work of these two women writers, this article will look at how these acts of narration function as a mode of transcribing their—predominantly oral—first languages into the Global Hispanophone, thereby transforming Spanish letters writ large.

Najat El Hachmi's *La filla estrangera*

Najat El Hachmi is arguably the most widely recognized of the two, and far more of a public figure. Much of this renown is due to her debut novel, *L'últim patriarca*, which was awarded the Ramon Llull, the highest honor for Catalan literature. Distributed by Editorial Planeta, a (formerly) Barcelona-based publishing house with branches throughout Latin America, this award guarantees immediate translation into Spanish and significant international dissemination of the prize-winning text. Thus, while her first publication, the autobiographical think piece, *Jo també soc catalana* ('I am also Catalan', 2004), remains untranslated, the rest of El Hachmi's oeuvre has seen wide diffusion in Catalan, Spanish, English, French, and more.

More recently, she has published three other novels: *La cassadora dos corpos* (*The Body Hunter*, 2011)—also with Editorial Planeta, in addition to *La filla estrangera* and *Mare de llet i mel* ('Mother of Milk and Honey,' 2018) with Edicions 62. She has since described the latter two as completing a sort of

[3] Since the question of national identity/identities is so salient in El Hachmi's writing there is a growing body of criticism that explores this issue. Carrasco, Codina, Folkart ("The Incestuous Embodiment of Immigration and Identity: *La filla estrangera* by Najat El Hachmi") and Bourland Ross have paid special attention to *La filla estrangera*, whereas Carrobles, Folkart ("Scoring the National Hym(e)n"; Folkart, *Liminal Fiction at the Edge of the Millennium*), Joan Rodríguez, and Ricci, ("*L'últim patriarca* de Najat El Hachmi y el forjamiento de una identidad amazigh-catalana"; "African Voices in Contemporary Spain"; "The Reshaping of Postcolonial Iberia: Moroccan and Amazigh Literatures in the Peninsula") take a comparative approach to analyzing her broader corpus.

"migration tryptic" with *L'últim patriarca*, one that foregrounds women's voices. This is clearly a concern that motivates much of her writing. In 2019, she came out with her first nonfiction piece since *Jo també soc catalana* a book-length essay entitled *Sempre han parlat per nosaltres* ('They Have Always Spoken for Us,' 2019). This feminist manifesto addresses the doubly enforced silence of "third culture kids" like herself: that is, the daughters of Muslim Moroccans in Spain who not only risk rejection from their communities if they speak out against the patriarchal norms with which they were raised, but also must counter a Western desire to accept—or even protect—those customs in the name of multicultural pluralism. Earlier this year, she won the Premio Nadal for her newest novel, *El lunes nos querrán* ('They'll Love Us on Monday,' 2021) which deals with many of the same themes in fictional form.

As evidenced by the titles of her works alone, El Hachmi has been a consistent champion of the particular challenges facing women of Maghrebi origin in Spain, and in Catalonia above all. Often, this takes the form of an attentiveness to the way linguistic barriers evolve over time and continue to impact women's lives long after the migratory process is technically over. This is especially true of the novels that form her migration tryptic, and of *La filla estrangera* in particular. El Hachmi's innovative use of the Catalan dictionary to structure the second part of *L'últim patriarca* has received significant critical attention (Crameri; Yebra López). Each chapter concludes with an alphabetized entry as a testament to the (unnamed) narrator's attempts to learn the language and establish herself in Catalonia. She thus distinguishes herself from her father Mimoun, the eponymous last patriarch whose story she sets out to recount in Part I. Despite the fact that the novel faithfully follows the protagonist from his birth in a Berber village in Rif, through his initial travels to Spain to earn money for his wedding, to his long-lost family's arrival in Vic, the text features very few original words in her regional Tamazight (or Arabic)—there are only occasional references to Muslim holidays, typical dishes from the region, or objects of clothing. In contrast, *Mare de llet i mel*, which tells the story of Fatima, a woman from Rif who moves to Spain with her daughter in pursuit of an errant husband, includes an entire glossary of terms in the Riffian Amazigh language (also known as Tamazight) she speaks to help readers decipher Fatima's perspective through her native tongue. *La filla estrangera*, however, falls somewhere in the middle. The narrator/protagonist is yet another anonymous daughter who is made to feel out of place in her hometown of Vic (or that we can assume is Vic), not because of her immigration status, but because of the constraints imposed by her traditional mother. In this case, the narrator/protagonist's sensation of being lost in translation between Tamazight and Catalan serves as the primary organizational trope for the novel.

