

ADAM RIGGIO
ASSIGNMENT: EARTH
ROADS UNTAKEN

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FOREWORD

I should start with some dedications. I want to thank Scott for his kind gesture in packaging and republishing these essays. As well, this writing project was essentially the product of a single conversation about Star Trek I had with the creator of Vaka Rangi. This is a blog that traces a path through all of Star Trek – episode by episode, ancillary product by related cultural influence – that traces something like a utopia. Vaka Rangi is an journey I encourage you to join, the sooner the better. The longer you wait, the more time you'll spend catching up.

But the point of this is Assignment: Earth. That conversation sparked a question, wondering what would have happened if Assignment: Earth had been picked up, and Star Trek disappeared from our culture. I wondered what kind of show it would be. I imagined it as I wanted it to be.

Everyone would create something a little different if they did an exercise like this. What if I could make Assignment: Earth? What would be my epic stories? My casting choices? My narrative ideas? This despite the incredibly unlikely event of any of these ideas making it through production. These questions inspired me to write nine weeks of blog entries. Just a writing exercise that might one day become something more. Edited only slightly from their original form, with a bonus 12th essay. Here's that something more.

- Adam Riggio

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PART ONE

THE BACKDOOR PILOT

24 September 2013

One of the blogs linked at right is *Vaka Rangi*, a long-running project to articulate a complex and innovative reading of the *Star Trek* franchise, affiliating it with the religion/philosophy of ancient Polynesian ocean wayfarers. Yes, it gets complicated. I've counted at least seven meta-textual elements to his criticism already, and we haven't even left the 1960s yet. He's also pointed out the positively retrograde contributions of Gene Roddenberry to *Star Trek: TOS*, who despite creating the franchise in the first place, was utterly terrible at writing or philosophizing for it. His most recent essay was on the second-season finale, "Assignment: Earth." This was a backdoor pilot for the show Roddenberry hoped to develop after *Star Trek's* ignominious cancellation by the end of two years. With his quirky space navy show set to be forgotten in the dustbins of television history, he thought he'd try his hand at spy-fi, the science-fiction-influenced techno-thriller genre that was becoming popular thanks to imports of British programs like *The Avengers*.

"Assignment: Earth," the episode of *Star Trek*, was about a secret agent named Gary Seven, who lived in Apartment 12B at 811 East 68th Street in New York. He worked for an extra-terrestrial organization named Aegis, who as of 1968 had been surreptitiously guiding human history for thousands of years, keeping humanity set to a specific arc of historical development. Their agents, descended from humans kidnapped 4,000 years ago, were inserted into Earth cultures to intervene at specific critical points in geo-political development to keep humanity on the track Aegis set for us.

A brilliant premise already. With our protagonist, we have fascinating themes and character possibilities. Gary Seven is separate from humanity because he was raised separately from Earth cultures, yet his purpose was to preserve humanity and aid its development. He would feel kinship with humanity and care for it, while also being separate from it thanks to his alien origin.

As for his mysterious alien employers Aegis, they introduce questions of the role of authority in cultural development. What makes proper history? What is the purpose of this arc of history Aegis aims to enforce through its interventions via subterfuge? What right do they have to control human history from the outside? What right does humanity have to control its future when we're clearly a short-sighted, violent species that more often causes widespread destruction than the genuine

improvement of human life and Earth more generally? What exactly is an arc of history anyway? And does Aegis have perfect knowledge and control, or can it make mistakes?

These questions, which would animate my imagined television show, are central to utopian thinking, figuring out how to build a better world, and what life in such a world would be. Utopian thinking imagines a perfect ideal according to which a society functions, and so the utopian revolutionary moves society toward articulating this perfection. The problem is that abstract visions of perfection never work in reality: the world is always more complicated than human moral reasoning can imagine. Therefore, utopian thinking that seeks to implement an actual already-planned utopia that would constitute a history-ending paradise is inherently oppressive. It oppresses not only people, but the world itself. Utopia, in this context, is the forced conformity of people to an abstract idea.

These themes would naturally animate *Assignment: Earth*, but they would not have been all there was. The other regulars of the program would have been Roberta Lincoln, Gary's human secretary who was an ordinary Mod youth in 1968 New York; and Isis, Gary's cat who was also a beautiful woman, and possibly also his computer that calculated his necessary interventions. The backdoor pilot episode didn't explain much of anything about Isis' character, nature or motivations. But presumably the show would have.

The problem is, as *Vaka Rangi* points out, that Gene Roddenberry was actually pretty bad at producing quality television. We all know Philip J. Fry spoke the truth when he described *Star Trek: TOS* as 79 episodes, and maybe 20 or so good ones. The best *Star Trek* scripts were the ones that received as little creative input from Roddenberry as possible. His story ideas tended to straight and humourless adventure that reinforced and validated patriarchal and imperial Western values. He was also fantastically sexist. In the *Star Trek* episode "Assignment: Earth," Roberta Lincoln is played by Teri Garr, one of Hollywood's best comic actresses in its 1970s renaissance. Garr refuses to discuss or even watch *Star Trek* today because of the disgusting and degrading treatment she received from Roddenberry on set. He essentially treated her as a set of legs to parade across the screen. Her performance of a role written essentially as a blonde ditz elevated it to a wonderful comedy. But she'd never play the role of Roberta Lincoln again.

Similarly went the actor who played Gary Seven, Robert Lansing, who said from the beginning that he never wanted to take part in a regular television series, and preferred to concentrate on his film career. Roddenberry was such a relative incompetent at producing television

pilots that he cast a lead who had already promised that he would never take part in a television show. In any case, the backdoor pilot was a failure. Instead of a mediocre geopolitical techno-thriller sci-fi hour, we ended up with a history making letter-writing campaign and a third season of *Star Trek*.

But in the imagination at least, there would be more to come.

PART TWO

A LEGEND ALMOST OVER BEFORE IT BEGINS

28 September 2013

The status of headcanon or fanfic is a tricky thing. I don't expect anything to come of this exercise in alternate-universe television writing that I started last week except some entertainment for myself and my readers, and perhaps some stimulation of the philosophical sense organs through reading my elaborate reconstruction of a television show that never existed. I'll never get any rights to contribute to actual *Assignment: Earth* official fiction, which does exist and is read by some humans. But I like the exercise. I write philosophy, and work in universities, but I'm also a fiction writer. And I can play on some days if I want to.

