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Book Section:
Chambers, Claire Gail orcid.org/0000-0001-8996-4129 and Watkins, Susan (2015) 'Writing Now'. In: Eagleton, Mary and Parker, Emma, (eds.) The History of British Women's Writing, 1970−Present. The History of British Women's Writing . Palgrave Macmillan , London , 245−265.

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Part V
Writing Now

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16
Writing Now

Claire Chambers and Susan Watkins

This chapter considers the preoccupations and forms that characterize British women's writing in the new millennium. We argue that these are, firstly, multiculturalism with its questioning of race, religion, and culture, and its relationship, if any, to terrorism. Secondly, this chapter will address the treatment in fiction of the issue of an ageing population, and the resultant concerns with women's changing roles in relation to employment, fertility, and childcare. Thirdly, an anxiety about climate change and environmental catastrophe manifests itself in a renewed interest in dystopian, post-apocalyptic writing. Finally, we consider the impact of technological change. The fact that publishing faces its greatest upheaval since Johannes Gutenberg's fifteenth-century invention of the printing press is leading to contemporary women's diverse interest in new technologies, including the internet, ebook and digital publishing, and other interactive online formats.

Multiculturalism

This millennium opened with Bhikhu Parekh's ground-breaking multiculturalism report, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (2000), and with the northern riots of 2001, followed by the 7/7 London bombings of 2005. Internationally, the events of 9/11 and subsequent assaults on the Middle East, and Central and South Asia provoked a response from women writers. These authors engage with matters of multiculturalism, race, religion, and terror, and with rising concerns about refugees and asylum seekers. We interpret multiculturalism as at once encompassing the everyday lived experiences of mixed cultures, races, and religions, and as an aspect of Britain's changing policy since the late 1960s towards its immigrant population. Whereas only unashamed racists could object to the first definition, multiculturalism as policy has come under attack, in recent years, from both the political Right and the Left. Multicultural policy in the UK is usually traced back to the 1966 speech of Roy Jenkins, then Labour

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Home Secretary. In this speech, ~~he~~ argues against an assimilatory 'melting pot' model, stating that Britain instead needs immigration to pivot on 'equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'.[1] However, since the Rushdie affair, and ~~gathering pace~~ as 9/11, 7/7, and the rise of so-called Islamic State prompt difficult questions about 'home-grown terrorists', multicultural policy is judged by many to have failed.[2] For example, speaking soon after 7/7, the chairman of the Commission of Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, averred that the policy creates ghettoization, or what he described as the phenomenon of 'sleepwalking to segregation'.[3]

From a feminist perspective, Susan Moller Okin controversially argued, in her important article 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?' (1997), that the radical notion of 'group rights' for minorities within multicultural societies can obfuscate the conservative politics of those who claim to speak on behalf of these minorities. Okin asserts that this often has severe fallout on non-Western women as a minority within a minority whose rights tend to be overlooked: 'group rights are potentially, and in many cases actually, antifeminist'.[4] A dozen years later, Marie Macey reframes Okin's titular question as 'Doing Harm By Doing Good?', in the subtitle of her 2009 monograph *Multiculturalism, Religion and Women*.[5] With a focus on religion, forced marriage, and notions of democracy amongst predominantly Kashmiri populations in Bradford, Macey's conclusions about multiculturalism are similarly pessimistic to Okin's. By contrast, the turn towards postsecularism, particularly in debates surrounding Muslim women and the mainstream's 'rhetoric of salvation' towards them, counters Okin's and Macey's assumption that 'minority ethnic women are generally more vulnerable to oppression and violence than are their Western counterparts' (Macey, p. ix).[6]

Some feminists with heritage in the global south such as Lila Abu-Lughod suggest that Western feminists see themselves as 'saving' their benighted Muslim sisters (pp. 788–9). Abu-Lughod wrote her essay 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?' in 2002 against the backdrop of the war in Afghanistan's initial phase. She takes as her point of departure the toxic but hilarious George W. Bushism 'women of cover', which conflates the politically sensitive American term 'woman of colour' with the issue of modest Muslim dress (pp. 783~~–4~~). By contrast, Abu-Lughod provides a textured reading of the veiling debate. Rather than the universal symbol of oppression that many Americans assume it to be, the burqa is a Pashtun garment and there can be empowerment in it; she quotes the anthropologist Hanna Papanek who describes it as 'portable seclusion' (p. 785). Abu-Lughod disagrees with any enforcement of the wearing of burqas, but observes that many women wear these outfits voluntarily and do not wish to discard them. Abu-Lughod next challenges the speech of George W. Bush's wife,

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Laura, in which she implicitly assumes that Afghan women will automatically be delighted to be rescued by American troops:

> It is deeply problematic to construct the Afghan woman as someone in need of saving. When you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her to something. What violences are entailed in this transformation, and what presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her? ~~(p. 789)~~.

Without endorsing cultural relativism, Abu-Lughod encourages us to think about women who may or may not want rescue, but more importantly need justice.

Rather than focusing on the secular, 'Western', or majoritarian white British responses to the 'problem' of Muslim women, this chapter concentrates on literature produced by contemporary women writers, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Much of this work demonstrates that everyday experiences of mixed culture are being reshaped by those most affected by multiculturalism as political policy: ethnic minority women. Nonetheless, as we have seen, one charge that is frequently levelled against multiculturalism is that it is inimical to women, ~~particularly~~, women from the very minority groups that the policy claims to help. This accusation is often reinforced by reference to minority women's restricted employment, sartorial, and sexual choices.