In this sense, *La filla estrangera* revives many of the concerns that undergird El Hachmi's own autobiography, *Jo també soc catalana*. Much like

Agboton's *Más allá del mar de arena* (to which we will turn our attention next), *Jo també soc catalana* is directed primarily at El Hachmi's son Rida.[4] Unlike Agboton's autobiographical essay, El Hachmi's text is framed in response to a piercing question from her son: "Jo sóc català, mama?" 'Am I Catalan, mother?'(89).[5] Written in Catalan, the text reaffirms El Hachmi's affinity to the culture it represents. However, she does not overlook the ways she and her son—who was born in Catalonia—have been otherized on the basis of physical appearance. In analyzing the title of this work, Michelle Murray astutely observes: "the word 'també' concedes difference, expresses excess, and recognizes the barriers that immigrants face in Catalonia. El Hachmi's invocation of this word suggests her possession by a Catalan culture reluctant to grapple with African migration, Islam, and cultural difference within its borders" (24). To this, Murray adds: "At the same time, her bold vindication of her 'Catalanness' signals a conscious dispossession, whereby she breaks with the race—and religious—based norms that aim to exclude her from Catalonia and Europe" (24). Arguably, the anonymous narrator/protagonist of *La filla estrangera* grapples with this same tension between possession and dispossession. For, much as Murray notes in the case of the *Jo també soc catalana*, language comes to represent the ways in which the border is not just a physical or political entity but a question of genealogy, of intergenerational conflict.

La filla estrangera is narrated from the perspective of our protagonist who finds herself at a crossroads. She is a promising student who has earned a 9.5 on her college entrance exams—an exceptionally high score that, combined with her foreign last name, lands her a television interview. Despite feeling a mix of embarrassment and resentment for having been touted as some sort of model minority by the local press, she would love nothing more than to pursue a university degree. However, her personal circumstances stand in the way of that dream. She lives alone with her mother with whom she migrated to Catalonia from the Rif as a child in pursuit of her absentee father. Given this dynamic, she feels obligated to work so that she can bring her cousin over to marry and thus restore her mother's reputation by confirming her ability to single-handedly raise the ideal daughter. Prior analyses examine how "she creates the story that tells of her constructing herself both within the cultural norms of Spain and through her rejection of the mother figure and motherhood itself," (Ross 354). In this vein, the narrative has been interpreted as an example of the literary production emerging from a new, multicultural and plurilingual Europe (Carrobles), as an exploration of female emancipation (Codina 123), and in a particularly fascinating study by Jessica

[4] The autobiography *Jo també soc catalana* is written in the second person. As Murray has identified, Rida's question is the impetus for the title, but El Hachmi dialogues with her grandmother and father as well (Murray 24).

[5] Unless otherwise noted, all translations into English are my own.

Folkart, as a "compelling narrative that foregrounds incest and the body as tropes for the negotiation of culture, particularly the cross-cultural 'inbreeding' of former colonizers/colonized from North Africa coming back to dwell in the peninsula" ("The Incestuous Embodiment of Immigration and Identity"). Here, I am interested in the way this novel pushes the bounds of the Catalan, and indeed, Spanish canon by immortalizing an otherwise oral, supposedly foreign language within its pages.

In *La filla estrangera*, the narrator/protagonist's relationship to her mother tongue, Tamazight, functions metonymically, representing the growing sense of displacement she feels in relation to the place and culture of her birth—and, by extension, a gradual estrangement from her mother. The novel begins with the daughter's frustrated attempt to run away from home. Although she is convinced that she will be caught by her overbearing and highly intuitive mother, it is a negative spiral of thoughts that ultimately stops her in her tracks. On board the train to Barcelona, she realizes that she put the normal amount of leavening in the daily bread before departing. Horror struck at the idea her mother would come home in the evening to a dough that had risen uncontrollably, her mind goes down a rabbit hole:

> A cada bucle dels meus pensaments una idea m'anava colpejant amb més intensitat: si hagués d'explicar en aquesta llengua en la qual penso tot el procés de fer el pa, no ho sabria fer, em fallarien les paraules perquè quan ho faig per mi la descripció se m'omple de paraules de la llengua de la meva mare que ningú més pot entendre. (El Hachmi, *La filla estrangera* 13)
>
> In every loop of my thoughts an idea was hitting me harder: if I had to explain the whole process of making bread in this language in which I think, I would not know how, I would be missing the vocabulary because, when I do it, the description is full of words in my mother's tongue that no one else can understand.

Through this interior monologue we come to understand that while she speaks in Catalan, much of her everyday reality is determined by her mother, and as result, by Tamazight. Regardless of the large number of Riffian expatriates residing in Catalonia, the narrator/protagonist is convinced that "no one else can understand [her]." Here, the "no one" this clearly refers to her Catalan peers with whom she feels more aligned because she concludes by insisting, "només amb algú que fos com jo, que també tingués una mare com la meva i hagués après aquesta llengua que ens és estrangera i l'hagués interioritzat com he fet jo" (13) 'Only with someone who was like me, who also had a mother like mine and had learned this language that is foreign to us and had internalized it as I have done [could understand].' There is tension in this phrasing because although the narrator supposedly thinks in

Catalan (thus the hesitancy about translation), Tamazight infiltrates the same mental space. Nonetheless, the entanglement of the two beautifully illustrates the sense of entrapment and isolation she feels, caught in the untranslatable in between.

