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Migration Crisis and Conspiracy in Kazuo Ishiguro

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ABSTRACT
Migration and its crises constitute an insistent theme in Kazuo Ishiguro’s fiction, where – as in real recent history – the politics of migration have a dangerously close relationship with conspiracy narratives. At the heart of such narratives lies the fetishised ideal of the organic, original home and “homeland”: conspiracist paranoia is bound up in desire for epistemological security, responding to the traumatic rifts that migrations expose in a world torn between resurgent nationalisms and fraught globalisations. This essay explores how Ishiguro’s characters register a series of psychocultural functions for conspiracy theory that are fundamental to modern and contemporary migration crises, their causes, and their brutal consequences. I argue that Ishiguro’s interrogation of his own protagonists’ narratives of migration alongside international crisis, in novels including A Pale View of Hills, The Remains of the Day, and When We Were Orphans, forms a subtle intervention against the power of conspiracist thought.

1. Citizens of nowhere: migration crisis and conspiracy in the twenty-first century

In recent years, conspiracy theories have become increasingly central to international crises, provoked by and influencing developments including governmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the expansion of border regimes, the reception of election results, and responses to the climate crisis. Conspiracy theories are narratives derived from symptomatic readings of the world, and therefore prima facie a matter for literary studies. This is especially true for studies of Kazuo Ishiguro, in whose work they appear frequently: suspicions of conspiracy play important roles in The Unconsoled (1995) and When We Were Orphans (2000), while more clearly genuine conspiracies appear in The Remains of the Day (1989), Never Let Me Go (2005), and Klara and the Sun (2021). As Doug Battersby has powerfully explored, Ishiguro’s narrative style consistently (albeit with complex variations and implications) solicits modes of suspicious reading, of which conspiracist reading could be said to be an extreme, albeit crude, version or parallel.1 Ishiguro has a finely-honed sense of fiction’s ambivalent position in critique of falsely satisfying, and potentially dangerous, narratives – even in 2021 describing Donald Trump’s denial of his election loss as a source of personal anxiety over the

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1Battersby, “Reading Ishiguro Today: Suspicion and Form”.
most basic ethics of fiction. Ishiguro’s work has long explored, too, the relationships between conspiracy narratives and international crises.

The 2010s saw a large-scale expansion of conspiracy-based communities and movements (Phadke et al., “What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities?”; Mahl et al., “From ‘Nasa Lies’ to ‘Reptilian Eyes’”) and of their impacts on public life, driven by new online cultures, increasingly extreme political polarisation, and reactions to real economic, environmental and political crises. This expansion has included the United Kingdom, where Ishiguro lives and works, and where in recent times conspiracist groups have linked the COVID-19 pandemic, alleged international child trafficking, and climate policy (see Sharma, “How a Desire to ‘Save Our Children’”; McIntyre, “QAnon Conspiracy Theory Gaining Ground in the UK”). Such movements often significantly overlap with each other and with older antisemitic narratives about a secretive transnational Jewish elite.

In the 2010s, some of the most prominent international crises involved migration, especially in the mid-2010s “European Migrant Crisis”, centred on crossings from destabilised areas of the Middle East and North Africa into Europe, often via the Mediterranean. Even though these migrations were of people with generally transparent motivations (including escape from conflict and severe economic insecurity), they nevertheless proved to be rich sites for the projection of conspiracist narratives, which then played at least some role in motivating developments such as the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the United Kingdom’s Brexit vote also of 2016, and various rightwing electoral advances within European counties (Norris and Inglehart, Cultural Backlash).

These conspiracist narratives coalesced around opposition to “globalism”. As the political scientist Thomas Grumke observes: “Right-wing extremists […] see the process of globalisation as a deliberately controlled destruction of cultures, traditions and values (and, ultimately, of nations and peoples) by […] powerful ‘globalists’” directed by “a hidden Jewish world conspiracy”. Not all anti-globalist politics involve explicit antisemitism, but they consistently draw on the narrative structures and explanatory logic of an antisemitic inheritance, as Grumke argues. The social change allegedly sought by the global elite through engineered migrations is known as the “Great Replacement”, an alleged attempt to replace white European populations with non-white peoples. This thinking pits an existing, but threatened, ethno-national reality – conceived as organic, natural and deeply-rooted – against an artificial, superimposed, damaging internationalism.

Although anti-globalist politics are framed and driven by the extreme far Right, their basic tenets have been increasingly embraced, with varying dilution, by some mainstream politicians. In the United Kingdom, for example, then-Prime Minister Theresa May’s notorious 2016 speech defined her post-Brexit principles against “citizens of the

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2Ishiguro made these remarks during “An Evening with Kazuo Ishiguro”, hosted online by the Guardian on 2nd March 2021.
3See Jones, Violent Borders.
5Ibid., 15.
6Obaidi et al., “The ‘Great Replacement’ Conspiracy”.
7This theory has a more recent parallel in the “Great Reset” alleged to be the true motivation for restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.
world” – in fact “citizens of nowhere”, existing in artificial suspension above, and illegitimately harming the interests of, the authentic national community. The British government’s regime for managing asylum seeker and refugee claims is often, meanwhile, premised on deep hostility towards individual agency and situational complexity,\(^8\) an attitude itself grounded in suspicion of concealed motivations behind migration. Migration crisis includes, then, crises of narrative at both intimate and global levels, a fact that Ishiguro seems to have registered and responded to, as we shall see.

Conspiracist narratives are typically defined by their assurance of simple explanatory power. The antisemitic tradition, described by Bauman,\(^9\) of identifying Jews simultaneously with powerful elites and with impoverished minorities, has been revived in the anti-globalist movement’s accounting for large-scale migrations. It is the identification of a secret intentionality in place of seeming chaos and contingency that makes sense of the contradiction: The belief in societies being comprehensively manipulated by elites contains, within its ostensible demand for liberation, an affirmation of a world more controlled and controllable than the uninitiated realise (and which chaotic migrations and desperate refugees might otherwise contradict). The theorist of antisemitism Zygmunt Bauman claims that: “Doing something about the Jews was […] an effort to fight the world’s contingency, opacity, uncontrollability […] ambivalence”.\(^10\) Contemporary anti-globalism seeks similar goals: this movement’s extensive crossover\(^11\) with opposition to “gender theory” (meaning any account of gender that acknowledges realities beyond two immutable sex categories) indicates this drive against ambivalence, as does its obsessive focus on transforming opaque threats like terrorism into reasons to simply strengthen identitarian and material borders.