Many contemporary women writers reflect on or challenge arguments about multiculturalism's imagined and quotidian aspects, and its impact on women. In *Brick Lane* (2003), for example, Monica Ali makes clothing an important motif around which discussion of identity, religion, and culture coalesces. The novel's protagonist, Nazneen, a housewife who becomes a seamstress, has an arranged marriage with an older man, Chanu. Yet Ali does not let Nazneen remain in the apparently automatically oppressive space of her arranged marriage. She moves the character out of her religio-cultural milieu once Nazneen starts to take in sewing and has an affair with the younger British Muslim overseer, Karim. *Brick Lane* met with commercial success and critical plaudits, as well as criticisms that Ali did not have the right to represent the British-Bangladeshi community. Germaine Greer, for example, took Ali to task for her choice of language and ventriloquism of the voice of Nazneen's Bangladeshi sister, Hasina: '[Ali] writes in English and her point of view is, whether she allows herself to impersonate a village Bangladeshi woman or not, British.'[7] However, when Ali wrote about a topic not associated with 'her' group, in the follow-up novel *Alentejo Blue* (2006), set in Portugal, negative reviews ensued.[8] There has also been something of a backlash against her 'girly' novel about Princess Diana, *Untold Story*

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(2011).[9] This may partly be due to the uneven quality of the writing, but it is also because her later novels do not operate 'in an expected way', which, as Ana María Sánchez-Arce argues, is demanded by established notions of ethnic minority 'authenticity'.[10] This seems a curious double bind, whereby a mixed-heritage writer like Ali is damned if she does write about Muslims in Britain and damned if she does not.

Towards the end of 2013, reports emerged that three women aged between 30 and 69 had been held in slavery in South London for approximately three decades.[11] Given the higher profile that human trafficking has had in recent years, it is perhaps unsurprising that a concern with refugees, asylum seekers, and modern forms of slavery is increasingly prominent in contemporary women's fiction. In her somewhat more enthusiastically received third novel, *In the Kitchen* (2009), Ali brings together a large and discrepant cast of characters from the Caribbean, Africa, South Asia, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet bloc, and beyond, who all work in the suggestively named Imperial Hotel in London. From the perspective of her protagonist Gabe Lightfoot, who is one of the novel's few Englishmen and an executive chef, Ali writes:

> Every corner of the earth was here: Hispanic, Asian, African, Baltic and most places in between ... It was touching, really, to watch them all, every race, every colour, every creed.[12]

This passage clearly dramatizes Paul Gilroy's vision of Britain's twenty-first-century 'unkempt, unruly, and unplanned multiculture'.[13] Gabe celebrates the mostly 'convivial' coexistence of very different people within exponentially internationalizing London (p. 105). However, it emerges that the Slavic grill man, Ivan, is in cahoots with the restaurant manager, Gleeson, and housekeeper, Branka, to traffic women. These girls of all nationalities work on menial wages at the hotel, and the gang benefits from the high value of 'human capital' to 'sell ... them like meat ... two dollars a kilo' (p. 364).

The interest in displaced, exploited, and imprisoned peoples continues in the theatre, with plays including Kay Adshead's *The Bogus Woman* (2000), Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo's *Guantanamo: 'Honor Bound to Defend Freedom'* (2004), Sonja Linden's *Crocodile Seeking Refuge* (2005), Christine Bacon's *Rendition Monologues* (2008), Rukhsana Ahmad's *Letting Go* (2008), Natasha Walter's *Motherland* (2008), and Gbemisola Ikumelo's *Next Door* (2010). *Letting Go*, for example, written by British-Pakistani author Rukhsana Ahmad, was part of a Pursued by a Bear Theatre double bill entitled *Footprints in the Sand*, and dealt with the issue of refugees. The play is set in and around Dover beach and its nearby shared housing, detention, and advice centres, 'touchstone' spaces for multiculturalism. All of these impoverished and punitive locations loom large for the African and South Asian asylum seekers who live (and die) in the play. Starkly illustrated is the refugees' lack of human rights, liberty, and housing of a standard 'adequate for ... health'.[14]

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Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo's *Guantanamo* also explores human rights and focuses on what Gilroy describes as 'the critical figure of the person who [can] be killed with impunity', in this case, the Guantanamo Bay detainee (Gilroy, p. 53). The play is based on testimony from so-called enemy combatants including Moazzam Begg and Jamal Al-Harith, their relatives and legal defenders, politicians, and other involved parties, including the brother of one of the almost 3000 people killed in the World Trade Center attacks. Brittain and Slovo unsettle the widespread Western assumption that Afghanistan is backward and lacking in human rights while the West is the model for progress and civil liberties. This is also a point made by the solicitor, Gareth Peirce, in the play:

> The [boys] are three young British lads who are like all our children – they're people who are very familiar, very easy to feel immediately comfortable with. And yet the story they tell is one of terrible stark medieval horror ... [of] being tortured in a prison in Afghanistan, being interrogated with a gun to your head, being transported like animals to a country you don't know where you are, and being treated like animals from start to finish for two years.[15]

Peirce's emphasis here on the 'knowability' and ordinariness of 'the Three' is contrasted with the extraordinary, almost inhuman, treatment they received from the Americans and their allies in Afghanistan and Cuba.

Multicultural women writers often attract controversy. In 2006, the filming of Ali's *Brick Lane* on the 'real' Brick Lane was famously challenged by protesters who disliked the novel's depiction of the Bangladeshi community. The storm surrounding American Sherry Jones's *The Jewel of Medina* (2008), a romantic novel about the Prophet Mohammed's favourite wife Aisha, led to her UK publisher being firebombed.[16] Finally, from outside the issue of Muslim 'offence', a production of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti* ('Dishonour') was cancelled in 2004 by the Birmingham Rep, because Sikh activists were angered by its use of religious iconography.[17] Violence against women was one of its key themes and, in her introduction to the printed version of the play, Bhatti writes of her interest in 'those who are not beacons of multiculturalism, who live with fear and without hope and who thrive through their own versions of anti-social behaviour'.[18] Yet the protests centred on the play's use of sacred texts such as the Guru Granth Sahib and on its sacred setting in a gurdwara, rather than its social criticisms as in the *Brick Lane* dispute.