This comes to a head in the novel when the narrator/protagonist is betrothed to her cousin back in Morocco. The marriage involves several trips to her natal village in Rif, where she finds herself woefully out of sync with the other women in her family. The narrator/protagonist makes it clear that, at least in her case, there are very few opportunities for self-realization in Tamazight. In the family home in Morocco, certain sensorial experiences bring her tremendous pleasure, such as walking barefoot across the cool tile floor. But when her cousin and main confidant is shocked by her risky behavior, insisting she will quickly catch a cold, our narrator/protagonist realizes that there is no easy way to overcome this cultural gap: "Plaer? Ni tan sols sé dir aquesta paraula en la llengua de la meva mare. Ni tan sols sé si existeix en la llengua de la mare. Ni plaer, ni delit, ni èxtasi, ni res. Encara menys orgasme" (24) 'Pleasure? I can't even say that word in my mother's language. I don't even know if it exists in the mother tongue. Neither pleasure, nor delight, nor ecstasy, nor anything. Let alone orgasm.' As she confronts the possibility of marriage, the narrator/protagonist realizes that she cannot express her most basic desires in the language of her mother—and soon-to-be husband. Her wedding night will be her first ever sexual encounter and she has no words for the sensations that should entail. The same can be said of the concept of love. Within her mother's world she must resign herself to the fact that "pel meu origen, classe i condició, el meu serà per força un amor prefabricat, pensat i dissenyat per algú altre" (89) 'given my origin, class and condition, mine will be a forced, pre-fabricated love, thought up and designed by others.' In these passages, language is not only depicted as a means of capturing certain perceptions, but also as determinant of a corresponding worldview.

Our narrator/protagonist is left wrestling with the incommensurability of the perspectives that Catalan and Tamazight embody, mystified by the fact that lived experience can be rendered untranslatable. This struggle becomes all the more painful when her husband finally moves to Catalonia. His presence in what had been a matriarchal household has a corrosive effect on the mother-daughter relationship that lies at the novel's core. The mother, who not only condoned but arranged the marriage for her daughter, gets drawn into to reinforcing many of the patriarchal norms embedded in Moroccan/Amazigh culture. At this point, the narrator/protagonist's frustrations with translation change direction, as the novel loops back (at least emotionally) to where we found her in the beginning: paralyzed by the fear that she has been indelibly marked as different and will not be able to find a means of expressing that difference in Catalan either.

This comes to light as the mother and daughter pair search for a new apartment for what will soon be a family of three. The narrator/protagonist remarks

bitterly how the petition for family reunification requires proof of a certain standard of living that has generally been inaccessible to them. Since their arrival in Vic, they have lived in a run-down apartment in the old city center—the only area available to immigrants before new waves of gentrification increased its popularity. Having spent years of her life wandering the shadowy, narrow streets, she describes the way the strange musty aroma of this historic district has become part of her over the years (9). But that is no longer to be the case—at least if they can overcome the rampant racism in the housing market. The narrator/protagonist explains the ins and outs of the process:

> Per telèfon és tot molt fàcil . . . Com que el meu accent és tan característic de la ciutat m'atenen bé. De vegades fins i tot quan em coneixen en persona no dubten que pugui ser una candidata a ser-ne la llogatera. De vegades no. Això depèn de la persona, hi ha qui té un sentit de l'alteritat més desenvolupat que un altre i sap que sóc marroquina de seguida, però altres em confonen amb algú del sud o morena de mena. (63)
>
> By phone it's all very easy. . . Because my accent is so characteristic of the city, they take good care of me. Sometimes even when they meet me in person, they have no doubt that I can be a candidate to be their tenant. Sometimes not. It depends on the person, there are those who have a more developed sense of alterity than others and know that I am Moroccan right away, but others confuse me with someone from the south or a regular old brunette.

The housing search accentuates the strange bind in which she finds herself. As much as she sounds familiar to potential landlords, she looks other. This bizarre conflict between oral/aural acceptance and visual rejection illustrates the irony of the narrator/protagonist's situation: the fact that it is only in seeking to branch out from the cramped, immigrant quarters she and her mother have always inhabited that she is otherized.

These tensions reach their apogee when Driss, her husband-cousin (as she refers to him), finally arrives. His residence card does not include work authorization and the two women are forced to take on additional cleaning gigs to support him. The narrator/protagonist is known in the community to be an outstanding student, and while her family situation would never allow her to attend university, she is offered the position of cultural mediator for the local government. Despite the additional income, the public nature of this work makes Driss uncomfortable and in a fit of jealousy he obligates her to start wearing a headscarf, or *funara.* The narrator/protagonist notes in anguish that there is no true equivalent for the word in Catalan: "*Funara* no sona com mocador, és un terme més específic,

amb tot el pes significatiu posat en aquest aspecte, el de ser una peça que les dones es posen al cap. La *funara* no pot servir per res més, en canvi el mocador sí" (138) '*Funara* does not sound like handkerchief, it's a more specific term, all the weight of its significance rests on this aspect, that of being a piece that women wear on their heads. The *funara* cannot be used for anything else, whereas a handkerchief can.' The narrator/protagonist clearly feels that there is no space in Catalan for such a concept and the longer she wears the *funara*, the more she feels that there is no longer space for her in her hometown either. She scuttles around corners on the way to work and avoids eye contact with passersby. When she bumps into one of her high school teachers—a teacher she always respected for her staunch feminism—and the woman looks the other way, the narrator/protagonist concludes: "deu ser que amb mocedor m'he tornat invisible" (145) 'it must be that with the handkerchief I've become invisible.'