The first problem with *Assignment: Earth* as a concept was Gene Roddenberry. If you want more detailed information on why Gene Roddenberry deserves pretty much none of the praise he's gotten over the last five decades. Just read *Vaka Rangi* to find out what a sexist, socially-conservative man he really was. The second problem with *Assignment: Earth* in real life was that both the lead actors refused to do a full series. Robert Lansing didn't want to work on a regular television series, and Roddenberry treated Teri Garr so disrespectfully on set that she refused to have anything to do with him again.

So my imagined *Assignment: Earth* begins with a radical recasting. Without the stars of the actual episode, I can recast the part with whoever I want, but I want to keep it as realistic for the time period as my imagination will allow. Only actors who would have been the appropriate age in 1970 could join the cast. That actually doesn't limit me very much.

Gary Seven as a character sits at a fascinating place in the *Assignment: Earth* story. Gary is human, but was raised on a faraway world by the Aegis organization, the extra-terrestrial group that has been secretly intervening in the geopolitics of Earth over thousands of years to keep humanity on a strict path of historical development. The details and purpose of that path are known only to the Aegis aliens themselves. Their human charges are no more than servants keeping the plan on track.

Here is a character who is human, and feels great attachment to humanity and Earth. Earth is his ancestral home, and humanity is the species he's responsible for guiding to enlightenment (or so the Aegis would have him believe). Yet he also feels separate from Earth and humanity, because he wasn't raised among them, but in the sterile environment for the children marked to become Aegis officers. He is officially paired with Isis, a shapeshifter whose consciousness is twinned

and simultaneously operating as a computer in his apartment. Gary Seven is raised in a world of logical clarity, and his life's purpose is to shepherd humanity secretly through the steps of a rational plan of historical development. Gene Roddenberry already had an actor in his stable of regulars who would be perfectly suitable for this role. His name was Leonard Nimoy.

Roberta Lincoln, Gary's human secretary, could become so much more than the one-note ditz Roddenberry designed and the two-note comedy ditz Teri Garr turned her into to save her on-set sanity. Roberta becomes Gary's anchor in the human world, an imperfect person with a tangled personal life and complicated family history. During the first season, the main espionage-adventure plots of every three or four episodes would be invaded by Roberta's individual-scale dramas outside the office. They would usually function as comedy interludes, but would gradually involve Gary in normal human relationships.

The question of her casting is important, though. She'd need a comic sensibility, which would work equally well for dramatic moments, because all good comic actors can do drama. She'd also need some practice in action, and have the charisma to hold her own against such an eccentric performance as Nimoy's. Her arc over the first and second seasons would involve her moving from a comic relief position and occasional logistical support to actively helping Gary with his historico-dialectical spy games. She'd be the voice of the ordinary person in the philosophical/historical dialogue that is Gary's life. The only person I can think of for that role is also the best: formerly *Get Smart's* Agent 99, Barbara Feldon.

Isis would be pretty much a blank slate. I'd have her appear human more often than I'd have her appear cat. The cat disguise was pretty much inexplicable in the episode, so I'd have Isis be a cat for espionage purposes, and a human for daily interactions. Although the interaction of Roberta with Isis' cat form could generate some comic moments. Isis would be the representative of Aegis' serious game of manipulating human history. Yet she'd also be able, slowly and with a great deal of hesitation and trepidation, to express genuine affection for her charge Gary, and occasionally even Roberta. Isis may also have secrets from Gary, as she's part of the computer network that calculates what his interventions should be, so has some knowledge of the Aegis plan for human history. Who could embody that steel trustworthiness in a pinch of trouble, but with a veil hiding possibly sinister secrets? Roddenberry already cast her once, and he would again in the real world of *Star Trek: TOS'* third season: Diana Muldaur.

The overall character arc of the first two seasons would see Gary Seven torn between his growing affection and compassion for humanity, and his loyalty to the political-historical program of Aegis. To keep the major plan on track, he would sometimes have to sacrifice individual lives. But his friendship with Roberta would influence him to care as much, and sometimes even more, for ordinary folk than for the master plan.

I picture one episode, perhaps late in the first season. There have been mostly plots of adventure and danger as Gary and Isis, with a little help from the hapless Roberta, have played their spy games with the geopolitics of the human race. A sabotaged nuclear device here, a seed planted in the thoughts of a groundbreaking genetic researcher there. Each episode would have comic moments of Roberta trying to help Gary adjust to life as a human in the early 1970s. But every four episodes or so is an overall comic vehicle where the stakes aren't that high.

So it would be rather shocking to watch the last of these episodes in the second season where Roberta is distracted from her tasks at the office with family troubles. She has an older sister whose husband is beginning to abuse her, and Roberta asks Gary for help protecting her. Stories like this would teach Gary about aspects of human life that escape the structure of the Aegis plan for history, and put him in territory where his character is uncomfortable, where the eccentric super-spy has to adjust himself to function well. Isis would advise Gary with perfect logic that this is an inconsequential act that is utterly unimportant to his mission on Earth, so there is no need for him to interfere in a petty domestic squabble.

Picture a young Nimoy as Gary saying, "It is true that my interference in Roberta's life would have no important effects on the global scale of human history. Her sister will never intersect a critical moment, nor will she have any serious indirect effects on critical moments. Her life is inconsequential. Therefore, just as there is no reason for me to interfere, no harm will be done by my interference! Meanwhile, I will have the chance to do some good, just as I do in a major interference. Except it will be small, virtually unnoticeable but for the few people it immediately affects. A useless good is nonetheless a good. I'll be back this evening, Isis." And he's out the door.

DVD COMMENTARY

WHY I DECIDED THESE POSTS WERE WORTH DOING

29 September 2013

You can probably figure out by now that my imagined *Assignment: Earth* essays are essentially fanfic. I even labelled them as such on the original entries. So you might wonder why – on a blog that so often discusses philosophical reading, writing, and interpretation – a bunch of fanfic started showing up.

There are a lot of causes. But they leave unanswered why I'm writing weekend fanfic. A couple of years ago, I never would have thought of putting these kinds of ideas in a public forum, even one as modest as a blog. I'd write a few comments about "What might have been" on a few of my friends' far more technically-impressive science-fiction blogs. But I'd never really explore the ideas in detail in a forum specifically dedicated to me. Then I learned a few things about how fanfic operates that can actually be useful as a writer.