The *Behzti* furore indicates that artistic–religious controversies in the period following the Rushdie affair have involved not only Muslims. The *Behzti* protests were largely initiated by working-class, British-Punjabi Sikh men, a group often seen as 'pioneers of British multiculturalism'. Perhaps because of perceptions of their model minority status, these angry Sikh

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responses 'failed to evince the usual derision reserved for minority ethnic communities', according to Gurharpal Singh.[19] Shortly after the *Behzti* affair, English PEN members, including Monica Ali, Zadie Smith, Gillian Slovo, and Maggie Gee, lobbied the government against the proposed incitement to religious hatred legislation, arguing that it would dangerously curtail freedom of expression and criticism, and that it would only encourage disputes such as those surrounding the play.[20] Yet Rehana Ahmed and Claire Chambers have argued elsewhere that protests against the cultural products of Ali, Jones, and Bhatti (as well as better-known controversies surrounding male-authored texts such as Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* or the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons) should not be understood in conventional terms such as the limiting of 'free speech' versus 'censorious religion'.[21] Instead, thinking about the unequal access to cultural and economic capital that frequently marks such disputes, and about who has access to and who feels excluded from the texts that are so vigorously debated, opens up more ~~nuanced approaches.~~

Official multicultural policy has always coped inadequately with deeply felt religious difference and, in the 1980s and 1990s, was widely derided for its apparent reliance on 'saris, samosas and steel bands', cultural markers particularly associated with women. After 7/7, however, 'soft' multiculturalism got tough as Tony Blair, then Prime Minister, announced that 'the rules of the game are changing' and suspended civil liberties for terror suspects.[22] In a 2011 speech, David Cameron, having being appointed Prime Minister in 2010, outlined his idea of 'muscular liberalism' in preference to the so-called 'passive tolerance of recent years'. Cameron declared that even non-violent extremists who are opposed to 'British values' (the benchmarks of which are, apparently, the equality of the sexes, liberalism, democracy, and freedom of sexuality) cannot be tolerated: the 'Other', it seems, must be 'civilized' or expelled. Cameron also emphasized 'free speech and intellectual enquiry'.[23] As our discussion of *Brick Lane* and *Behzti* indicates, it is not so easy to reconcile the ethics of representation with the 'right' of art to offend. Ultimately, women's writing post-millennium suggests that more rather than less multiculturalism is needed, if Britain is to inculcate a genuine (if multifarious) sense of citizenship in its diverse populace. As women's apocalyptic writing also suggests, the rise of fundamentalism needs to be countered and challenged by an emphasis on ~~syncretic~~ plural narratives (faith-based and otherwise) that avoid judgement.

Ageing

The literary preoccupation with ageing can be seen as a creative response to statistical realities such as an ageing population in the UK, the tendency (~~particularly~~ amongst middle-class women) to delay the decision to have children, and cuts in welfare and other provision for older people in poverty.

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Resentment of the 'baby-boom' generation for their supposed property wealth, final-salary pension entitlements, free bus passes, and winter fuel payments hides a prosaic reality: older people tend to be poor, and it is often women who do the work of caring for elders, sometimes alongside bringing up baby and working outside the home. British women writers publishing since the millennium suggest a significant generational shift. Whereas women once wrote from the point of view of daughters challenging their mothers – for example Doris Lessing in the *Children of Violence* novels (1952–69) – those daughters have now become the older generation. Recent novels by writers in their fifties, sixties, and beyond, such as Liz Jensen, Michèle Roberts, Alison Fell, and Penelope Lively, demonstrate a transition in perspective: the older woman can now be the subject of the narrative rather than its object, or in some cases she can be both subject *and* object.

The age of 50 is a crux point for the protagonists in Fell's *Tricks of the Light* (2004) and Roberts's *Reader, I Married Him* (2005). Broom, the heroine of Fell's novel, comments that 'her body, which she still intermittently loved, was wise; it seemed to know a lot'.[24] The sense that Broom implicitly trusts her body, if not her culture's valuation of it, is important. Kathleen Woodward argues that women who are actually in midlife feel old before men of the same age. The cult of youth, the negativity surrounding the menopause, and the prominence of conventional narratives of ageing, which tend to embrace what Margaret Morganroth Gullette calls 'decline ideology', all contribute to this.[25] Woodward demands that we 'attend to the articulations of women's experience of the shadow of aging cast by our culture at midlife'.[26] The idea of being 'aged by culture', as Gullette's title claims, is challenged in these two novels, along with the assumption that the age of 50 marks the beginning of decline for women. In both novels, the heroines experience pleasurable sex with new partners, are creatively productive, and come to terms with the loss of previous partners, even if, as Sarah Falcus notes in relation to Roberts's novel, celebrating 'sexual fulfillment and the pleasures of the physical' leads to 'its own version of age denial or effacement'.[27] Lessing's *Love Again* (1996) and the title novella of *The Grandmothers* (2003), and Jenny Diski's *Happily Ever After* (1991) provide further examples of the sexually adventurous or desiring older woman.