In a move typical of El Hachmi's writing, the novel's denouement is rapid. In the final few chapters, we learn that this oppressive environment brings on a deep-seated depression and that when the narrator/protagonist finally resolves to leave home for good, an unwanted pregnancy gets in the way. However, the epilogue finds our narrator/protagonist living on her own in "the big city" (163) 'la gran ciutat,' having left her newborn son under her mother's care. With a literal "room of her own" (163) 'la meva habitació pròpia' she has returned to reading voraciously, and even admits to leafing through the brochures about various career tracks in university. Her hair, which she had cut off while depressed, grows back. Without her mother's incessant olive oil treatments, or the chemical straightening she'd done in the past during the job search, she avers that "semblo més marroquina que mai" (164) 'I look more Moroccan than ever," so much so that "de vegades algú que també ho és em reconeix i em parla, bé en àrab, bé en rifeny, però jo faig veure que no els entenc per no tornar a la mare" (164) 'sometimes, someone else who also is recognizes me [as Moroccan] and speaks to me, either in Arabic or in Riffian, but I pretend like do not understand to not return to my mother.' Rather than associate her mother tongue with her domineering mother and the patriarchal norms she chooses to uphold, she literally conflates the two. However, this rejection of the past, of her family and of her first language is horribly painful. In the final paragraphs of the novel, she describes overhearing a conversation among a group of Riffian women on the bus. She is overjoyed to recognize the language and distraught when they get off at the next stop. This casual encounter brings on an epiphany of sorts and she decides to write her mother's story.

In her analysis of the novel, Núria Codina insists that "the oral language of the illiterate mother (Amazigh, although not named explicitly) represents the gender roles imposed on women in the culture of origin, while the written language of the new society (by inference, Catalan) opens the way to literature and enables the protagonist to escape from the surrounding constraints through her imagination"

(Codina 122).[6] While I agree with this assessment, the narrator/protagonist's decision to live independently, and exclusively in Catalan, comes at a great personal cost. Much as Murray points out in the case of El Hachmi's own trajectory, the acquisition of Catalan, not just for speaking and reading but also as a tool of self-narration, necessitates a detachment from the mother and mother tongue. Codina acknowledges this loss but ignores the extent to which *La filla estrangera* offers a vital critique of Catalan. El Hachmi has underscored what she sees as commonalities between the two languages and their histories: "I sent totes dues llengües marginades per certs poders, encara sentia més el deure de defensar-les, d'elevar-les al lloc que els pertoca encara que fos només fent-ne ús" (El Hachmi, *Jo també soc catalana* 52; qtd. in Murray 22) 'As both are languages marginalized by certain powers, I felt the need to defend them, to elevate them to the place where they rightfully belonged, if only through constant use.' Referring here to the suppression of the Catalan language and Catalan national identity under the dictatorial regime of Francisco Franco (1939-1975), as well as the Moroccan state's exclusionary attitudes towards Tamazight, El Hachmi creates a rationale for the preservation of these two languages based on their histories of exclusion from the mainstream.[7]

Yet, the novel's narrator/protagonist seems to espouse a different attitude, focusing more on her marginal position vis-à-vis both Tamazight and Catalan. The latter certainly offers a more promising liberatory framework for her development as a young woman. However, she is painfully aware of its insularity, the way it has been constructed as belonging to a certain territory, a certain people. The novel thus represents a significant challenge to the discursive barriers erected around and between these two languages. Codina highlights how Tamazight words and phrases are italicized throughout the novel, paradoxically drawing the reader's eye to the very language the narrator/protagonist is trying to leave behind. This observation about the material realities of the written text deserves further analysis. Despite insisting throughout her narrative on the ephemeral qualities of Tamazight, that it is a "una llengua que és del tot alien al paper, que es transmet per l'aire sense deixar rastres de cap mena" (El Hachmi, *La filla estrangera* 20) 'a language that is completely alien to paper, that is transmitted through the air without leaving any kind of trace,' the narrator/protagonist's resulting story becomes the vehicle for its—seemingly impossible—transcription. El Hachmi subverts the oral/written opposition of Tamazight and Catalan by manipulating Catalan's formal qualities to create a lasting record of Amazigh modes of expression. It is in this "born-

[6] Amazigh typically refers to Berber culture, whereas Tamazight refers to the language.