Most of the stereotypes of fanfic writers is that they're clinically insane. But that isn't how all of it works. When writers whose fiction moves in sci-fi circles are brainstorming ideas or looking to relax, they sometimes play with characters that they already know well from other franchises or worlds. I'll give you one example: Kate Orman, one of the most acclaimed novelists of the Virgin Publishing line of *Doctor Who* from the 1990s, writes fan-fiction. This is a form that's a mark of obsessives, but also works quite well as a practice for storytelling. You take characters that are already established and known, then work out a new story for them. It's precisely what writers-for-hire do when they work for a series that's new to them. They get to know the characters, come up with a plot that's plausible for that world, and get to work. Every brilliant one-off story for a television series is just fanfic until the commission check gets written.

Of course, I'm not writing actual fictional stories or scripts for *Assignment: Earth*. I'm describing plots and narrative developments. The literary form is different, but it also has a high pedigree: the fake encyclopædia. Some of Jorge Borges (*A Universal History of Iniquity*) and Roberto Bolaño's (*Nazi Literature in the Americas*) best and most influential work was in this style. Each book is a collection of false biographies and fictional histories of imagined people. Bolaño's has the most political bite, which I've always enjoyed in an author: he writes an encyclopædia of a loosely connected movement of fascist or fascism-sympathetic authors from North and South (mostly South) America.

My *Assignment: Earth* pastiches will work something like this. The story guide to the production of a television series that never happened. Who knows? Maybe I'll develop it into a fictional television reference guide, spinning original characters and fictionalizations of real people from the American television industry in the early 1970s into a bizarre kind of novel that depicts that strange period in that society through the lens of a television show that almost, but never was.

PART THREE

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE TELEVISION

5 October 2013

The third season of *Assignment: Earth*, Gary and Isis' office/apartment would move from East 68th Street to a two-story brownstone in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn. This would also allow for storylines to cross into neighbouring Bedford-Stuyvesant so domestic episodes can explore issues of racial injustice through Gary Seven's extra-terrestrial perspective. Ostensibly, it would simply be so that Gary could have some extra space in his home without the constant humming presence of his asexual apartment-mate Isis.

I picture a running gag in which Isis forgets that her cover identity is as Gary's sister because she's an asexual shapeshifting cybernetic construct who sometimes doesn't bother to remember what to her are incidental details. This will usually happen in social situations where Isis is mistaken for Gary's wife or girlfriend.

This season would be the first to display a consistent narrative arc throughout the year, where previous seasons merely had a thin movement of character development stretched over adventure-of-the-week stories. Gary would probably be the only character having a genuinely complex arc, what with being the central protagonist navigating the complicated paths of his alien origin and mission, alongside his growing attachment to humans and his developing solidarity with humanity and the Western ideals of freedom (however miserably those ideals are actually articulated in the West).

Roberta Lincoln's arc is one of increasing competency in her work, as she develops into a character that never loses her comic pluck, but becomes increasingly good at the historico-dialectical espionage that working for Gary Seven (and by extension Aegis) entails. She's also becoming better friends with Gary, and possibly developing some romantic tension. I know how dull this is, and my imagined actress, Barbara Feldon, had already gone through this arc on *Get Smart*. But it's a slow romance arc on a very different sort of show. Isis, meanwhile, is learning a begrudging respect for humans, though this is coloured with her own doubts about whether Gary is still fit to carry out his work. At some point during season three, Isis may send a fairly innocent question to Aegis authority that results in serious danger for them all down the road.

The narrative arc of *Assignment: Earth* season three would go

something like this. On each of Gary's missions this season, he would discover a clue that would indicate Aegis' philosophically sinister motives. Aegis doesn't want what's best for humanity, but only for Earth to follow a course of development that conforms to Aegis' philosophical conception of the proper arc of history. Essentially, Aegis is slowly manipulating humanity into a total conformity to their own conception of the culmination of history: a utopia of total cultural uniformity and submission to their logical system. Aegis achieves this by manipulating species over millennia into thinking according to their logic. When their work on Earth is complete, not only would no one want to think differently, but no one can even conceive of how. Once Gary works this out, he's incredibly uncool with it: his time on Earth has taught him the value of individual thought and subversive creativity. His philosophy of life is no longer that of the people who raised him.

The climax of season three comes with this philosophical eureka, but also with a tragedy. Throughout the year, Gary, Roberta, and Isis have become friends with a young man named Johnny Robinson and his family in Bed-Stuy. Gary occasionally uses his extra-terrestrial powers to help Johnny's family, mostly keeping it secret from Isis. The Robinsons have no idea Gary is an alien; they just think of him as an eccentric white guy. But they've run afoul of a local gangster who develops a vendetta against them because the Robinsons refuse to pay him protection money for their general store. Gary has been surreptitiously protecting them from the gangster's sabotage, with the frequency of a B-plot about every two or three episodes. In the second-last appearance of the Robinsons that season, Isis discovers Gary's favours for them, but she no longer cares about his minor acts of unsanctioned interference. Earth has been wearing her down too.

In the third season finale, the gangster finally gets his revenge on the Robinsons, ambushing Johnny in a drive-by and killing him while Gary, Isis and Roberta are involved in dialectical-historical espionage on the other end of the city. They get back to Brooklyn too late to save him.

Gary is psychologically destroyed by the death of his friend. Isis, meanwhile, is the one who takes proper revenge, appearing at the home of the lead gangster and unleashing her full powers as a shapeshifter and an Aegis construct to torture and destroy him. All the violence happens off screen, of course, because this is American network television in 1973. But her last line before we cut to the final commercial break is, "I should have done this a long time ago. And I'm not afraid to interfere anymore."

Gary, Roberta, and Isis appear at Johnny's funeral in the season's coda, but shortly afterward, Gary distracts his friends and disappears.

DVD COMMENTARY

JOHNNY'S DEAD

6 October 2013

What I find particularly interesting thinking about these *Assignment: Earth* exercises is getting my perspective into what was and wasn't possible in the television of the early 1970s in the United States, even though I'm no expert.