What Barbara Frey Waxman refers to as the 'dialogic qualities' of women's writing about ageing – its attempt to provide a multiplicity of voices on the topic – suggests an explicit desire to complicate the binary thinking apparent in the two most popular narratives of ageing: progress/maturation (what she elsewhere terms the 'novel of ripening', or *reifungsroman*), versus decline/downfall.[28] Lively's novel *Family Album* (2010), for instance, ends with Alison and Ingrid, wife and au pair/mistress respectively of Charles, writer and patriarch, setting up home together after his death and starting a business running cookery courses and growing vegetables. Their relationship's alteration from rivalry to partnership suggests not so much decline

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or ripening as a major reassessment of their previous connection with each other, their entire family, and the narrative of ageing itself.

Rather than focusing solely on images of older women in contemporary women's writing, it might be more fruitful to rework Edward Said's idea of 'late style' to refer not merely to the author's own experience of ageing and how that affects late work but to the creative representations of ageing in British women's post-millennial writing.[29] For Said, late style is about 'irresolution and unsynthesized fragmentariness'.[30] However, Gordon McMullan argues that the 'most obvious immediate critical blind spot in studies of late style [is] systematic exclusion of women'.[31] He demonstrates that the absence of discussion of *women's* late style corresponds to an unwillingness to see them as geniuses. In other words, to embody the qualities of late style you have to be, or once have been, a genius. This is, of course, an apparently universal quality that is actually more likely to be ascribed to men than women.

Contrary to the claim that late style is the preserve of male writers, we argue that in the literature of British women writing after the millennium a gendered 'late writing' makes clear the importance in women's lives of connections between the work of caring (whether for elders or children) and the work of writing. This literature also attempts to complicate and challenge conventional narratives of growing old and makes use of multiple perspectives and subject positions on the ageing process. In addition, ageing affects the *form* of many of these narratives. In Jensen's novel *War Crimes for the Home* (2002), the ageing protagonist Gloria gradually confronts her traumatic experiences on the 'home front' in ~~World War Two~~. Through doing so, she starts to understand that time and memory function in non-sequential, simultaneous, sometimes awkward, ways. As she puts it: 'you got in a time muddle. Like forgetting the bloody punchline'.[32] This understanding affects the reader's experience of the novel and generates formal experimentation with ways of presenting time.

In relation to formal experimentation, it is necessary to comment on the recent phenomenon of ageing memoirs. These include Penelope Lively's *Ammonites and Leaping Fish: A Life in Time* (2013) and Diana Athill's *Somewhere Towards the End* (2008). In addition, Jane Miller's *Crazy Age: Thoughts on Being Old* (2010) and Lynne Segal's *Out of Time: The Perils and Pleasures of Ageing* (2014) have interesting hybrid forms, incorporating elements of auto/biography, essay, and political tract. For a novelist like Lively, who has addressed this topic in her fiction, the hybrid form is a product of a new understanding of time generated by ageing. She argues that ageing brings a 'new and disturbing relationship with time ... time has looped back, regressed, it no longer lies ahead, but behind'.[33] In a section on memory, she argues that 'the most effective method of memoir writing seems to be ... to try to reflect the processes of memory itself rather than the artificial plod through time of routine autobiography' (p. 127). The book achieves this by

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using six well-loved objects from Lively's house, as well as the books she has read, to prompt her recollections, and a selection of events (for example the Suez crisis) which pinpoint key historical moments and significant personal memories. She concludes that her method acknowledges that identity is palimpsestic: '[w]e are all of us palimpsests; we carry the past around, it comes surging up whether or not we want it' (p. 174).

Lynne Segal's understanding of identity in old age resembles Lively's. As she puts it, 'the older we are the more we encounter the world through complex layerings of identity'.[34] She also comments on the increasing numbers of memoirs being published, where the connections between the younger and older self are clear and where mourning and loss can be creative rather than solely negative experiences. Segal's magisterial book is partly a polemic calling for the acknowledgement of dependency as key to all forms of identity (rather than solely the aged self). She challenges the privileging of 'independence' in narratives about the self and the body (especially the ageing self and body), arguing that 'differing modes of dependence are essential to the human condition' (p. 35). She also champions the older woman's right to be a desiring subject and questions the prevalence of narratives by older women that confidently protest celibacy as a release from the perils of desire.

In *Somewhere Towards the End*, publisher and writer Athill explores the impact of ageing on her sexuality, mobility, hobbies, attitude to religion, and relationships with others. Written when she was 89, Athill is disarmingly frank about the facts that she still drives a car but no longer has sex. She has gone off reading novels, an activity which provided her living as senior editor at André Deutsch, but now enjoys perusing and reviewing works of non-fiction. Her atheism has gained in stridency rather than becoming weaker as she faces her 'end'. However, whereas she remembers her Christian upbringing with affection for the ethics and stories it taught her, she has no time for Islam. Discussing the 'deep and tangled roots' that attach to the notion that a wife must be faithful to her husband, she observes that these are:

> based not only on a man's need to know himself to be the father of his wife's child, but also on the even deeper, darker feeling that man *owns* woman, God having made her for his convenience. It's hard to imagine the extirpation of that: think of its power in Islam! And woman's anxious clamour for her husband's fidelity springs from the same primitive root: she feels it to be necessary proof of her value.[35]

In the light of Abu-Lughod's comments about saviour discourse, discussed earlier, this throwaway remark about Islam in an otherwise thoughtful and lively memoir reveals Athill's simplistic assumption that Islam has a markedly regressive approach to gender relations.