[7] Despite the fact that Berbers predate the Arabs of Morocco, their language and traditions are not formally recognized by the state. The events of Arab Spring in 2011 brought about changes in the Moroccan constitution, including the classification of the Amazigh language—known as Tamazight—as co-official.

translated" work, which circulates extensively not only in Catalan but also in Castilian, that El Hachmi uses translation to remind a Spanish readership that any accurate portrayal of contemporary Spain must necessarily include the languages of its growing migrant communities, such as Tamazight. Or, as Campoy-Cubillo points out in reference to El Hachmi's *La cassadora dos corpos*: that identity cannot be boiled down to any one original language.[8]

Agnès Agboton's *Más allá del mar de arena*

Agnès Agboton also resides in Barcelona and writes from the position of an African woman and inhabitant of the Catalan city. Just as El Hachmi is an advocate for Catalan literature, Agboton is adamant about her affinity for both Catalan and Castilian, having earned her degree in Spanish Language and Literature.[9] Through her autobiography, *Más allá del mar de arena* she too seeks to inscribe her first language, Gun, into the Hispanosphere. Given centuries of Spanish intervention in the Rif, El Hachmi's text represents a true reversal of colonial domination, in which a migrant subject from a former occupied territory brings her own language to bear on the metropolitan realities of Spain, whereas Agboton's does not. In carving out a space for the indigenous knowledges of her youth via Peninsular literature, she is far less critical of linguistic biases and overt racism she has encountered than El Hachmi (García de Vinuesa 212). This may be in part due to the book's format. As a multi-chapter letter addressed to her two sons, Axel and Didac, *Más allá del mar de arena* can best be described as a memoir—or *libro de memorias* 'book of memories' in Spanish. Agboton reminisces at length about her childhood in Benin as well as her adolescence in Côte de'Ivoire, where she met her children's father, Manuel Serrat Crespo. However, the more-or-less linear narrative that traces her trajectory from Porto Novo (Benin) to Bingerville (Côte de'Ivoire), and finally to Barcelona is punctuated by a variety of other material. Agboton and Serrat Crespo dedicated their careers to the preservation of West African oral traditions. Thus, mythology, folklore, and even recipes are interspersed throughout the text. In line with Agboton's work as a folklorist, the familial framing of both autobiographical material and cultural artifacts reminds us that storytelling is an important means of preserving history.

[8] For more on El Hachmi's relationship to the growing Berber community in Catalonia see Adolfo Campoy-Cubillo's "Representation and its Discontents: Maghrebian Voices and Iberian Diversity."
[9] Maya García de Vinuesa has interviewed Agboton about the creative process, eliciting beautiful and, indeed, endearing reflections about Peninsular languages from the author: "The first time I listened to Catalan (not understanding a word of it, of course) was in Ivory Coast, on the veranda at Bingerville, listening to Manuel's [her husband] conversation with his mother…Catalan felt then a very sweet and tender language…And it still feels so now" (García de Vinuesa 218).

Agboton is also a prolific writer. In addition to *Más allá del mar de arena* she has produced three cookbooks—*La cuina africana* ('African Cooking,' 1988), *Àfrica des dels fogons* ('Africa from the Stove,' 2001), and *Las cocinas del mundo* ('Cuisines of the World,' 2002); four collections of African folktales—*Contes d'arreu del món* ('Tales from Around the World,' 1995), *Abenyonhú* (2003),[10] *Na Mitón. La mujer en los cuentos y leyendas africanas* ('Our Mother: Women in African Tales and Legends,' 2004), *Eté Utú: Cuentos de tradición oral. De por qué en África las cosas son lo que son* ('Eté Utú: Stories from Oral Tradition. About Why in Africa Things Are How They Are');[11] and two volumes of her own poems, written in Gun and translated into Spanish—*Canciones del poblado y del exilio* ('Songs from the Village and from Exile,' 2006) and *Voz de dos orillas* ('Voice from Two Shores,' 2009).[12] Her commitment to what García de Vinuesa—and Agboton herself—describes as self-translation (García de Vinuesa 214; 218), whether it be re-creating a Beninese dish from memory or explaining the significance of her Gun surname in Spanish, makes Agboton's production the perfect example of "born-translated" literature. For just as Walkowitz has suggested, Agboton uses the translation of Gun into Castilian and Catalan as "medium and origin rather than afterthought" (Walkowitz 3-4); it drives and shapes her text.

Perhaps for that reason, previous analyses of *Más allá del mar de arena* have taken Agboton's years working as a cultural mediator in Barcelona as an entry point for interpreting this piece, homing in on the varied use of languages throughout the text as an expression of hybridity. This has led some scholars to focus on Agboton's praise of her new home and declare that *Más allá del mar de arena* is intended to mollify a Spanish audience (Vega-Durán 216-217), while others, conversely, stress her strategic use of ambiguity to unsettle monolithic narratives about 'European' or 'African' culture (Borst 177; Gallego 75). However, most readings of the text are concerned with her role as an intercultural agent—and the sometimes difficult act of self-translation that this requires (see García de Vinuesa 283 in particular). These studies have been fundamental for confirming M'bare N'Gom's assertion that what can be described as "Hispanic African Literature"[13] can no longer be restricted to Equatorial Guinea, given that "there are

[10] This is a proper noun in Gun and without translation.

[11] *Na Mitón* can be translated directly to mean "our mother," however the back cover of the book explains that, in Gun, it is a direct reference to the goddess of fertility. The subtitle is in Castilian.

[12] The translation of these titles into English is generally my own. However, wherever possible I have coincided with the translations that García de Vinuesa includes in "Agnès Agboton: Self-Translation and Intercultural Mediation."