The desire to control a chaotic world and correctly interpret the intentions of powerful actors is a repeated feature of Ishiguro’s fictional protagonists. Real, imagined and ambiguous conspiracies appear throughout Ishiguro’s oeuvre, companions to his tendency to reveal the significance of his characters’ motivations and actions gradually, obliquely, and with enduring ambivalence. In his recent *Klara and the Sun* (2021), the android Klara’s expected function as a re-embodied replacement for Josie is itself a conspiracy, organised between Josie’s mother and Mr Capaldi, whose efforts are matched by Klara’s own attempt to secure Josie’s life in partnership with the Sun, in what is both a conspiracy (it is intended as a secret agreement) and a theory (relying on an excessively intentionalist, and fantasist, understanding of the world). *Klara’s* clearest precursor is *Never Let Me Go*, where the clones develop their own conspiracy theories to account for their opaque status, and to escape the cruelty of their true position with fantasies of secret favour. Tellingly, they establish these theories, despite their paranoid character, as a palliative narrative that explains, and thus partly evades, their bleak reality.

Still earlier in Ishiguro’s oeuvre, the mysterious, unresolved motivations behind events in *The Unconsoled* (1995) hint at multiple overlapping or conflicting conspiracies around the protagonist Ryder, whose posing in front of the controversial Sattler monument is one of several events that appear to have been engineered to manipulate his actions and attribute intentions he does not in fact possess. There are strong, albeit indirect,
echoes of antisemitic conspiracism and its consequences in *The Unconsoled*, set in the kind of central European territory where Nazi atrocities were particularly focussed; this locale is combined with compulsive returns of Ryder’s English childhood, including a reappearance of his childhood home where it cannot possibly “really” exist. This novel draws opaque yet persistent connections between geopolitical paranoia, historical trauma, and the fantasy or fetish of the home.

In this essay, however, I focus on three other Ishiguro novels: *The Remains of the Day*, *A Pale View of Hills*, and *When We Were Orphans*. All written well before the 2010s and 2020s increase in prominence of conspiracist movements, these novels show Ishiguro both recognising the dynamics through which such movements gestate and expand, and setting them within broad and deep historical and psychosocial contexts, thus providing both uncannily anticipatory and retrospective fictions to read alongside our current predicaments. *Remains* involves a real conspiracy driven in significant part by antisemitism; *A Pale View* centres on post-migration trauma following the international crises of the Second World War; and *Orphans* combines these themes with ambiguously real and imagined conspiracies based around both an individual, overdetermined, migration narrative and a broader migration crisis. Throughout my readings of these novels, conspiracist narratives emerge alongside a palliative domestication of global problems and international crisis, with first Jews and then others, including children and migrants, appearing to refuse this domestication and representing the element that, in its resistance, is treated simultaneously as politically abstract, morally abject, and materially threatening.

### 2. Antisemitism and conspiracy in *The Remains of the Day*

Ishiguro evoked the history of modern antisemitism when he had Stevens, the butler-protagonist of *The Remains of the Day*, dismiss two Jewish servants from Darlington Hall’s staff in concession to his employer’s understanding of the “nature of Jewry”. As Rankin Russell remarks:

> If [the maids] were fired with no references, they may well have been unable to get work in England and could have drifted to the continent, where they could easily have been imprisoned and killed in the Holocaust. No evidence in the novel exists that that was their fate, but Stevens’s omission of the Holocaust entirely as a gaping hole in his narrative suggests it is the ethical elephant standing in Darlington Hall and the novel.

Although antisemitism occupies a disingenuously minor space in Stevens’ narrative, then, it is central to the implications of his complicity. The profound irony of Lord Darlington’s antisemitism is that his own paranoid, conspiracist mindset, imagining danger even in working-class Jews who work for him, operates alongside his attempting real conspiracies of his own, via secretive yet grandiose gatherings seeking to reject the post-Ver-sailles European order. Darlington’s imagined “Jewry” is an abject projection of his own pretentions to secret elite influence in international affairs; and his residence, managed by Stevens, is both a stereotypically English space and the secretive heart of an international conspiracy, one where Lord Darlington’s elitist and amateur meddling is underpinned by

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12Ishiguro, *Remains*, 158.
13Rankin Russell, 446.
the unseen professionalism of Stevens, itself ironically and unconsciously linked to the possibilities of a less essentialist and identitarian, more abstract and professionalised approach to international politics by one of Darlington’s own guests, Senator Lewis.14

Managed by two narcissistic bachelors, Darlington and Stevens, Darlington Hall operates as a microcosm of the masculinist, hierarchical society both regard as natural and healthy – only disrupted by Miss Kenton, via her challenges to the Jewish servants’ dismissal and more broadly to Stevens’ pompous classism. Despite her role as domestic manager of the Hall, Kenton ironically undermines the kind of ethically dubious domestication in which both Darlington and Stevens engage when they reduce the functions of international politics to a tragicomically comfortable scale – where perhaps the silver-polishing, as Stevens delightedly suggests,15 really might affect high decision-making. Such a self-aggrandising domestication of international crises sits in symbiotic relationship with its doppelgänger, the hauntingly unknowable scale of the responsibility of these two men for early failures to effectively challenge the rise of Nazi Germany.

The potentially overwhelmingly significant, yet ultimately unknowable, destination of Darlington’s Jewish servants is an example of the disorientations of scale that Ishiguro repeatedly practices as a signature textual manoeuvre and ethical gesture.16 If the fate of the maids is indeed the novel’s “gaping hole”, this is a void produced by exactly that disorientation of scale, by the realisation that the ethical realities of international affairs are not to be securely domesticated, made comfortably knowable as complacently claimed within the conferences Darlington hosts. This is a void that, importantly, is a migration (at least away from the Hall, and potentially much further, as Rankin Russell notes), and one that mirrors the antisemitism that drives it – founded as the latter is on the idea of a stable, healthy organic society to which the Jews are wholly other, their presence unassimilable.