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Catastrophe and apocalypse

In Jane Miller's *Crazy Age* she admits that she is still drawn, 40 years after her first reading, to Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), where he calls *tick-tock* the ubiquitous attempt to organize both the typical plot and the typical life. Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* is also attracted to what Edward Said referred to as 'late style', arguing that the history of fiction suggests a move from visions of the 'end of days' or apocalypse to an understanding of the course and conclusion of the individual lifespan. Kermode suggests that 'literary fictions changed in the same way – perpetually recurring crises of the person, and the death of that person, took over from myths which purport to relate one's experience to grand beginnings and ends'.[36] In the post-millennial moment, it is perhaps hardly surprising that British women's writing is attracted as much to 'grand beginnings and ends' – maybe even what has been called 'the end of history' – as to more focused narratives of ageing and the end of the individual human life experience.[37]

A large number of millennial British women writers have imagined the end (and sometimes limping survival) of days. These novels often use the science fiction device of extrapolation to create future societies in which some kind of systemic collapse leading to an apocalypse has either taken or is taking place. The causes and symptoms of such destruction are manifold, though all are related to late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century phenomena: the excesses of techno-science, globalization, corporatization, consumerism, and climate change are all implicated. Impending catastrophe can undermine human rights. For instance, Ali Smith in *Girl Meets Boy* (2008) explores the threat that consumerism and branding represent to freedom of speech and the right to love. A character working for the Pure Corporation on a new brand of bottled water remarks that 'water is not a human right. Water is a human need. And that means we can market it. We can sell a need. It's our *human right* to.'[38] Imogen, who by the end of the text transforms from an anorexic, homophobic corporate drone to a more resisting character, refutes this, saying, 'Those words you just used are all in the wrong places' (p. 124).

Some texts focus on changes in accepted ideologies of female embodiment, gender, and sexuality that arise as a consequence of falling birth rates. In a number of recent 'demodystopias', population decline is of particular concern although, in others, fear of population excess leads to repressive measures.[39] For example, in Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2008), as a result of the collapse of civil society and the scarcities attendant upon the consequences of climate change, a repressive 'Authority' runs the UK and insists that all fertile women are fitted with a contraceptive coil. In Jane Rogers's *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* (2011), a catastrophic worldwide population decline and anxieties about climate change lead to a disturbing

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change in conventional gender roles and a return to patriarchal attitudes linking 'nature' with the female body.

Rogers imagines a world where women are either idolized or hated after MDS (Maternal Death Syndrome), a genetically engineered virus supposedly created by terrorists, makes all pregnancies generate a fatal auto-immune Prion disease (akin to CJD) in the pregnant woman. A number of changes in sexual and family conventions occur in response. Jessie Lamb speculates that 'now sexual reproduction was over, all those old commandments against homosexuality were melting away and millions more men were coming out'.[40] Jessie notices that the sexes begin to cluster together in a terrified reaction to MDS and its consequences. This sexual segregation results in the 'Othering' of the 'opposite' sex and an increasing reliance on binary thinking that sees 'boys' and 'girls' as irremediably different; such difference is no longer attractive but to be feared.

Homosociality and homosexuality also increase in Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* (1998), where, as the previously temperate northern climes cool, men and women start to live in all-female and all-male communities (known as 'segging'). As in Rogers's novel, this is a source of anxiety and concern for the male narrator, although his response is satirized. UK politics are affected when the women-only 'Wicca' Party beats the male 'Scientists' in the general election. Both Gee's and Rogers's novels also adumbrate the increase of children-only communities who refuse to live with adults. Lisa, one of the characters in Rogers's novel, argues that adults are sick, usually dependent on alcohol, drugs, or just routine, like 'those horses in the olden days that used to walk round in a circle to turn a mill wheel' (p. 48).

Some texts point to post-human technology – the robot or cyborg – as having the capacity to break down distinctions such as those between nature and science, animal and human, and organic and inorganic matter, in order to transform the body, identity, and sexuality in positive ways.[41] Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) imagines these kinds of changes in attitudes to human and machine bodies. In the first part of the novel, the heroine, Billie, falls in love with a *robo-sapiens* called Spike. Spike refuses to distinguish between the human and the robot. Such a distinction is no longer meaningful in the world of the novel, where the human *and* the *robo-sapiens* body is subject to continual genetic modification and 'enhancement', as a way of avoiding the 'decline narrative' associated with ageing. Despite the ban on inter-species sex, the homo- and *robo-sapiens* desire each other and begin a relationship. The novel strongly suggests that it is the *robo-sapiens* that stands a chance of surviving the apocalypse and that this is not necessarily tragic. Margaret Toye argues that contemporary feminist theory should revisit Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg, particularly in relation to how women SF writers use the cyborg to 'help us to rethink embodiment'.[42] Much of British women's post-millennial apocalyptic writing does this via what Stacey Alaimo refers to as 'transcorporeality', her term

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for the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and non-human natures.[43]

A return to the maternal body, or *mater*, as a source of imagery and narrative structure is also important. Aaron Rosenfeld asserts that conventional post-apocalyptic narratives 'work towards the recovery of patriarchal norms'.[44] Understandably, therefore, they are often preoccupied with father–son relationships. Gee's *The Ice People* is ironic about the father's obsessive focus on his relationship with his son. By contrast, Rogers's novel is concerned in interesting ways with the father–daughter relationship. Jessie's father imprisons her rather than allowing her to become a 'Sleeping Beauty', a young woman who fatally volunteers to incubate embryos vaccinated against MDS. Other writers make use of maternal metaphors that are implicitly associated with the idea of return home. Winterson's *The Stone Gods* positions mother–daughter love and the post-human same-sex desire between Billie and Spike against the discovery that humanity's self-destructive, greedy behaviour in relation to the environment is repeated across time, space, and place. This is also the case in *The Carhullan Army*, in which the protagonist–narrator 'Sister' finds refuge from the Authority in Carhullan, an all-women community in the rural north.