[13] Hispanic African Literature is N'Gom's label. For her part, Dorothy Odartey Wellington uses "literatura afrohispana" but has also come up with the neologism *trans-afrohispanismo* to describe the transcultural and transnational character of creative expression in Spanish produced by the African diaspora (2). Sabrina Brancato proposes Afro-Spanish for the corpus of texts produced by

new cultural constituents who come from non-Hispanic African countries but who write in Castilian" (N'Gom 103; Borst 170). And indeed, this body of criticism has managed to secure Agboton's status as "una de las voces femeninas afroespañolas más importantes" (Borst 170) 'one of the most important female Afro-Spanish voices,' establishing her place within the Spanish canon and in the Global Hispanophone. Yet, insufficient attention has been paid to the angle Agboton herself chooses for her memoirs; that is, writing as a Black woman married to a white man and writing for her bi-racial children, all in predominantly white Spain. Only Ana Zapata-Calle's analysis homes in on Agboton's self-positioning as a matriarchal figure who writes out of a commitment to Spain's growing Afro-descendent population (Zapata-Calle 3-4). Given that this fact determined her choice to write her memoirs in Castilian Spanish, self-translate into Catalan, and, of course, transcribe expressions in Gun along the way (García de Vinuesa 218), I argue that this subject position cannot be ignored. In what follows, I analyze how Agboton employs ambiguity and, in fact, the conspicuous omission of certain details to enrich the subtext of her memoirs. She may not be as forthcoming as El Hachmi, but by juxtaposing Dahomanian and Spanish cosmovisions, *Más allá del mar de arena* nonetheless offers an important critique of the Western lifestyle Agboton encounters in Barcelona. Her born-translated text thereby carves out an important space in the Hispanophone world for new forms of Black world-making.

Unlike the many Equatorial Guinean authors who write from exile in Spain, or the many Moroccan authors who choose Castilian and Catalan as their languages of literary expression on the either side of the Strait of Gibraltar,[14] Agboton grew up between two countries where French is the colonially imposed official language. She admits that, given this linguistic connection, both in Benin and later in Côte d'Ivoire, "De un modo algo ingenuo, debido sin duda a la antigua colonización, Europa era París" (Agboton 71) 'In a somewhat naïve way, due undoubtedly to former colonization, Europe was Paris.' She describes how, as a young woman, the dream was to make it to Paris, "ciudad a la que, en gun, llamamos *Yovotomé*, 'el país de los blancos'" (Agboton 71) 'a city that, in Gun, we called *Yovotomé*, "the country of white people."' In this instance the capital city served as a metonym for

"Afrosporic authors in Europe" (1, 9-10). Martin Repinecz distinguishes between the "global Hispanophone" to refer to the contemporary Spanish-speaking world, "Hispanic" to refer to historical theories of Hispanism, and "Afro-Hispanic" for African or Afro-diasporic communities that speak Spanish (121).

[14] Michael Ugarte's *Africans in Europe: The Culture of Exile and Emigration from Equatorial Guinea to Spain* is the definitive text on Equatorial Guinea's political turmoil following independence from Spain in 1968 and the many "emexiles" that have taken up residence in the former metropole to avoid persecution. Cristián Ricci's *¡Hay moros en la costa! Literatura marroquí fronteriza en castellano y catalán* ('There are Moors on the coast! Moroccan Borderland Literature in Spanish and Catalan') focuses on Spain's enduring influence in the Maghreb via Moroccan literature produced directly in Castilian and Catalan.

the entire metropole. Thinking back to her earliest days in Barcelona she realizes that, regardless of linguistic ties, it was one and the same: "vivía en *Yovotomé*, para bien y para mal" (Agboton 71) 'I lived in *Yovotomé,* for better or worse.' She never details direct experiences with anti-Black racism but cleverly draws a parallel with France to illustrate how Spain's colonial past has shaped its present as well. In *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Cedric Robinson explores how as early as the thirteenth century the Mediterranean slave trade served as a model for Atlantic colonial slavery, with the vital difference that slaves, European, Asian, and African, were primarily employed in domestic service rather than agrarian production. For this reason, slave women were preferred and "were to be found in the households of wealthy and 'even relatively modest Catalan and Italian families'" (Hay 76; qtd in Robinson 15). Therefore, while Barcelona's development may more famously have depended on slavery in terms of the investment of surplus from the Spanish colonies, the labor of enslaved women above all nurtured the growth of a merchant class from the medieval period on. Agboton is well aware of the ugly history that unites her place of origin and her new home and even comments: "A veces me resulta gracioso pensar que vivo en Barcelona y que nací en la Costa de los Esclavos. Ahora sé que algunas de las grandes fortunas de Barcelona se consiguieron gracias al tráfico de esclavos y se puede decir que soy amiga de algunos descendientes de aquellas familias" (Agboton 21) 'Sometimes I find it funny to think that I live in Barcelona and that I was born on the Slave Coast. Now I know that some of the great fortunes of Barcelona were made thanks to the slave trade and one could say that I'm a friend of some of the descendants of those families.' We have to assume that this observation is ironic. After all, there is nothing funny about the long and damaging legacy of the Atlantic slave trade. Nor is Agboton the first West African writer to call attention to how the opulence of certain Spanish cities reeks of dirty money, wealth acquired via the exploitation of enslaved labor.[15] But this almost sardonic commentary aligns well with what García de Vinuesa has described as the "unique oral quality" of her live storytelling events that adds "a particular sense of humor" that content alone cannot convey (García de Vinuesa 216). Read as a form of mockery or jest, these lines seem to insinuate that her presence in Barcelona is a triumph: an affront to the exploitative, racist, sexist system upon which this cosmopolitan center was built. In this light, Agboton's determination to make