In Stevens’ disquisitions on his own contributions at Darlington Hall, the possibility of meaningful connection between the mundane and global scales is present yet unresolvable: an uncomfortable moral awareness that can descend into paranoia and from there into conspiracy theory, which offers a narrative consolation and explanatory resolution. So it is that Lord Darlington’s claim to privileged knowledge of “the nature of Jewry” promises to resolve a problem of scale, of the disparity between theories of “Jewry” as source of malevolent influence on global events and the quotidian reality of two under-privileged Jews working on the staff.

Darlington characterises Jewishness as an all-pervasive taint, corrupting anything with which it has had even limited contact.17 “Jewry” appears here as an imagined heart for the darkness of twentieth-century modernity that has produced, Darlington believes, an artificial re-ordering of a naturally organic and hierarchical society through the expansion of democracy (to Darlington, artificial egalitarianism) and an internationalism that he views as hostile to national integrity.18 It has also produced the Jews as embodied evidence of this; theorist Moishe Postone provides a valuable framework for understanding such a belief:

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14Ishiguro, Remains, 106–7.
15Ishiguro, Remains, 143–4; 146–7.
16See Walkowitz, 218; Bain, 242–56.
17Ishiguro, Remains, 154.
18Ibid., 76; 79.
In Europe [...] the nation as a purely political entity, abstracted from the substantiality of civil society, was never fully realized. The nation was not only a political entity, it was also concrete, determined by a common language, history, traditions, and religion. In this sense, the only group in Europe that fulfilled the determination of citizenship as a pure political abstraction was the Jews [...] They were of the nation abstractly, but rarely concretely. [...] The quality of abstractness [...] became closely identified with the Jews. In a period when the concrete became glorified against the abstract, against “capitalism” and the bourgeois state, this became a fatal association. The Jews were rootless, international, and abstract.  

This characterisation closes fits Lord Darlington’s worldview, where national identity and class hierarchy constitute the stable, organic society that he imagines is undermined by modernity, democracy, and by the artificial abstractions of international “Jewry”. There are echoes between Darlington’s paranoid project and contemporary anti-globalist movements, which behind their apparent populism often have their own elite drivers, and employ the same basic ideological framework he expounds: An organicist ethno-national community must be defended against internal enemies (especially leftists) and hostile international institutions.

Darlington’s quest to remake the world on such organicist terms is gradually revealed in ironic, retrospective juxtaposition with Stevens’ quest to heal the trauma of his pre-war complicity by repairing his relationship with Miss Kenton. The failure of his attempt to retrieve Kenton to Darlington Hall is a refutation of the control over moral and geographic scale asserted by Darlington and compulsively reiterated by Stevens even in his post-war life. A restoration of quasi-domestic harmony, and a return of the woman once pushed out – a revived and revised picture of organic order – cannot in fact offer Stevens a resolution of his disrupted position in the world.

Ishiguro repeatedly returns to characters driven by the idea of uncovering the heart of some modern darkness (a darkness that is itself an abject projection over the void of non-meaning, of material but imaginatively unassimilable reality, often present in international crises that challenge the territorial and ideological borders of nations, empires, and ethnic groups). Stevens’ complicity in Darlington’s attempt at this leads to his later quest for the retrieval of some familial or intimate relationship, and of reality itself as in some sense more domestic, more homely. (On his journey, Stevens even regards England as a whole as a kind of civilly domesticated counterpart to the entire rest of the world.) In Ishiguro, conspiracist thinking and the desire to secure the comforts of the intimately-known and the domestic often sit in close relation to each other.

3. A Pale View of Hills: traumatic migration and conspiracism in Ishiguro’s early work

Ishiguro’s first novel, A Pale View of Hills, meditates on the voids of non-meaning created by migrations, nations redrawn by international crises, and generational change. A Pale

20One example is the Islamophobic anti-migration alliance between Steve Bannon and Cardinal Raymond Burke in the late 2010s (see Pulella, n.p.).
21Ishiguro, Remains, 28–9.
View also demonstrates vividly how a conspiracist worldview emerges in response to these voids. If conspiracy theories exist to fill an epistemological or political disruption or discontinuity with an idea of sweeping explanatory power, it is noticeable that there is a blank space at this novel’s heart, occupying the place of a migration. Although events are narrated mostly from Etsuko’s reminiscing within her comfortable home counties house, the novel – contrary to Etsuko’s early reflection on the image of her daughter’s dead body that it is “possible to develop an intimacy with the most disturbing of things”\(^\text{22}\) – gradually makes this domestic end-point of her migration itself a profoundly unheimlich space, a vertiginous gulf into which traumatic memories are endlessly projected, where dead children come to figure the unassimilable, unknowable element in migrations and the historical and generational changes in which they are embedded.

Etsuko’s narrative includes two partial accounts of migration(s) from “east” to “west”. In her recollections of the earlier (seemingly early 1950s)\(^\text{23}\) period in Nagasaki, Sachiko (who may be wholly or partly a projection of Etsuko herself) plans an aspirational migration to the United States; these plans are however not secure, and Etsuko herself appears committed to continued family life in Japan. In the 1980s, Etsuko has been resident in the United Kingdom for some time, although her family apparently retained a split ethnic and cultural identity (a split upon which she appears to blame her daughter Keiko’s suicide). Yet the novel never directly narrates either migration, nor explains how one relates to the other; their connection is lost somewhere in the middle of the later twentieth century, and as Caroline Bennett observes, Etsuko “has missed out the largest part of her own story”\(^\text{24}\) reflecting a narrator who, as Doug Battersby says, “solicits suspicious interpretation […] from the opening lines” of the novel.\(^\text{25}\)

Since this migration seems to relate in multiple ways to the death of a child, the narrative void within which it lies becomes both the heart of darkness and the maternal, intimate heart of the novel. (This disturbing combination is figured, with gothic precision, in the metaphor of the child gestating within a mother who walks in the cemetery, an object of anxiety in the Nagasaki narrative\(^\text{26}\) that echoes in the multiple visions of infanticide recurring throughout Etsuko’s thoughts). A plot void, again, as the heart of the narrative’s moral darkness, a precursor to the fate of Remains’ Jewish maids; and here the child, embodiment of a future that cannot be easily assimilated into any reassuring and continuous world following the temporal and ideological ruptures Etsuko has experienced, becomes as abject – and as dangerously abstract, neither at home in Japan nor wholly British – as Jews are perceived to be in Ishiguro’s later novel.