Probably the most important aspect of television during the early 1970s for my thinking is the rise of socially progressive TV. Basically, I'm talking about the empire of Norman Lear. Lear was a television producer who designed shows that explored the social and political transformations of the era. *All in the Family* wrung comedy from the collision of the blue-collar conservative past and the more white-collar liberal present. *Sanford and Son* and *The Jeffersons* were two of the first mainstream shows that focussed on the lives of black people. There were many other shows in the Lear fold (credit also due to his creative partners Bud Yorkin and Charlie Hauck), all of which contributed to the immense popularity in the early 1970s of what was called social issues – or socially progressive – television.

All of these shows were sitcoms. The popular dramas of the period were action and crime shows, which rarely engaged with the social issues of the time, and more often than not tended to a reactionary perspective. Science fiction of the period usually settled into this action-TV model, apolitical at best and socially regressive at worst. Then there was the original *Battlestar Galactica*, which was many things in its time, none of which was intelligent. *Vaka Rangi* has done an excellent job so far of showing just how reactionary *Star Trek: TOS* often was, contrary to the mythology that has grown up around the original television show, and transformed the franchise as a whole along progressive utopianism.

My imagined *Assignment: Earth* is a creature that never actually existed in our world of American television in the 1970s. Its stories were in the dangerous New York of the time, a city sliding into a neglect and decline from which it would never recover in quite the same way. *Assignment: Earth* was a socially progressive sci-fi-action television show that explored a society in uncertain transition. The alien eyes of Gary Seven could see the social conflicts of the time from a perspective that would escape the constraints of humanity itself. The concept of the show is to explore the collisions of his character with our world. Gary's missions involve him with the politics of a volatile world. His life involves him with the less politically influential people who are often the victims

of the power games his alien masters play. Their lives are defined by conflicts that Gary doesn't fully understand because Earth isn't where he grew up. These conflicts make him question the wisdom of the missions and orders and plans of the aliens who raised him. Season three is where these more fundamental political conflicts come to the forefront.

PART FOUR

AMERICA'S MOST POPULAR ADVENTURE SHOW

12 October 2013

By the fourth season of the television masterpiece of the early 1970s, *Assignment: Earth*, we would follow up Leonard Nimoy's Emmy win for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series with a special two-hour season premiere. At the centre of this story is whether Leonard Nimoy will even return to the show.

As you will remember from the tragic third season finale last week, after the brutal murder of his friend Johnny Robinson, Nimoy's Gary Seven has disappeared. His mission for the extra-terrestrial manipulators of human history, the Aegis, has gone spinning out of control. No Aegis operative has ever abandoned his mission for any reason short of his own death before. Gary has been missing for the last year, and Isis has spent that time fending off threats from her superiors/creators to punish her for his disappearance. She's promised to find him, even though she knows he doesn't want to be found.

We discover Roberta Lincoln working in a genuinely boring clerical job in Queens. She has tried to move on from her three years working with Gary Seven, but something about booking meetings for an architecture firm just isn't as exciting as historic-dialectical espionage. One evening, she's at her local for a drink to unwind from the ennui when a middle-aged Hispanic man in an impeccable suit begins chatting her up. She's put off at first, but then slightly intrigued, and starting to get into it, when he starts asking questions about her employer, and her former employer. Then she realizes that he's never said his name.

"Louis," he answers. "But my full name is Louis Ten."

This is when Roberta understands that she's being interrogated by an Aegis operative. He's quite charming, but makes no secret that he is prepared to torture, warp and destroy her body and mind if it will lead him to Gary Seven. That's when a black cat appears in the window.

I'm not entirely sure what this fight scene would look like. Maybe some freeze-frames to indicate that Isis has frozen all the non-Aegis people at the bar in time to prevent them from being hurt when she and Louis are throwing energy beams at each other. Either way, Isis rescues Roberta and prevents Louis from killing everyone in the bar to get to her.

Another commenter on the *Vaka Rangi* post that started this whole insane scenario discussed the status of Isis in the original episode as a familiar. The familiar, in traditional European folklore, is a kind of animal companion to a witch, having magical powers that supplement the

witch's, and a subservience to its master. In the original *Star Trek* episode "Assignment: Earth," Isis clearly functions as Gary Seven's familiar, even accompanying him to such ridiculous locations for a cat as a rocket launch tower. When she transforms into humanoid form at the end of the episode, her hair is even made up to resemble cat ears. She acts as a trickster according to Gary's orders. She was originally designed, when Gene Roddenberry was in charge, as a silent female character who is basically a magical cat.

The arc of Isis in my imagined series is quite different from the static familiar we got in that one hour of mediocre television. The science-fiction trope of aliens sufficiently more powerful than us that they become practically indistinguishable from gods has always been fascinated me. *Star Trek* has a long history of dealing with these types of aliens, since some of its very first episodes. One of the many absorbing ideas in Arthur C. Clarke's *2001* series was his conception of the monolith-making aliens: creatures who were so lonely in the universe that they created machines to encourage the development of intelligence around the galaxy. The Aegis are gods that use their powers to bend the histories of intelligent species to their ideals of logic and thought. They have human operatives like Gary Seven and Louis Ten, but these operatives are accompanied by familiars like Isis. Consider her, for this story, as a Clarke-style monolith that can speak. Indeed, one of the suspicious attributes of Louis Ten (aside from threatening one of our leads with violence and starting an otherworldly fight with another) is that is that he has no familiar.

Isis would offer my parallel-universe Diana Muldaur a great challenge for an actor. Isis is a creature defined by her designed purpose: the successful operation of the Aegis plan for human development. In the course of her adventures on the show, she must form friendships with humans in order to live properly in the world. However, she remains separate from them because of her nature as a machine-creature designed by alien engineers. Gary Seven, along with other Leonard Nimoy characters over the years, is defined by his inherent duality, a blended heritage of alien and human. For Isis, simply achieving a blended heritage would be progress in breaking away from her programmatic nature. This would be the arc of her character over the first three years of *Assignment: Earth*. She is first entirely defined by her plot purpose of being Gary's computer, genie, and also his minder to make sure he stays on track. Over the three seasons so far, but especially through season three's storylines based in ordinary struggles, she comes to be defined by no purpose at all. For the first time (that we know of), an Aegis familiar simply lives.

Precisely how many capture-escape sequences occur as Roberta and Isis are on the run from Louis Ten depends on how long it takes to build tension to Gary's inevitable return. The show is such a success at this point that its budget is only limited by the quality of special effects. Quite a chunk of the finale's first hour looks at Isis and Roberta's lives without Gary in it. Isis will have several scenes where she's hounded by communiques from Aegis taking place over the absent year between the last season and the current episode. This would be intercut with some comic scenes showing Roberta's dull life: interacting with her dormative bosses at the architecture firm, going on dates with turds from Staten Island.