[15] As Equatorial Guinean author Francisco Zamora Loboch describes in his 1994 essay, *Cómo ser negro y no morir en Aravaca* ('How to be Black and Not Die in Aravaca'), Madrid, too, was built on the wealth acquired during colonization and the slave trade: "no es nada raro que más que un banco de los que hoy sacan pecho Castellana arriba, huela a negro de Guinea" 'it is nothing strange that of the many banks today that strut their stuff up the Castellana, more than one smells of black Guinean' (Zamora Loboch 20). Here, he is referring to Madrid's most prominent boulevard, Paseo de la Castellana, which is home to many of the country's most important financial institutions.

literary and literal space for herself in a city that was built for white men, on the backs of generations of Africans, is a radical move in and of itself.[16]

A constant give-and-take is fundamental to Agboton's own definition of integration. She excoriates words like "tolerance" and "integration," as they are often employed under the presumption of political correctness. Above all, she finds "tolerance" particularly noxious because "el verbo 'tolerar' incluye un saborcillo de algo no deseado, de algo desagradable que debe soportarse con resignación" (Agboton 74) 'the verb "tolerate" includes an aftertaste of something undesirable, something unpleasant that one has to bear with resignation.' Moreover, as she notes, this establishes a hierarchy in which the one being "tolerant" is superior to the person that is "tolerated."[17] These words clearly bear personal significance for Agboton because she sums up her critique with the statement: "la verdad es que no me gustaría que nadie me 'tolerase' u os 'tolerase' como algo inevitable y a la fuerza" (Agboton 74) 'the truth is that I wouldn't like anyone to "tolerate" me or '"tolerate" you [two] as something inevitable and [imposed on them] against their will.' Directing her words once more towards her sons, she establishes that true integration is based on a voluntary exchange between parties. Agboton claims: "Estoy integrada porque recibo y porque doy; porque acepto y, muchas veces, comparto los valores que prevalecen en la sociedad donde vivo" (Agboton 75-76) 'I am integrated because I receive and because I give, because I accept and, often, I share the values that prevail in the society I live in.' But as she makes clear, this also depends on there being interest in what she brings to the table: "pero estoy integrada, también, porque mis propios valores, los de mi cultura de nacimiento, pueden ser aceptados y compartidos, pueden ser conocidos, al menos, por la gente

[16] See Deborah Parsons's *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* for how modern cities were "constructed by and around masculine culture" (Parsons 15). Today's Barcelona, like Madrid, bears remnants of earlier eras but is a largely 19th-century city. These cities of capitalist modernity were built for men's participation in the public sphere and women's relegation to the private. The male urban wanderer is epitomized by Walter Benjamin's *flâneur*. However, Parsons argues, nineteenth and early-twentieth century women writers claimed a space for themselves as well: "their urban narratives are based in these locations, on the pavement of the city rather than floating detachedly above" (14-15).

[17] "Ser tolerantes, para mí, significa soportar la presencia del otro, sus costumbres o sus ideas, aunque no nos gusten, dando así pruebas de nuestra generosidad, de nuestra paciencia. Eso supone, a mi entender, que el "tolerante" se sitúa en una posición de superioridad en relación con el "tolerado". Es como si le dijera: "Eres feo, eres distinto o estás equivocado, pero yo soy tan bueno que, a pesar de ello, te acepto" (Agboton 74) 'To be tolerant, for me, means putting up with the presence of the other, their habits or ideas, even if we don't like them, thus giving proof of our generosity, our patience. This entails, to my understanding, that the "tolerant" is situated in a position of superiority in relation to the "tolerated." It's as if they said: "You are ugly, you are different or you're wrong, but I am so good that, despite all of that, I accept you."'

a la que amo y por la sociedad en la que vivo. De no ser así, no sería 'integración' sino 'asimilación'. Y no es lo mismo, no es lo mismo..." (Agboton 76) 'But I am integrated, also, because my own values, those of the culture of my birth, can be accepted and shared, they can be recognized, at least, by the people I love in the society that I live in. If it were not this way, it would not be rather "integration" and instead be "assimilation." And it is not the same, it is not the same…' In these terms, it is the preservation and diffusion of the Gun via Castilian and Catalan that confirms her sense of belonging.