A Pale View presents a series of violent scenes hovering between reality and fantasy, memory and nightmare; and an ambiguous, ultimately irresolvable account of their motivations and connections. The novel gains its compelling effect by associating these liminalities both with globally-significant disasters, including the atomic bombing of Japan, and with the ultimate yet intimate crime of infanticide. The novel is full of dead and threatened children – including Keiko, Etsuko’s “pure Japanese”

\(^{22}\)Ishiguro, A Pale View of Hills, 54.

\(^{23}\)Whilst the Nagasaki timeframe is imprecise, Etsuko arguably implies that it takes place contemporaneously with the Korean War (June 1950–July 1953), and the reconstruction of Nagasaki is underway (11).

\(^{24}\)Bennett, “Cemeteries are no Places for Young People,” 84.

\(^{25}\)Battersby, “Reading Ishiguro Today”, 71.

\(^{26}\)A Pale View, 25.
daughter, who commits suicide as a young woman\textsuperscript{27}; Mariko, at one point discovered lying prone and apparently (but not actually) dead,\textsuperscript{28} and who later perceives Etsuko as threatening her death\textsuperscript{29}; the baby in Tokyo whom Mariko allegedly witnessed being murdered by its mother during the war\textsuperscript{30}; and the children murdered around Nagasaki by an unidentified serial killer.\textsuperscript{31} The dead children merge and multiply in Mariko’s recurring vision of the child-killing woman of Tokyo, and in Etsuko’s own recurring dream about a child being killed.\textsuperscript{32}

Intimate and global crisis, one person’s migration and the whole phenomenon of twentieth-century globalisation under American hegemony, are tightly bound together here. The reader searches – cued by the compulsively recurring images of child killing, associated with migration from the opening summary of Keiko’s suicide – for an explanatory resolution to this unsettling combination of intimate and global violence; and this is the compulsion that, ironically, we share with today’s British or American conspiracist who wonders if the true explanation for migration might be revealed in child abuse and child murder. Compelled to seek for precisely the resolution or revelation that remains denied, Ishiguro’s reader shares this compulsion with those who develop conspiracist narratives in the face of traumatic political and epistemological disruption, and will even likely become haunted by questions that resemble conspiracist paranoia: Was Keiko’s suicide simply caused by social alienation in 1980s Britain, or was Etsuko in some sense complicit in it? Could Etsuko be fleeing child-murders she herself committed in Nagasaki?

Etsuko’s narrative also evokes conflicts around migration in 1980s Britain, playing on the ambiguities of Thatcherism, a conservative project that embraced economic globalisation while restricting immigration. As an East Asian immigrant, Etsuko belongs to a category of migrants that Margaret Thatcher argued must be restricted, given their supposed immutable otherness.\textsuperscript{33} Yet Etsuko’s Japanese origins complicate this status – both because her own memories of Japan include a powerful, if ambivalent, role for the entrepreneurial American dream on which Thatcherism partly drew, and because Japan itself had become associated with capitalist success by the 1980s,\textsuperscript{34} thus potentially confounding Thatcherism’s combination of anti-migration nationalism and neoliberal openness to globalised capital. Etsuko’s migration as narrative void combines with this unspoken but potent context, which hints towards a normative British suspicion of her immigrant narrative and so jointly fuels, alongside the imagery of child-killing, the reader’s desire for an explanation that remains denied.

\textsuperscript{27}The description of Keiko as a “child” here primarily refers to her being viewed entirely from her mother’s perspective, in ways that connect and elide her with other children in the novel. Although Keiko was an adult at the time of her death, when Etsuko dreams, it is not Keiko as her older self but rather a “little girl” (96) that she visualises hanging.

\textsuperscript{28}A Pale View, 46.

\textsuperscript{29}Etsuko’s reassurance, “I’m not going to hurt you” (173) indicates that Mariko is afraid of her, and this fear appears to be connected to an object Etsuko is holding, seemingly a rope, which echoes Etsuko’s own later dreams about a girl hanging from a noose (96), Keiko’s method of suicide (10), and the murder method of the child serial-killer (100).

\textsuperscript{30}A Pale View, 74–5.

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., 100.

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., 55, 96.

\textsuperscript{33}Thatcher’s view of the Vietnamese Boat People and of Hong Kongers (two groups who confronted her government with humanitarian challenges to its restrictionist stance) was that they were fundamentally less suitable for British assimilation than white immigrants. On the Thatcher government’s attitudes towards east Asian immigration, see Partos, Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{34}Brown, “Conservative Government,” 367–9.
The source of Mariko’s childhood trauma, a trauma that produces her own resistance to a planned migration (a resistance that in turn produces Etsuko’s potentially murderous response) is apparently an early witnessing of a mother drowning her child.35 There is a distant echo in this of the antisemitic myths of Jews murdering children by drowning; the myth implies that abject moral alterity is the only explanation for such taboo crimes. The novel’s contexts of post-war ideological reconstruction in conditions of defeat and occupation, and of later migration from “east” to “west”, mean that the source of this otherness is always ambivalent: is it some indelible ethnic essence of the Japanese nation; or, conversely, the corruption of that essence by late modern globalisation; or, instead, the irreparable trauma of exposure to extreme violence, whether atomic or parental? A Pale View compellingly invokes a profound psychic and political need to identify an isolatable cause and origin of modern violence and of migration alike; yet it refuses to satisfy that need and hints, subtly but to accelerating horror, towards the abusive and violent consequences of the very drive to satisfy it. Through the role of migration narratives in the actual or potential deaths of Keiko and Mariko, Ishiguro implies that the quest for resolution may itself be guilty of the violence it seeks to explain, in a brutal psycho-political trap that destroys the future. The deaths of children here signal the violence of the drive for a simple, revelatory and reassuring truth, like the “truth” of Keiko’s essential Japanese-ness that the British tabloids find so satisfying,36 as is emphasised by how all the children in the novel are hedged by conflicting discourses that attempt, in various ways, to repair the temporal rupture created by the war and find new security against the geographic fracturing of Japan’s borders under conditions of occupation, abandoned imperialism, and incipient globalisation.