But after one more battle with Louis, Isis is dangerously wounded, and they escape to a hole of a motel in New Jersey to recuperate. There, Isis reveals what she's actually been doing for the last year. She actually hasn't been searching for Gary; she's been keeping him hidden from the Aegis. Louis Ten's theatrically violent methods are a tactic the Aegis has never tried before because of their huge amounts of collateral damage, and it suggests that Aegis authority is slipping. Isis has had a homing beacon in her cat's collar for the last year. If she activates it, Gary will come, and Gary is the only person on Earth who can heal her injuries from Louis' weapon. But the beacon will also lead Louis straight to them, and they'll have to hope that Gary arrives first.

Isis finally passes out from her wounds, and Roberta knows she doesn't have long. She goes out into the grassy fields and abandoned industrial districts behind their off-highway motel and activates the homing device.

There are twenty minutes left in our climactic two-hour fourth season premiere of *Assignment: Earth*.

So of course Gary shows up at the motel first. After Roberta sends the distress signal, we see where Gary has been all this time, in a Foto Hut van in New Jersey.¹ He's grown a beard, and looks more like a dropout hippie than ever before. But when he detects the signal, a kind of ESP, he reverts to his old, hyper-logical, determined self. There's one more scene where Isis, believing she could die at any moment, is about to tell Roberta a horrible secret about her role in the Aegis when she loses consciousness. Gary appears and mystically heals her, but she won't wake up until the end of the episode because that would ruin the climax.

Walking around outside the motel, Roberta, in a motormouth style Barbara Feldon will have perfected over the last three years of playing her, rapidly infodumps as much as possible on Gary. After she runs out of breath, he tells her that everything was stated much more clearly in Isis' psychic message, but he appreciates her concern. He also reveals that he's known Louis Ten for a long time. When Louis arrives, the two men

¹ Yes, in case you're wondering, I essentially turned Gary Seven during his wilderness year into Leo from *That 70s Show*. And be fair, as wonderful as Tommy Chong was in that part, wouldn't it have been hilariously weird to have seen Leonard Nimoy in that role too? Basically, I think any role involving an eccentric weirdo on television from 1970 to 2005 would have been amazing if it had been played by Leonard Nimoy.

talk calmly, like old friends, then walk into the fields of the abandoned industrial district.

Naturally, we don't see the fight. Seeing the fight would ruin it. Instead, the camera follows Roberta in the motel room looking after a recovering Isis, then being interrupted by the thunder and lightning of a hurricane appearing outside the motel, which quickly changes to hideously unnatural colours. Green, red, blue and purple lights. Thunder that incorporates horrifying howls that are beyond the capacity of any life form on Earth. When the scene calms down, Gary staggers into the motel room, picks up a still-unconscious Isis, and takes her back to New York in the van.

Roll credits. Welcome back to *Assignment: Earth*.

One of the arcs of *Assignment: Earth* is that, from the first season onward, Gary Seven is going to learn powers that bring him closer to those of his alien masters, the Aegis. Isis assures him that his developing powers are a sign of his growth as an operative, as he progresses beyond the needs of physical technology and becomes able to control the energy weapons and perform the same mathematical calculations as she and the Aegis central computers. It's an old theme in both science fiction and philosophy that the human body as we understand it is limited, but that we have the potential to access higher planes of existence. I personally don't think of these planes as higher, just a different set of abilities which open up different capacities for worldly action. Given some of the problems physical technology have caused humanity when combined with our natural sense of greed and hunger for power, I wouldn't mind a few years of experimentation with psychic powers again. I'd probably regret it.

Season four of *Assignment: Earth*, after the premiere, would see the same adventure plots returning, but with the new twist that the Aegis didn't entirely trust Gary Seven or Isis. Being their only operative on the scene, and the only operative capable of killing the rogue Louis Ten (or did he??), they don't mind his more eccentric methods and his new taste for individuality and variation. They don't mind it, but they don't like it.

I thought of a wonderful way for Aegis to reassure Gary that a return to something like the status quo is possible after the events that caused his own rebellion. When Gary Seven, Roberta Lincoln, and Isis return to the Prospect Heights brownstone that was their base through the third season, they aren't sure what they'll find, whether Louis Ten represented official Aegis, or was another rogue agent operating for a mysterious purpose. At the start of the second episode, they learn the new status quo. On walking up the steps of the brownstone, a familiar face emerges.

Gary immediately and happily welcomes his old friend, Selena Three, played by Nichelle Nichols.

We learn from Selena, who will be a recurring character in season four, that Louis was a rogue agent who had murdered his minder Osiris and disappeared from his own assignment in the USSR to find Gary. He had sent a series of increasingly unhinged messages to their command, growing obsessed with Gary's ability to disappear from the view of Aegis. Gary's new mission, in addition to any historical-dialectic tweaks that become required, is to help Selena discover why Louis Ten went rogue, how he was able to kill Osiris, and what effects his treason might have had on other operatives on Earth. His mission for the first episode in the show's new framework, after shaving his terrible beard, is to find out if the operative Francis Eight, currently attached to the British delegation to the United Nations, is likely to betray Aegis.

Selena Three claps her hands to call her black labrador dog, Loki, and leaves the brownstone, letting them know they'll be seeing her again.

PART FIVE

THE SHOW'S GREATEST VILLAIN

26 October 2013

Only Patrick Troughton could play Francis Eight.

Of course, Francis Eight wouldn't be anything like the Doctor. Troughton is versatile enough to avoid that. What Francis Eight as a character relies on is a lack of trustworthiness, a characterization that makes you suspicious of him all the time. I suppose the character has a smarm more appropriate to Salamander, the villainous dictator double of the Doctor who Troughton also plays in "The Enemy of the World."

But the character would work differently than Salamander as well. After all, I wouldn't want to throw soft pitches to Patrick Troughton, especially after paying him enough money to get him filming in New York television studios for nine episodes this season. Francis has to combine a sense of considerable wisdom and experience with that uncertainty of his moral character. He's slyly charming, like a rogue from a spy show who's retired to become a snide control figure, but who occasionally lets slip a Machiavellian ruthlessness. There should also be a sense that he's personally much older than his appearance. He was a warrior who's become a sage, but who may be a closet gangster.