At the end of these novels, the reader senses that humanity's self-destruction is inevitable while, at the same time, bonds between women can still suggest resistance. *The Carhullan Army* implies the failure of the women's uprising against the Authority by using a frame for the text which indicates that Sister's record is that of a prisoner. Nevertheless, the final words of the novel are Sister's: 'I do not recognize the jurisdiction of this government.'[45] Equally, Rogers's *Testament* concludes with Jessie leaving a final message for the child she hopes she is carrying, an ending that could be viewed as either tragic, utopian, or both.

The choices these women make take place in a context where they are uncertain about the validity or effectiveness of their own interventions in the drift towards apocalypse, or the recovery afterwards. Jessie, for instance, comments, in the face of parental opposition to her decision to volunteer for the Sleeping Beauty programme, that 'deciding what I'm going to do, and setting that in motion, is giving me power ... for the first time in my life I feel safe, and in control' (p. 204). Whether to agree with her position, or with her parents' attempts to stop her, is one of the questions the reader has to try to answer. Greg Garrard claims that 'the drama of apocalypse is shaped by a "frame of acceptance" that may be either "comic" or "tragic". The choice of frame will determine the way in which issues of time, agency, authority and crisis are dramatized.'[46] Hence, the individual in the tragic narrative cannot affect its outcome or progress, whereas the comic narrative is open-ended and permits agency and change. Writers like Rogers make judicious use of this distinction, often making it the fulcrum of their texts.

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Both individual life narratives of ageing and 'end-of-world' narratives can be related to Steven Connor's description of the 'contortions introduced by the very notion of representing the end of representation'.[47] It is arguably this idea of creative narrative 'contortion' that interests post-millennium British women writers. At the conclusion of Jensen's *Rapture* (2009), a tsunami destroys the world, but the protagonist reveals that she is expecting a child and looks forward, imagining the hand-to-mouth existence that child will have, as well as looking back to the world as it was before the disaster. In a similar way, Gee's *The Flood* (2005) begins and ends with sections titled 'Before' and 'After' the deluge, which describe human existence in a paradisiacal city. While, in the main body of the text, she imagines the Flood's complete destruction of humanity, the novel paradoxically allows all its characters to survive the Flood and exist in a space/time outside the conventional narrative chronotope.

New technologies

If the end of representation and the rise of extremism generate difficulties that are creatively productive for many women writers, then the same can also be said of the increasing dominance of new technologies. New technologies and online or virtual publication can constitute a positive challenge to supposedly static national boundaries and fixed subject positions in terms of gender, sexuality, class, and age. Narrative structures, which had initially been based on the codex, longhand writing, and sequential reading, were challenged, before 1970, by writers including Christine Brooke-Rose and Eva Figes. Since the millennium, conventional models of authorship and publication have been altered by the collaborative writing of fan fiction and by virtual online communities of writers, as well as by the blog. Suniti Namjoshi's *Building Babel* (1996) was pioneering in its invitation to readers to collaborate by concluding the novel online.[48] Canadian-born Kate Pullinger's 'networked' novel, *Flight Paths* (2005), tells the story of Yacub, an immigrant worker in Dubai whose attempt to stow away on a plane fails when he crashes into a supermarket car park. It includes visuals and music and encourages contributions from readers/viewers.[49] Pullinger's *Inanimate Alice* is a transmedia story designed to unfold over time and on multiple platforms. It uses text, images, music, sound effects, puzzles, and games, inviting the reader to drive the action forward at her own pace and encouraging her to co-create her own version(s) of the story.[50] It is striking that these narratives share a concern in their subject matter with displacement and transnationalism, which suggests that this subject is one that lends itself to an innovative transmedia form.

This connection is also made in Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* (2002), which addresses the legacy of the 1971 ~~civil war~~ in Pakistan but also evinces a concern with remapping the city of Karachi from various perspectives in

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order to challenge the patriarchal–colonial history of conventional mapping. Shamsie juxtaposes the insider's view of the city with the tourist's Lonely Planet perspective. Furthermore, she imagines an interactive internet map where people can click on links to pictures and sound-files, anticipating the creation of Google Earth in 2005. In effect, her attitude to these new technologies and their possibilities for storytelling constructs, as Caroline Herbert argues, 'a dialogue between narrative and non-narrative modes that opens a space for difference and non-identification'.[51] While Shamsie's novel was authored, published, and read in the conventional way, her attempt to create what Herbert refers to as 'lyric maps' suggests connections between new narrative forms, new technologies, and new approaches to nation.

In October 2012, the collaboratively written zombie novel of Naomi Alderman and Margaret Atwood began to appear on Wattpad, a website that allows readers and writers to publish and read stories for free. While the Jewish author Alderman notes an interesting correspondence between the appearance of George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and the Holocaust trial of Adolf Eichmann of 1961, she also argues that '[p]erhaps the zombie represents our society's increasing yearning for immortality, and the increasing necessity therefore to imagine it as horrifying'.[52] Engagement with the non-human, the 'Other', and the inanimate is another appropriate topic (along with transnationalism and displacement) to explore in non-traditional, virtual form, and vice versa.

The question of the extent to which this networked society affects the life of the subaltern, and the subaltern woman in particular, is a theme that preoccupies many of the women writers we discuss here. George P. Landow argues that the predilection of French poststructuralist and deconstructivist theorists for images of webs and networks is indicative of an epistemological shift that results from a widespread recognition of the need to abandon 'conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity'.[53] What Landow does not explore, but is implicit in his choice of words, is that the replacement of hierarchical structures with networks may have an impact on the relationships between hegemonic and subaltern groups.