The importance of voids and inconsistencies in Ishiguro’s narratives, and the reader’s irreparable distance from any resolution of them, has been analysed in terms of memory37 and of philosophical ineffability38; I suggest, though, that they have a particular political significance alongside the repeated demands for characters to narrate their experiences in order to access some material benefit, moral status, or psychosocial consolation. This is particularly pronounced when, as in A Pale View, they coincide with migration and what is today called “migration status”. Such demands may come either in an explicitly brutal form (as with the Boatman who puts Axl and Beatrice, the migrating couple of The Buried Giant, to the test), or in the liberal, heroising, form of Niki’s friend who wants to celebrate the story of Etsuko’s migration.39 Such demands are also behind, of course, the narratives offered by conspiracy theory. As later in Remains, in A Pale View of Hills an apparent domestication of globally-consequential events to the intentions and actions of the narrating individual not only finally refuses the resolutions it at first seems to promise, it also emerges as a severely ethically dubious tendency in its own right.

The anxiety likely produced by reading A Pale View, with its disturbing refusal to decisively explain its protagonist’s migration, thus itself constitutes an ethical intervention, as well as a literary reflection, on the relationship between migration and conspiracist thinking. It is a productive anxiety, because in creating a compulsion and leaving it unsatisfied,

35 A Pale View, 74–5.
36 Ibid., 10.
37 See Teo, Kazuo Ishiguro and Memory.
38 See Sloane, Kazuo Ishiguro’s Gestural Politics, especially 9–11.
39 A Pale View, 89–90; 177.
the compulsion itself is exposed with greater clarity and to uncanny effect. This first Ishiguro novel establishes tropes and themes to which he would persistently return: The startling equivalence *A Pale View* draws between the maternal “heart” (the affective attitudes and memories of a mother towards her children) and the heart of a geopolitical darkness (a source of the traumas of late modernity and of migration) is one of these. So too is the closely-connected parallel obsession with the good “home,” encompassing both family home and national community, in a kind of domestic essentialism. So too again are the distant, uncanny but pervasive echoes of other violent legacies of the earlier twentieth century, including the antisemitism associated with the trope of a child serial killer engaged in a personal conspiracy to kill off the future. Ishiguro’s first novel contained the seeds of his sustained attention towards conspiracist thinking and migration as interlinked phenomena.

4. International crisis and conspiracy: *When We Were Orphans*

By the time Ishiguro came to write his fifth novel, then, he had already established interests that laid the ground for his most explicit and extended engagement with the relationship between migration crisis and conspiracy, *When We Were Orphans*.

Christopher Banks grows up in the early twentieth-century Shanghai International Settlement, son of British parents: a businessman father and a political-activist mother. After their mysterious disappearances, Banks is taken “home” to an unfamiliar England. Years later, now a private detective, he returns to Shanghai to search for his parents, a project that curiously merges into attempting to resolve the conflict now raging there between Japanese and Chinese forces. Banks ultimately fails, though; and he discovers that much of his life has allegedly been the product of an obscene conspiracy: “Uncle” Philip, a figure from his childhood, re-emerges to inform Banks that his mother’s subversive activities led into conflict with local warlord Wang Ku, who then abducted her. She remained as an abused concubine for Wang Ku for years; in return for submission, she extracted financial support for her exiled son, with his education ultimately funded from this grotesque source. Much later, in the 1950s, Banks appears to find his mother in a Hong Kong mental institution, and they have an ambiguous reconciliation, where she never recognises, yet nevertheless reassures, her son.

*Orphans* is, then, a quest narrative structured around a conspiracy, which appears to eventually provide a total—and morally abject—explanation for the protagonist’s position in the world, as well as for his personal migration history. It draws upon, and ironically re-works, canonical literary models of conspiracy and quest narrative, especially Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1861) and more subtly Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). In *Orphans*, conspiracies are earnestly believed, and prompt major decisions; yet they are of dubious truth-value. Even the central conspiracy “revealed” by Uncle Philip has been increasingly critically recognised as not to be taken at face value.

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40Ibid., 44–5; 65–67.
41This trope echoes medieval myths about Jews committing ritual murders of children—given modern, revised revival in, for example, Fritz Lang’s 1931 movie *M*.
44Ringrose, “‘In the End It has to Shatter’,” 173; 177.
Conspiracy theories operate, in this novel, even within the highest levels of influence – as in Banks’ dialogue with Canon Moorly following a heated debate over the recent German invasion of the Rhineland:

“But on the question of how the balance of power might be maintained, how we can contain the violent conflict of aspirations in Europe, on such things I’m afraid I have no large theory as such.”

“No theory? [...] But you do have, shall we say, a special relationship to what is, in truth, the source of all our current anxieties. Oh come, my dear fellow! You know perfectly well to what I’m referring! You know better than anyone the eye of the storm is to be found not in Europe at all, but in the Far East. In Shanghai, to be exact.”

“Shanghai,” I said lamely. “Yes, I suppose … I suppose there are some problems in that city.”

“Problems indeed. And what was once just a local problem has been allowed to fester and grow. To spread its poison over the years ever further across the world, right through our civilisation. But I hardly need remind you of this”.

In this encounter, the conspiracist pleasure in being party to privileged knowledge becomes uncanny and alienating: Moorly is seemingly referring to the opium trade; yet his suggestion that this is the “source of all our current anxieties”, with Germany’s invasion of the Rhineland as the immediate context for the comment, is so extraordinary that it becomes disorientating. He could, alternatively, conceivably be referring to Japanese imperial expansionism – though the terms do not quite fit, as calling the latter a “local problem” seems too small, while conversely claiming it has spread “right through our civilisation” suggests a secretive and pervasive, rather than open and militaristic, threat. Our inability to confidently identify Moorly’s object here actually heightens our attention to its characteristics: this malevolent agency is foreign, powerful, migrating; not merely a political actor, but a moral and viral threat. Here, I suggest, Moorly presents a displaced antisemitism – a conspiracy theory that maintains a formal logic and imagery that clearly evokes antisemitic tropes and narratives, but which has drifted off its original target (the obsession with Shanghai is not obviously compatible with an anti-Jewish mythos) in making the well-established antisemitic metaphors of Jewish influence as poison and virus surreally literalised as opium addiction. This reflects Bauman’s emphasis on antisemitism as a necessary logical category within modernity (148), capable of detaching and reattaching to different phenomena; Ishiguro takes such displacement to a pointed extreme here.