Naturally, his familiar is a bird, a raven named Morrigan who appears with him at various surreptitious points in the city, delivering him strange signs or mysterious messages. When in human form, Miss Morrigan is a prim Englishwoman dressed entirely in black, and played by Jacqueline Hill, who has a similar sly characterization. She's meant to echo an even more extremely secretive and haughty version of how Isis was in the first season. This is where the progress of the main cast in growing more human and individual will be stark. Isis sees in Morrigan a direction she might have gone if Gary had been a different sort of person, if he were less impulsive and less ethical, which would have made him less likely to form emotional bonds as with the Robinson family in season three. Beyond that, it would be joyous to watch Jacqueline Hill slowly develop an appetite for scenery over her and Troughton's nine appearances in season four.

One might wonder how much influence *Doctor Who* could have on American adventure television at this time. Until the late 1970s, after all, no episodes of *Doctor Who* were broadcast outside Britain beyond a few strange transmissions that would see film prints end up in Hong Kong and Nigeria. The show could never have found an audience in the United States.

However, that didn't stop one of the showrunners from going on vacation to London in the summer between seasons two and three in summer 1972. While there, he caught a strange program Saturday evening that transfixed him with its weirdness. While none of the current stars would be available anytime soon, after receiving a brief history of the show, he had some old prints mailed to Los Angeles for review. He thought Hill gave a brilliant performance in a story called "The Crusade." From the moment he finished "The Power of the Daleks," Troughton was necessary. The film prints were left in a storage space in the studio, and should still be kicking around somewhere.

So what precisely is Francis Eight doing in New York? He and Morrigan are part of the new British delegation to the United Nations, giving Francis direct access to the goings-on of the Security Council and privy to much of the gossip floating around the General Assembly. He's perfectly positioned to spy on and nudge the behaviour of various delegations and governments through a carefully placed word here, an overheard conversation there, and the occasional raven surreptitiously using the photocopier. Aegis authority wants Gary, Roberta, and Isis to see if Francis is using the right nudges, only those the bosses want him to use.

PART SIX

A SHOW WITH EMPATHY AT ITS HEART

2 November 2013

Leonard Nimoy's Gary Seven is the star of the television show *Assignment: Earth*. His character supplies the central arc of the show, the man whose messy involvements with human relationships lead him to rebel against the easy answers and simple plans of his masters. Diana Muldaur's Isis is his familiar, embodying the tension of the mission itself with the sympathetic protagonist Gary. But Barbara Feldon's Roberta Lincoln is the heart of the show in a literal sense.

Roberta is the conscience of *Assignment: Earth*. Gary Seven began to doubt the authority and knowledge of the Aegis when he befriended Roberta. Indeed, it begins when Gary first makes friends among humans, lets them into an intimate circle. Even in the backdoor pilot Gene Roddenberry first produced at the end of the second season of his predecessor program *Star Trek*, Gary only becomes sympathetic, or at least understandable, when he makes friends with Roberta and the crew of the Enterprise. Although the Enterprise would disappear into the depths of obscurity in television history, Roberta Lincoln would become the ethical centre of one of the most revolutionary television shows in American science-fiction.

If I could return to the real world for a moment, this conception of the power of friendship is at the heart of some of the work I'm developing in moral philosophy. Justice, right and good are abstract concepts. In the discipline of philosophy, we treat these as powerful concepts, and they underlie all political activity. Yet they don't have worldly power; these concepts alone can't motivate people to action. Hell, even among philosophers, we're less often driven to action in the name of these concepts as we're driven to arguments over their nature and content. What motivates people to political action is when they see and empathize with an injustice, a wrong, or a harm, that befalls some actual person. The motive of authentic politics (not just jockeying among state and corporate institutions for personal power) is this face-to-face connection. That empathetic connection is the generation of friendship.

Roberta was Gary's first friend, the first time in many, many years that an Aegis operative has truly made a friend on Earth. The empathy and sympathy for the people of Earth that uniquely characterizes Gary among all the operatives began with Roberta. That was the importance of the arc involving the Robinson family in season three. Roberta's friendship had introduced Gary, for a start, to the injustices

suffered by women in the middle class. His friendship with the Robinson family introduced Gary to the injustices and harm done by racism institutionalized in government, culture, and economics. The involvement of Isis in the lives of the Robinson family similarly started friendships that opened her to the everyday economic injustice of racism and gang crime. Some of the season three episodes focussed on the Robinson family would be action-comedies with Isis in the comedic role, stuck getting to know the Robinson family matriarch, Johnny's mother Joelle, while Gary and Roberta did a lot of the action television work. It would be a change of pace, as the role of Roberta in seasons one and two would often be comic relief while Gary and Isis took care of the action work. Joelle would periodically appear around season four, usually approaching Isis first.

Central to *Assignment: Earth*, and to my own conception of effective politics, is the power of friendship to enact social change. Simply getting to know and care for individuals who are different than you, who face different problems in their lives than you, opens you to political action. The abstract concepts of more mainstream moral and political philosophy are tools in our arsenals once our friendships have motivated us to political action.

That's why the third-last episode of *Assignment: Earth's* fourth season features Francis Eight and Morrigan confronting Roberta Lincoln with what she did. They understand the power of what friendship can do, and contrary to suspicions sown throughout the season, they are still loyal to the goals of the Aegis (after a fashion), and will do whatever they think necessary to safeguard their plan for humanity's development. In fact, they are a little too loyal, because their plan threatens to tear the television show *Assignment: Earth* apart. Their goal is to destroy the friendship between Roberta and Gary Seven, severing his sympathetic link with humanity, and allowing him to be the brutally impartial agent that is required. They risk going farther into immorality than any operative has before.

PART SEVEN

CONSPIRACY AND PHILOSOPHY INVADE AMERICAN TELEVISION

9 November 2013

If the four seasons so far of *Assignment: Earth* can be said to have an overall narrative, it's Gary Seven's growing skepticism that the plan for Earth of the aliens who raised and trained him, the Aegis, is the best for its people. I've described the Aegis as understanding the human race to be an insignificant, primitive people who nonetheless have potential, if they can be guided correctly to the right path of development. Their manipulation of human history will take millennia to justify itself. The Aegis are tweaking different events in human history to improve the likelihood that humanity will develop what they consider the highest morality. Precisely in what that consists, we're never entirely sure.