The assumption that hypertext will automatically lead to experimental, decentred writing is not always borne out by developments in cyberspace. Wattpad illustrates the online writers' unashamed preference for pulpy, plot-driven genre forms including science fiction, fantasy, horror, historical fiction, and chick lit (Wattpad's only categories that might include literary fiction are the mysteriously titled 'Non-Teen Fiction' and 'Spiritual'). Similarly, the most successful novel by a British woman writer in the last five years, E.L. James's 'erotic' *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), which has spawned a whole industry including a branded collection of wine, famously started its life as online fan fiction. It was written in response to Stephenie Mayer's *Twilight* series, and was posted on fanfiction.net and later on James's own website, fiftyshades.com, where it developed a word-of-mouth following.

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Mercilessly satirized as 'S-and-M Cinderella', 'mommy porn', and even '50 Heaves of Puke', no one could accuse this once hypertext-based novel of being experimental or challenging.[54]

Perhaps more interesting are those examples of literary production which use digital and other technologies to make us question the relation between technological and other forms of production and consumption. In an environment increasingly threatened, as we have already discussed in relation to post-apocalyptic writing, by the negative impacts of climate change and a systemic waste of natural resources, the poet and 'inTer-active artist' Maya Chowdry 'explores the juxtaposition and conflicts of new media with the "natural world", utilising text, film, animation, photography and the Web'.[55] Chowdry is Scottish-born, of Indian heritage and resident in Manchester. Her work includes installations, community collaborations, films, poetry disseminated on and through the internet, and a Tumblr blog. She is ~~particularly~~ concerned with the importance of water and impending water scarcity. Her work 'Haiku', a collaboration between herself and another poet, Sarah Hymas, used words from their poetry to produce a haiku grown in cress seeds. Her *Water is Priceless* installation consists of a hydroponic herb garden, 'made from upcycled water bottles, which triggers animations that tell the stories of water, whilst a barcode scanner triggers a webcam that captures the audience's image and refracts it into a mosaic of images of water'.[56] Here we can see Chowdry manipulating new technologies to challenge us to rethink what technology means, and question where our reliance on it has brought us. In combination with the politics of water consumption and production, the question of who has access to new technologies has new resonance.

Other writers who have begun to make use of the creative potential of social networking sites such as Tumblr and Twitter include Caitlin Moran, whose Twitter feed has become an A-level set text on the OCR exam board syllabus alongside Samuel Pepys's diary. The controversy caused by this decision focused on whether those who chose to use this exam board would get into good universities, but in her response Moran argued that English is a living language and that change can only be positive:

> It's an insanity to say that 'English' only happens in 'proper' books and coursework. English is made by the people who use it every day. One report suggested that more than 1.8 billion new words are invented every year – think of 'twerking', 'Bitcoin', 'tbh', 'selfie', 'shamazing', 'trolling' – all made up by people, normal people, just typing and chatting away.[57]

The examples of new word coinages that she mentions were in several instances ('Bitcoin', 'tbh', 'selfie', and 'trolling') created in the digital environment. In some cases, writing in the digital environment encourages new attitudes to authorship: Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,

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for example, has begun blogging as the character Ifemelu from her most recent novel, *Americanah* (2013).[58]

In conclusion, many forms of women's literary production – including those taking place in cyberspace, written in hypertext and collaboratively authored – contest boundaries between nations and between fixed identities. Authorial identities and the identities of different ethnic groups, as well as the boundary between the human/non-human, and that between technological and other forms of production and consumption are questioned. However, such contestation is not an inevitable response within new media writing environments. Just as some 'multicultural' women's writing can enunciate a conservative agenda, so too online interactive fiction expresses a range of political positions. As we inch closer to the third decade of this millennium, we believe that women's interest in the themes of multiculturalism, ageing, and the environment will accelerate still more, fuelled by ever more innovative and digitized forms.

Notes

1. Quoted in Michael Banton, *Ethnic and Racial Consciousness* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 61.
2. Salman Rushdie's depiction, in his 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*, of a character called Mahound (an archaic, derogatory name for the Prophet Mohammed) led to widespread protest in 'the Muslim world' for its apparently blasphemous content. Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa*, or Islamic jurisdictional opinion, on Valentine's Day 1989, calling for capital punishment against Rushdie and his publishers. Rushdie went into hiding that spring and only emerged from concealment in the late 1990s. Several people died in connection with the *fatwa* and it had a tremendous impact on British Muslims' self-perceptions as a distinct community to be defended.
3. Trevor Phillips quoted in 'Britain "Sleepwalking to Segregation"', *Guardian*, 19 September 2005, www.theguardian.com/world/2005/sep/19/race.socialexclusion, accessed 22 October 2014.
4. Susan Moller Okin, 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?', Susan Moller Okin et al., *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 12.
5. Marie Macey, *Multiculturalism, Religion and Women: Doing Harm By Doing Good?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
6. For examples of postsecular approaches, see Rosi Braidotti, 'In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 25:6 (2008), pp. 1–24, and Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?: Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others', *American Anthropologist*, 104:3 (2002), p. 788.
7. Germaine Greer, 'Reality Bites', *Guardian G2*, 24 July 2006, p. 24.
8. For an exemplary negative review, see Natasha Walter, 'Continental Drift', *Guardian Review*, 20 May 2006, p. 16. Her conclusion is that 'you can't help wishing that Monica Ali had chosen to write about somewhere she knew better, or wanted to know better', and that 'somewhere' is taken to be the Bangladeshi milieu of *Brick Lane*.