Moorly’s language echoes earlier comments from Sir Cecil Medhurst, who also uses imagery that strongly evokes antisemitism without being quite securely confined to it:

We’ll do what we can. Organise, confer. Get the greatest men from the greatest nations to put their heads together and talk. But there’ll always be evil lurking around the corner for us. Oh yes! They’re busy, even now, even as we speak, busy conspiring to put civilisation to the torch. And they’re clever, oh, devilishly clever. [...] The evil ones are much too cunning for your ordinary decent citizen. They’ll run rings around him, corrupt him [...] That’s why

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46Nevertheless, in the 1930s — when a significant part of Orphans is set — antisemitism could indeed combine with orientalism in lurid fears about “dope”. See Cunningham, British Writers of the Thirties, 283. Antisemitism is referenced in The White Countess, set in Shanghai during the same period.
we’ll need to rely more than ever on the likes of you, my young friend. The few on our side every bit as clever as they are. Who’ll spot their game quickly, destroy the fungus before it takes hold and spreads.\textsuperscript{47}

The impact of this influx of tropes of modern antisemitism is catalysed by the contexts of the novel’s interests in 1930s forms of internationalism, in the rise of Fascism and renewed nationalisms, and in morally-ambivalent international institutions (the scale of which ranges from Mrs Banks’ home, to the League of Nations itself). Medhurst is an internationalist involved in establishing the League\textsuperscript{48}; yet after drinking he slips into rambling paranoia.\textsuperscript{49} In Orphans’ interwar world, as today, anti-globalism and international institutions are in symbiotic relationship with each other.

The uncanny, disorientating displacement of antisemitic forms here suggests their enduring capacity to regenerate in new contexts and new registers, and with new targets. It also exposes their internal psycho-political logic, which repeatedly reduces to finding a single source for international crisis, as indicated in the variants on the heart-of-darkness trope recurring throughout Orphans, particularly when Banks is encouraged to return to Shanghai: A police inspector demands that Banks go “to where the heart of the serpent lies and slay the thing once and for all”,\textsuperscript{50} while Moorly urges him to accept Shanghai as “the real heart of our present crisis”.\textsuperscript{51} These exhortations are accompanied by assertions of the special position of Banks himself, derived from his childhood in Shanghai. The idea that Banks can reveal and resolve the source of a global crisis just as he would unmask a murderer depends on a severely deterministic and intentionalist worldview, implicitly characterising complex, dispersed phenomena as the engineered products of powerful, malicious agents.

As I have previously argued,\textsuperscript{52} the identification of Banks’ supposed insight into this crisis with his Shanghai childhood and his migration “story” makes him a white western saviour ambivalently close to the darkness he is tasked to slay. Again, there are echoes of modern European antisemitism here: Bauman traces how gentile hostility towards and heroisation of Jews share a common insistence on their special, irreducible otherness; the accusation of an essential difference that is valorised yet closely connected to the sinister is similarly levelled at Banks. The constant assertions that Banks must know more than he admits hint at a disturbing nascent paranoia; if Banks has these privileged insights, what does his failure to acknowledge them imply about his own intentions? Banks, then, sometimes seems to teeter, Kurtz-like, on the edge of becoming the source of “our present crisis” rather than civilisation’s saviour from it. Colonel Chamberlain, the man sent to take the young Christopher to England after his parents’ disappearances, alludes to this possibility when he simultaneously remarks that with much more time in Shanghai, Banks would risk “turning into a Chinaman” and so instead, “you’re going to England. You’re going home”,\textsuperscript{53} even though, as the boy recognises, England is “a strange land where I did not know a soul”.\textsuperscript{54} Chamberlain’s words, like their

\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., 43–4.
\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{49}Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{50}Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{51}Ibid., 137–8.
\textsuperscript{52}See Dean, “Ishiguro and the Abandoned Child”.
\textsuperscript{53}Ishiguro, Orphans, 28.
\textsuperscript{54}Ibid..
equivalent more utopian version delivered by Uncle Philip,\textsuperscript{55} indicate the risk of Banks becoming an abstract figure, a citizen of the world and so a citizen of nowhere, much as Jews are accused of being in the antisemitic imaginary disclosed by Lord Darlington. This risk is embodied in Banks’ supposed rediscovery of his childhood home, which similarly teeters between the reassuring affirmation of meaning and its unbearable opposite.

5. Homes and hearts of darkness

Ishiguro’s characters repeatedly seek a form of homecoming, often by a physical or psychological reverse migration, to resolve a personal, ideological, and epistemological loss. Banks returns to Shanghai to attempt to recover both his childhood home and his parents. Although he supposedly does find his home, it is so much changed that the reader might reasonably wonder whether it is in fact correctly identified. I have argued elsewhere\textsuperscript{56} that crucial events of Orphans, including Banks’ eventual reunion with his mother, have a less reliable reality-status than always has been critically recognised, and this unreliability includes Banks’ return to his childhood home: “Obviously […] some vast restructuring had taken place over the years. I could not, for instance, work out at all how the areas through which Morgan and I had just entered related to our old hall”.\textsuperscript{57} Progressing through, Banks “entered various kinds of room, but – for some time at least – saw nothing at all familiar to me”.\textsuperscript{58}

Then finally […] I recognised with a wave of emotion our old “library”. It had been greatly altered: the ceiling was much higher, a wall had been knocked through to make the space L-shaped; and where there had once been double doors through into our dining room, there was now a partition […] But it was unmistakably the same room where as a child I had done much of my homework.\textsuperscript{59}