Even Gary, who was raised among them, isn't fully certain of all the principles of the Aegis' highest morality. Isis always finds it difficult to explain, often referring to the value of harmony and reciprocation. Selena Three, Nichelle Nichols' periodic guest character throughout season four, best articulates the moral perspective of the Aegis.

She's mostly appeared this season in plots not directly connected to the shenanigans of Francis Eight at the United Nations. She often gets Gary involved in protecting some new development in computer technology or a discovery in environmental science from threats and hostile actors, because this is an action-adventure show and we need guns and fistfights. As best as Selena can explain, Aegis morality revolves around a kind of total recycling, a society where every waste product is used for the construction of everything else. It's a plural holism, valuing individual experimentations (which is why Gary hasn't had his own work shut down over the last two seasons), but understanding that all parts of a smoothly running system are ultimately replaceable, providing their function to constitute the whole remains in place. The needs of the whole are of an entirely different category than the needs of individuals.

Of course, the Aegis' progress hasn't always been entirely successful. Many of the individualist values that developed in the West run entirely against Aegis moral principles. The same goes for the centralized dictatorships of the other major world powers over the centuries in Asia, which have holist elements, but are too draconian and easily corruptible. Aegis interference in human development is millennia old, and will continue for millennia more.

But the core idea is that the Aegis empire is a moral one; their desire is to

build a network of intelligent races across the galaxy that share values and principles. Gary had come to dislike this idea because, however good he may think the moral principles are, he no longer thinks Aegis has the right to manipulate the history of worlds to encourage them developing those moral principles. He believes in autonomy of the development of worlds. The conflict with Francis Eight works along entirely different lines.

Because Francis is tired of the slow path to success in the Aegis plan, and he doesn't think the idea of an empire of morality alone achieves all that can be achieved. Francis has seen how lofty and noble the moral goals of the Aegis are, and knows this is incompatible with the underhanded methods of secret agents and hidden cultural manipulation they use to achieve them. Francis can't abide by the hypocrisy anymore, and he's convinced his familiar Morrigan that their hypocrisy is likewise intolerable.

At least this is what he says to Gary Seven when they finally confront each other in his office at the United Nations. Francis and Morrigan have failed to manipulate Gary and Roberta into ending their friendship, and they've traced the interference to Francis. When Gary confronts him, Francis explains all this, and ends his speech with the rhetorical flourish that marks him clearly as the villain of the season. Imagine Patrick Troughton and Leonard Nimoy having this conversation:

Francis Eight (*Patrick Troughton*): I couldn't abide the hypocrisy anymore, Gary. I simply could not! I have lived such a long life for the Aegis, and all this time I've been their slave. But I was happy in this slavery. My life was comfortable, my goals assured and guaranteed. You know how good it feels to devote yourself wholeheartedly to a cause that's bigger than you are, almost infinitely bigger. It was like we were working for gods. According to most religions, I suppose we technically are working for gods. Your heart must be so empty living as an apostate.

Gary Seven (*Leonard Nimoy*): It was a happy life. But I still have a happy life. There are other ways to be happy.

Francis: Oh, I'm sure there are. And I'll find my own way to be happy again soon. You see, I couldn't stand the hypocrisy of the Aegis going to so much effort for such a modest goal as creating a shared morality, as if they wanted every intelligent life form in the universe to be their echo. As if that were enough.

Gary: Enough? What do you mean by enough?

Francis: Our masters want a moral empire. But we would have no place

in that moral empire. We're the soldiers, the ones to build the empire. But once the empire is established, our work would be done. We'd be superfluous. Useless. What I do, I do not for us, but for our descendants, those who our masters will discard when the work is done. When the Aegis learn the rules of my empire, we'll never be rejected. Operatives will always be necessary.

Gary: An operative has his task, and his work is done when his task is done. That's what we always learned.

Francis: True empire is a never-ending task, Gary. The Aegis will only truly profit and prosper when they control Earth. An Earth on the same moral level as the Aegis will be their equal. They're building an empire just to give it away. The purpose of an empire is to keep it.

As the full weight of what Francis has just said dawns on Gary, the sky darkens overhead and the penultimate episode of *Assignment: Earth's* fourth season comes to an end. A massive Aegis ship, black, round, covered with angular protrusions and lights of a thousand colours, descends over New York City while Francis Eight laughs maniacally as his dream of a genuine interstellar empire comes to fruition.

PART EIGHT

EVERYTHING ENDS EVENTUALLY

16 November 2013

The fourth season finale of *Assignment: Earth* opens with an action sequence of course, as Gary Seven flees through the twisting corridors of the United Nations. This is a scene of pure chaos, the perfect hook for the beginning of an engrossing episode. We cut rapidly back and forth to Gary trying to find Roberta and Isis in the massive building, then to Isis trying to track down Gary and Roberta, and Roberta generally just trying to get the hell out. This is all while surrounded by thousands of people running wildly through an enormous confusing building doing basically the same thing.

Of course it's Roberta who finds in all that chaos, one actually calm person, the immaculately dressed Louis Ten. After an initial comic scream and a slapstick attempt to put him in a headlock (Did I mention that Roberta's occasional tries at something approaching martial arts generally result in physical comedy? I didn't cast Barbara Feldon for nothing), she flees from him elsewhere in the building. When she escapes at last, she discovers that most of Manhattan is under the shadow of the giant Aegis ship. But the first thing she sees is Gary's old Foto Hut van from his own sabbatical after season three. She looks back to the UN and starts to put the pieces together.

Francis Eight meets with the other leaders of his conspiracy, all Aegis operatives and their familiars, some of the latter in human form and some animal. This is a parade of ethnicities, genders and species (on the part of the familiars at least), so the extent of Francis' cabal is clear. There are operatives from all over the Earth. But the limits of their reach is clear when one conspirator asks in a Nigerian accent, "But have any of them responded to our demands?"

"They'll have to respond after what we've done today!" Francis barks. "They'll realize that this is the only way to succeed in their plan of controlling humanity's morals!" At this point, it's clear to the audience that the Aegis have nothing to do with the plan to invade and conquer Earth militarily. "And we certainly won't have to deal with interference from Gary Seven much longer."² Morrigan, in a quick cut, transforms into a raven, flying through the corridors after him.³

Isis finds Louis in a service elevator on his way to the top floors to find Francis and his gang, dropping in as a cat through a vent in its ceiling. Despite his protests against being "constantly manhandled by Seven's women!" Isis has no problem getting him in a chokehold against the

² Pure cheese, I know.