Mothering is a fundamental aspect of this self-construction project too, and Agboton's relationship with her sons lies at the heart of this vision for a more equitable city. As she assures them in varying forms throughout the text: "sois el ejemplo inmediato y palpable, desde que nacisteis, de que el mundo es variado y de que nadie puede reclamar la exclusiva del bien, de la cultura y de la verdad" (75) 'You [plural] are the immediate and palpable example, since you were born, that the world is diverse and that no one can claim an exclusive right to what is good, to culture and to the truth.' She decries what she perceives to be a global situation in which public discourse trends increasingly towards absolute truths, particularly because, in her words, the latter are the "seed of misunderstanding" (83).[18] As she remarks to Axel by way of conclusion; "Eres un hijo de esta ciudad y se te nota" (64) 'You are a child of this city and it shows'. Her sons are without a doubt "*barceloneses*" (126) 'Barcelonian.' Their claims to belonging in Barcelona are the product of Agboton's own integration—her give and take with her adopted hometown. As she affirms in the conclusion of the fifth chapter, "Barcelona en blanco y negro" 'Barcelona in Black and White': "Lo que sí sé es que he aprendido a amar Barcelona. Ahora es mi ciudad, sí, la siento así. Y hoy ni siquiera me hacen ya daño, más bien me dan pena, quienes a veces (pocas, pocas...) me han dicho aquello de 'vete a tu país'. A vosotros dos también os lo han dicho, muchas veces me habéis hablado de ello." (72) 'What I have learned is to love Barcelona. Now it's my city, yes, that's how I feel about it. And these days it does not even hurt my feelings, it mostly just makes me pity those (few, few…) people who have said to me the classic "go back to your country." I know they've said the same to you two, you have told me about it many times.' Clearly, her means of overcoming these racist aggressions has been to raise and foster the next generation, making a place for Africanity in a cosmopolitan, European environment, for, as if to encourage her sons, she concludes with: "Como decían en Benín durante la dictadura de Kérékou: *Ehuzu Ehuzu, dan dan lo*, las cosas están cambiando mucho. Ojalá cambien más aún" (72) 'As they said in Benin during the Kérékou dictatorship: *Ehuzu Ehuzu,*

[18] "El mundo corre cada vez más aprisa hacia el reino de las verdades absolutas, sin matices. Y las verdades absolutas son la semilla de la incomprensión" (Agboton 83) 'The world is headed ever more quickly towards the reign of absolute truths, without nuance. And absolute truths are the seed of misunderstanding.'

dan dan lo, things are really changing. I hope they change even more.' Writing as a mother also means that she writes herself into Barcelona's urban landscape. At times she does so with her own words, at others by re-telling oral histories, sayings in Gun, and occasionally through strategic silences of her own.

Conclusions

While *La filla estrangera*, like *L'últim patriarca* before it, can certainly be described as a piece of "autobiographical fiction" (Ricci, "African Voices in Contemporary Spain" 213; Codina 123), I wish to push this analysis of El Hachmi and Agboton's writing beyond the question of genre, to focus instead on their shared interest in genealogy brings us closer to an understanding of how "the subaltern voices of immigrants may disrupt (or antagonize) the modern canon of the literatures of the Peninsula" (Ricci, "African Voices in Contemporary Spain" 213). Furthermore, this approach gives us a clearer vision of where these two authors fit within the very genealogies of thought they set out to identify. For her part, Agboton invites her sons to stake a claim on the Global Hispanophone: "¿Soy una madre africana que vive en Barcelona? ¿Soy una madre barcelonesa de origen africano? No lo sé, y si queréis que os diga la verdad, me es indiferente. Soy una madre, eso sí. Vuestra madre" (99) 'Am I an African mother that lives in Barcelona? Am I Barcelonian mother of African origin? I don't know, and if you want me to tell you [plural] the truth, it's irrelevant to me. I'm a mother, that's for sure. Your mother.' By insisting on her maternal role as the most important, she is opening the door for future generations to decide where to place the hyphen (as it were) in their hybrid identities—and her own. But not without offering an African lens through which to view their European reality. In contrast, El Hachmi writes from the position of those who must navigate this painful process of hyphenation for themselves. Ironically, while the main character of *La filla estrangera* rejects all things maternal—even Tamazight—the telling, or rather, writing of her story results in the entextualization of this predominantly oral language. The italicized words jump off the page, catching the reader's eye. Thus, much as García de Vinuesa proclaims in the case of Agboton's preservation of key Gun phrases in some of her Spanish-language versions of traditional Beninese stories, they "reveal a fierce will" to resist domestication (García de Vinuesa 216). Zapata-Calle thus insists that *Más allá del mar de arena* functions to decolonize the minds of its audience by destabilizing patriarchal and racist logics.[19] I submit that the same can

[19] "*Más allá del mar de arena* como libro no deja de cumplir la función de descolonizar las mentes de niños y adultos de todas las razas y destruir la ideología patriarcal y los prejuicios racistas" (Zapata-Calle 4) 'As a book, *Más allá del mar de arena* does not stop serving the function of decolonizing the minds of children and adults of all races and destroying patriarchal ideology and racist prejudices.'

be said of *La filla estrangera*. Together, these respective works of non-fiction and fiction demonstrate the ways in which African indigenous languages, and the forms of knowledge they convey, are passed down through generations of women and woven—albeit unevenly at times—into the fabric of everyday life on the Iberian Peninsula, all via migration.

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