There are echoes here of when The Unconsoled’s Ryder claims to recognise his childhood home within an anonymous hotel room\textsuperscript{60}; and Banks’ “unmistakable” recognition is contradicted by his own denial of any and every identifying feature. How are we to understand the sense of something very dubious about this claim – which, after all, the owner of the house, Mr Lin, himself affirms, even being willing to surrender ownership to Banks on the basis of his childhood residence there? Conspiracist reading offers one explanation: Perhaps the “agreement” for Banks to recover the house, which he only vaguely claims to recall,\textsuperscript{61} is in a fact a conspiracy – a scam – against him of some kind (Mr Lin’s motivations are obscure, and various entities seem to be scheming to manipulate Banks’ actions in Shanghai, though whether and how much of this is paranoid projection is impossible to determine). Banks’ going along with the proposed repossession of his childhood home, oblivious to the possibility that he is being conspired against, underlines the depth of his desire for a home to counter his abject

\textsuperscript{55}Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{56}Dean, “Ishiguro and the Abandoned Child,” 162–3.
\textsuperscript{57}Orphans, 186.
\textsuperscript{58}Ibid., 190.
\textsuperscript{59}Ibid., 190. This closely echoes Ryder’s similarly perverse assertions in The Unconsoled: “It had been recently re-plastered and repainted, its dimensions had been enlarged, the cornices had been removed, the decorations […] entirely altered. But it was unmistakably the same ceiling” (16).
\textsuperscript{60}Ishiguro, The Unconsoled, 16.
\textsuperscript{61}Orphans, 189.
fear of the contingency, potential insecurity, and ultimate meaninglessness of his migration history.

Banks’ doubtful homecoming is, in fact, an extended parody of the very need to make sense of the world through the deeply desired recovery of the intimate and domestic spaces of childhood, and particularly of the child’s relationship with the mother (a Freudian image of a unified, satisfying world). The global, as well as personal, significance of this compulsion is indicated by how the visit follows Banks’ journey through a Shanghai filled with refugees:

Once we went down a side-street on both sides of which the pavements were filled with huddled figures […] curled up asleep on the ground, squeezed one upon the other, so that there was only just enough space down the middle of the street for traffic to pass. They were of every age – I could see babies asleep in mothers’ arms – and their belongings were all around them; ragged bundles, bird-cages, the occasional wheelbarrow piled high with possessions. I have now grown used to such sights, but on that evening I stared out of the car in dismay. The faces were mostly Chinese, but as we came towards the end of the street, I saw clusters of European children – Russians, I supposed.

“Refugees from north of the canal,” Morgan said blandly, and turned away. For all his being a refugee himself, he appeared to feel no special empathy with his poorer counterparts.62

This passage captures a migration crisis as not only a political, but more immediately an affective and epistemological, challenge. The acute reach of this crisis into intimate, as well as global, sense-making emerges in how the mothers with babies echo Banks’ powerful attachment to the memory of his own mother, and how the piles of domestic possessions offer a grim doppelgänger of the (supposed) childhood home to which he is travelling. When, soon afterwards, Banks arrives there, the home becomes the answer to the migration crisis on the streets, a spatial and affective heart of Banks’ world to counter the void presented by the unaccommodated, unaccounted, uncanny refugees who are at risk of becoming abstractions, as betrayed by the uncertainty over whether the car at one point runs over a refugee or merely a random object.63

Mr Lin insists that Banks must retake possession of the house, suggesting that he will want to restore it to its condition during his childhood;64 both Banks and Mr Lin insist on the restored home as the moral, and putatively geographic, centre of Banks’ world. As benign, if deluded, as this insistence might appear, it is telling that Banks recalls a curiously ambivalent memory of his mother towards the end of his visit to the house, a remembered moment of childhood rage at her refusal to let him win a race, expressing a desire to secure a masculinist success that was necessarily incomplete during childhood.65 This hints that the need for global and intimate security in the home, and the imagined restoration of harmonious identification between the “orphan” and his mother, is a source of aggression as well as anguished fantasy, forcefully seeking a wholeness painfully frustrated even at the time its presence is remembered.

Mr Lin’s house is not the only doppelgänger of the family home that Banks encounters. He has already witnessed a ghoulish, unbearable parallel to this home in the refugees

62Ibid., 182–3.
63Ibid., 183.
64Ibid., 193.
65Ibid., 196.
and their detritus on the street; other such doppelgängers appear later, including within the “Warren” into which Banks ventures when trying to locate his parents:

It was all too easy in such circumstances to forget we were passing through what only several weeks before had been the homes of hundreds of people. In fact, I often had the impression we were moving through not a slum district, but some vast, ruined mansion with endless rooms […] in among the wreckage beneath our feet lay cherished heirlooms, children’s toys, simple but much-loved items of family life.66

The projected “mansion” coming in and out of focus as, in reality, a ruined “slum”, reflects the fast-dissolving mental barrier between Banks’s grandiose self-perception as a heroic returning exile and his imagining of the area’s exiled inhabitants, and between the compulsively, dubiously consoling “home” and the void created by modernity and migration crisis. This soon leads to a total breakdown in Banks’ relationship with reality. Yet years later Banks finally achieves, though in an ironic and bathetic form, the family reunion he sought in Shanghai, by visiting the woman now identified as his mother. Here his anxiety has been replaced by a quietism – though the reconciliation this achieves is just as much a potentially irrational product of psychological desperation as were Banks’ earlier attempts at heroism. The underlying need to recover a form of “home”, imagined as the restoration of a childhood unity with the mother, is consistent throughout Banks’ adult life; only the imperfect substitutes for this “home” change. Ultimately, the exposure of the conspiracy that apparently left Mrs Banks captive and abused for decades does not resolve any global crisis – including the crises of forced migration and associated violence of which it is a microcosm – but turns out to be merely ancillary to Banks’ need to escape the void of potential non-meaning to which the breakdown of his ego ideal, of the mythology around his childhood migration, has exposed him.