³ *Assignment: Earth* would never actually have the money to show anything like a morphing sequence on the show, and with the technology of 1974, it would be absolutely dreadful to watch anyway. Whenever a familiar changes, we just cut across the 180° from one form to another.

elevator's wall. She warns Louis that if he deviates from the plan, she'll kill him extremely painfully.

In the Secretary-General's office, Louis meets with Francis Eight. They talk about Gary Seven, who hasn't been seen since the chaos at the start of the episode. They talk about why Gary didn't kill him, and Louis evades the question, shifting the subject to talk about the Aegis, and what their reaction will be. Francis has sent them a detailed and comprehensive argument for the inadequacy of their own plans for moral influence of humanity, that they are only breeding competitors and rivals instead of people subject to their power. Louis and Francis spend several minutes in conversation about the morality of empire and the worth of peoples and planets. Francis speaks of these in entirely material terms. Louis is cagey. While they speak, all the other conspirators and familiars except Morrigan file into the room to intimidate him. Then Louis addresses them, "I'm so happy to see us all here together."

And as Francis fumes with anger, they're transported to another Aegis ship overlooking the planet. We see Roberta and Gary in the Foto Hut van with a CB radio, having sent a signal to Aegis authority. The giant ship has disappeared from the skies of New York. "They have you now, Francis," says Louis, laughing.

Isis the cat, meanwhile, has found Morrigan the raven on the roof of the United Nations, and they transform into humans. Isis confronts Morrigan with the evidence she's been searching for all season, particularly in very tense scenes of confrontation between them, that Morrigan was the one who killed Louis' familiar Osiris. Because Morrigan knew that Osiris would never go along with the plan.

As they're about to fight, we cut to Gary and Roberta in the van where Gary is explaining that Osiris had discovered Francis' conspiracy to turn Aegis into a proper imperial power, and Morrigan had killed him to silence him. Louis was understandably freaked, and ran away, having been declared a fugitive and believing himself to be a suspect in Osiris' death.

"But how do you kill a familiar?" Roberta asks. Gary answers, "With great difficulty." And another firestorm erupts from the roof of the UN.

And up on the ship, an Aegis finally appears to the viewers of *Assignment: Earth*, an enormous feathered quadruped with sharp mandibles ringing its mouth and antennae sprouting from all over its body. Francis sputters in front of his masters, who he has betrayed. He can tell that they didn't accept his arguments, and he demands to know why.

"BECAUSE YOU ACT WITH GREED, WITH PERSONAL DESIRE,

FROM THE INTERESTS OF YOUR OWN SELF. WE ARE NO SELF. WE DO NOT THINK WITH SUCH PETTINESS AS TO DESIRE POSSESSION.”

So the full gurning powers of Patrick Troughton are turned up to the highest intensity as a powerful bright light fills the screen, washing away the closeup on his face. The only sound we can hear is Louis Ten laughing.

We next see Louis knocking on the window of the Foto Hut van with Gary and Roberta still inside. He's carrying a sleeping cat, and says she'll need to rest for a few days, but will be fine soon. As for Morigan, "I think our kitten had a lovely meal of squaw today."

To Roberta's question of what happened to him, Louis explains what happened when he fled Aegis. He started searching for other operatives, and found many of them involved in the conspiracy. When he eventually found Gary, he thought he was part of it too, but when Louis and Gary finally were able to talk in the industrial park's field, Louis realized that Gary had absorbed some much more noble human values. Louis went undercover, Gary having helped fake his death. When Roberta asks him what he'll do now, Louis says that he'd like to start a business running a photograph developing van. But with almost all the Aegis operatives compromised by Francis' imperialist conspiracy, there are only a few of them left on Earth. And none of them have much of a heart for conspiracies anymore. The Aegis plan may really have been destroyed, or at least set back considerably.

PART NINE

THERE WILL BE MORE. THERE IS MORE.

And that was that. For just under two months, I had developed these odd little stories and commentaries, imagining a show that never was, and probably never could have been. I refer to you the archives of *Vaka Rangi* again to show how the creative team of Roddenberry could probably never have come close to producing television like this. But as I'm only limited by my imagination, I can call this the best-case scenario for the strange world where *Assignment: Earth* became the nationwide hit, and *Star Trek* was a curious little avant-garde footnote. As Philip J. Fry never would have said, 55 episodes and maybe 15 good ones.

But would Fry have spoken instead about *Assignment: Earth*? Five years, 105 episodes, probably 40 or so good ones. In our own world, *Star Trek* is a story that can continue indefinitely because they can keep slowly inching their way to new worlds, new planets, new stories to explore. Like *Doctor Who*, its space is expansive, so can include more stories and characters as the franchise develops.

Assignment: Earth would always be the story of Earth, the tensions between humanity, our mysterious would-be controllers the Aegis, and their conflicted operatives. The directionless mass ignorant of the larger forces that fight over its direction, and the poor souls caught in the middle. Gary, Roberta, and Isis looking for happiness. But maybe there could have been a *Next Generation*, a revival of *Assignment: Earth* that picked up in the early 1990s, taking on the political conflicts of its own time. Different shows could develop set in different countries, perhaps even filmed through different companies. Crossovers between countries and continuities! (Imagine the weirdness of Lucy Liu's Watson meeting Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlock.)

We all know *Star Trek* is the story of humanity, exploring our desires, conflicts, and dreams through these stories among the stars. The distance has let that universe tell its radical, critical stories when they appear. And they are more rare than its reputation. I've focussed on the exciting moments of my imagined *Assignment: Earth* because, like most television, there will be good days and bad days. These entries were about the philosophically dense, thematically rich, artfully acted centerpieces, the episodes that will always be remembered. I didn't want to explore the phoned-in scripts, the filler episodes, the weirdly conservative stories, or the awful stereotypes of some unfortunate episodes in the middle of season three. I've thought about writing a fictional *Complete Compendium of Assignment: Earth*. One day, I'll open that Kickstarter. But not yet.

The world of *Assignment: Earth*, the legendary television show of the early 1970s, is not this world. But it is a fascinating world to explore, nonetheless.

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