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9. Tibor Fischer, 'Untold Story by Monica Ali – Review', *Observer*, 3 April 2011, 'The New Review' section, p. 39, www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/03/monica-ali-princess-diana-untold, accessed 17 November 2014. The byline for this review states, '*Monica Ali's* what-if *novel* based on *Princess Di* is classy commercial *fiction* – but a bit too girly for Tibor Fischer'.
10. Ana María Sánchez-Arce, '"Authenticism", or the Authority of Authenticity', *Mosaic*, 40:3 (2007), p. 139.
11. Patrick Butler and Owen Borcourt, 'How Tiny Charity Uncovered Britain's Most Extreme Case of Domestic Slavery', *Guardian*, 22 November 2013, p. 3.
12. Monica Ali, *In the Kitchen* (London: Black Swan, 2009), p. 129.
13. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. x.
14. UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 10 December 1948, 217 A (III), www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3712c.html, accessed 22 November 2013.
15. Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo, *Guantanamo: 'Honor Bound to Defend Freedom'* (London: Oberon, 2004), pp. 51–2. The solicitor Gareth Peirce is renowned for her defence of human rights and campaigns against miscarriages of justice.
16. Suzanne Goldenberg, 'Novel on Prophet's Wife Pulled for Fear of Backlash', *Guardian*, 9 August 2008, p. 18; Jamie Doward and Mark Townsend, 'Terrorism: Firebomb Attack on London Book Publisher', *Observer,* 28 September 2008, p. 9.
17. For a useful survey of *Guardian* reporting of this Sikh cultural flashpoint, see http://arts.guardian.co.uk/behzti. For an academic article which pays close attention to the Sikh context and perspective, see Gurharpal Singh, 'British Multiculturalism and Sikhs', *Sikh Formations*, 1:2 (2005), pp. 157–73.
18. Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, *Behzti* (London: Oberon, 2012), ~~n.p.~~
19. Singh, p. 169.
20. ~~Alistair~~ Niven, Lisa Appignanesi, and signatories, 'Full Text of the Authors' Letter', *Guardian*, 13 January 2005, www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2005/jan/13/immigrationpolicy.politicsandthearts, accessed 22 November 2013.
21. Rehana Ahmed and Claire Chambers, 'Literary Controversies Since the Rushdie Affair', *Huffington Post*, 20 September 2012, www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-claire-chambers/rushdie-muslims-books-controversy_b_1895954.html, accessed 3 April 2015.
22. Tony Blair, 'The Prime Minister's Statement on Anti-Terror Measures', *Guardian*, 5 August 2005, www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/aug/05/uksecurity.terrorism1, accessed 22 November 2013.
23. David Cameron, 'Full Transcript: Speech on Radicalisation and Islamic Extremism (Munich)', *New Statesman,* 5 February 2011, www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/02/terrorism-islam-ideology, accessed 22 November 2013.
24. Alison Fell, *Tricks of the Light* (London: Black Swan, 2004), p. 52.
25. Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 19.
26. Kathleen Woodward, ed., *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. xiii.
27. Sarah Falcus, 'Addressing Age in Michèle Roberts's *Reader, I Married Him*', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 7:1 (2013), p. 32.
28. Barbara Frey Waxman, *To Live in the Center of the Moment: Literary Autobiographies of Aging* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), p. 13; *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Ageing in Contemporary Literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), pp. 1–22.

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29. See Susan Watkins, '"Summoning your youth at will": Memory, Time and Aging in the Work of Penelope Lively, Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies,* 34:2 (2013), pp. 222–44.
30. Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 12.
31. Gordon McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 17.
32. Liz Jensen, *War Crimes for the Home* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 29.
33. Penelope Lively, *Ammonites and Leaping Fish: A Life in Time* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 43.
34. Lynne Segal, *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 4.
35. Diana Athill, *Somewhere Towards the End* (London: Granta, 2008), pp. 21–2.
36. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 35.
37. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
38. Ali Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), p. 124.
39. Andreu Domingo coins this term to describe dystopias relating to demographic change and population concerns. See 'Demodystopias: Prospects of Demographic Hell', *Population and Development Review*, 34:4 (2008), p. 725. Thanks to Sarah King for this reference.
40. Jane Rogers, *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* (Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2011), p. 62.
41. See Susan Watkins, 'Future Shock: Rewriting the Apocalypse in Contemporary Women's Fiction', *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory*, 23:2 (2012), pp. 119–37.
42. Margaret Toye, 'Donna Haraway's Cyborg Touching (Up/On) Luce Irigaray's Ethics and the Interval Between: Poethics as Embodied Writing', *Hypatia*, 27:1 (2012), p. 191.
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48. See Suniti Namjoshi, *The Reader's Text of Building Babel: A Novel with Interactive Hypertext Links* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press), www.spinifexpress.com.au/BabelBuildingSite/, accessed 22 November 2013.
49. Kate Pullinger with Chris Joseph and participants, *Flight Paths: A Networked Novel*, http://flightpaths.net/, accessed 17 November 2013.
50. Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph, *Inanimate Alice*, www.inanimatealice.com/index.html, accessed 22 November 2013.
51. Caroline Herbert, 'Lyric Maps and the Legacies of 1971 in Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing,* 47:2 (2011), p. 171.
52. Naomi Alderman, 'The Meaning of Zombies', *Granta*, 20 November 2011, www.granta.com/New-Writing/The-Meaning-of-Zombies, accessed 17 November 2013.
53. George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 2.
54. Alessandra Stanley, 'Glass Slipper as Fetish', *New York Times,* 2 April 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/books/fifty-shades-of-grey-s-and-m-cinderella.html,

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55. See Chowdry's's website, www.interactiveartist.org/, accessed 2 November 2014.
56. See the documentation of this installation at http://vimeo.com/16482997, accessed 2 November 2014.
57. Caitlin Moran, 'Should My Tweets be on the A-Level Syllabus?', *Times,* 8 May 2014, www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/article4083402.ece, accessed 11 November 2014.
58. See 'The Small Redemptions of Lagos', http://americanahblog.com/, accessed 11 November 2014.

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