This relationship between the home, migration crisis and conspiracy has echoes in one of the literary antecedents of Orphans,68 Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899): Conrad’s narrator, like Banks, observes or intuits conspiracies; and, like Banks, he projects this on to issues of global significance, including the relationship between the “dark” territories penetrated by the colonial project and the national “homes” of that project itself (the novella famously opens with a collapsing of identities between the Congo and the Thames).69 Banks combines in a single protagonist elements of both Marlow and the object of Marlow’s mission, Kurtz. Marlow is obsessed by Kurtz as identified with the heart of a darkness supposedly revealed in the wilderness, but also by the ironic connections between this and his racial, national and intimate home in the imperial city,70 and his projected home with his Intended.71 (The collapse of the latter home into Marlow’s memories of the wilderness echoes through the various precarious, dissolving homes in Orphans.) Heart of Darkness also draws a telling dynamic between

66Ibid., 240–41.
68Conrad, especially Heart of Darkness, is a frequent reference point for Ishiguro scholarship. Alongside connections between Orphans and Heart of Darkness recognised by Bain and Döring, Meghan Marie Hammond compares Remains to Heart of Darkness, (98), while Peter Sloane (136) evokes it as an overarching antecedent for the journeys of Ishiguro’s protagonists.
69Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 5.
70Ibid., 12.
71Ibid., 67.
conspiratorial ideas of world systems and the void of non-meaning that belies such theorising: “The voice was gone. What else had been there? But I am of course aware that the next day the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole”.72 Kurtz’s voice is his ability to supposedly penetrate the underlying reality of the world, whether understood as imperial destiny or simply as “horror”73; and this attributed ability is associated with conspiracist thought: Kurtz comes to believe that his employer, Marlow, and others are all conspiring against him; and he deploys violence accordingly.74 Kurtz is himself conspiratorial, privately planning to “exterminate all the brutes!”75 under a rhetoric of globalising good intentions. Yet Marlow is aware that without Kurtz’s rhetorical energy there is still something left, the “muddy hole” into which his body is dispatched; Kurtz’s grave is the void of non-meaning (into which the newly abstract material of his body is placed) that the conspiracies and theories surrounding him are seeking to erase, in their shared excessive faith in his explanatory significance. Heart of Darkness anticipates twenty-first century conspiratorial thinking, and Ishiguro elaborates upon it in Orphans, in its depiction of the relentless compulsion to seek revelatory meaning to explain a world system that appears chaotic and amoral, via a supposedly heroic and uniquely positioned protagonist who is also ambivalently close to the darkness he claims to attack. Ishiguro updates this to take account of twentieth-century developments such as the rise of modern antisemitism, the Second World War itself, and emerging anxieties over globalisation, projected retrospectively on to the relationship between the Shanghai International Settlement (and Banks’ identification with his childhood there) and its surrounding context.

If the idea of the source of both conspiracy and migration crisis as a retrievable and conquerable heart of a globalised darkness falls away by the end of Orphans, though, the void of terrifying meaninglessness and unrecognisability – the same void that the uncanny collapse of Banks’ sense of home into refugees’ scattered possessions exposes – subtly reveals itself again here. It does so through the uncertainty in the identification of “Diana Banks”, which haunts the “reunion” scene through subtle gestures like the fact that this Diana is known by a different surname, and through the awkward memory of Banks’ previous, transparently deluded reunion with a Japanese soldier he believed to be his childhood friend Akira.76

Though it appears with a different tone, the fetishised memory of the maternal relationship with the child has just as disturbing a relationship with the migration-as-void motif here as it does in A Pale View of Hills.77 The compulsion to secure one’s “home” in the midst of migration crisis is an expression of fear of the void of non-meaning, of displacement without identification, that undergirds the cultural imaginary of migration crisis, producing the dual covers of the desired, maternal home and its doppelgänger, “where the heart of the serpent lies”. Conspiracy theories about migration crisis attempt to configure and affirm the relationships between them; yet such theories fall into irrelevance for the practical demands of Banks’ encounter with the traumatised, displaced migrant he takes to be his mother. However, Ishiguro allows limited if any

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72Ibid., 99.
73Ibid., 98.
74Ibid., 89.
75Ibid., 70.
76Ishiguro, Orphans, 249–77.
77The quest to recover the relationship between mother and child recurs in Ishiguro from both directions; within The Buried Giant’s migrations, Edwin is driven by strange visions of his mother, whilst Beatrice tries to retrieve her dead son.
optimism from their failure; in Banks’ affirmation that this woman must indeed be Diana Banks, the compulsion to recover the true “home” of the self remains an overwhelming, compulsive narratological need.

6. Conclusion: narrative ethics

The relationship between migration crisis and conspiracy constitutes a crucial theme in Ishiguro’s responses to our chaotic, unevenly globalised world. He reflects, interrogates, and – we can say from a contemporary vantage – anticipates the real history of this relationship, which has disturbingly increased in importance for contemporary global politics, with disastrous consequences for those who actually migrate in crisis conditions.

Ishiguro subtly but persistently forces his reader to consider the fundamental motivations behind conspiratorial narratives of migration crisis, and relates them to the material, moral and psychic security of the home. His novels emphasise the need for epistemological and material security; yet this does not mean that gaining such security through fetishising the home (or imagining its abject opposite) is a sustainable or ethical project. In fact, Ishiguro repeatedly implies the contrary.

As noted earlier, when discussing Klara and the Sun, Ishiguro observed his deep anxiety about the basic ethics of fictional narrative in a political context where deeply-satisfying narratives cause real material harm. Ishiguro’s readers could reassure him that his novels have always contained voids and discontinuities that resist the satisfaction of integration into a narrative with flattering explanatory power; these have appeared, amongst other places, in Etsuko’s missing migration story in A Pale View, the unknown fate of the dismissed maids in Remains, and the uncertainty of Banks’ final reunion with his trafficked mother in Orphans. These instances of internal resistance to narrative satisfaction coincide with migrations undertaken in various kinds of crisis. They demand that the migrant’s (or immigrant’s; or refugee’s) presence and voice be accepted in spite of their refusal to assimilate to either a heroic or abject, or indeed any complete, narrative account of their relationship with the condition of the world – the kind of account that conspiracy theories so perfectly provide. Ishiguro’s productive anxiety on this subject has been at work for some time, and its resistance to the lure of narratives that insist on domesticating or abjecting others, on rendering their narratives knowable in order to let them in (or, rather more often, keep them out, beyond our material and epistemological borders) is of real ethical and political importance.

To resist conspiracist narrative, Ishiguro suggests, is to establish, though not to ease, the basic conditions for accommodating both the other and the self without a fantasy of home to cover for our fear of the abject, the unknown and the abstract.

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