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## Abstractionist Aesthetics

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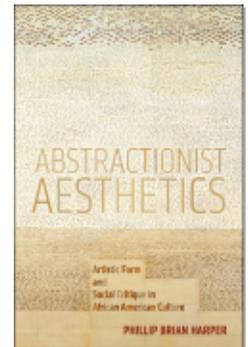
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## Introduction

### Against Positive Images

If art reflects life it does so with special mirrors.

—BERTOLT BRECHT

*Abstractionist Aesthetics* is a theoretical polemic concerned with the critical potential of African American expressive culture. It is premised on the widely accepted (if debatable) notion that such culture consists in works and practices that both originate among and in some way represent the experiences of African American people while also illuminating and appraising the racial-political context in which those experiences occur.<sup>1</sup> Conceived in this way, African American culture effectively *compels* polemic, in that it forces the perennially contestable question of how best to make a racial-political stand; and indeed, this book is preceded by a succession of similarly argumentative tracts issued over the past century or so. For the most part, these call for a socially engaged black art whose manifestation as such, they contend, necessitates an organic connection between the individual artist and the “community.” Alternatively—sometimes simultaneously—they repudiate such prescriptions, enjoining black artists to pursue whatever aesthetic paths they choose, heedless of “pleas[ing] either white people or black,” itself a political move.<sup>2</sup> The urgency of these competing directives has of course varied with the historical winds, but their mere existence indicates the peculiar effects of African American

culture's having been conceived at all as a political project, a primary one of which is that any given work—not to mention the artist who produced it—is always liable to be deemed not properly black.

Such judgment lies far afield of my interests here, and I am by the same token much less concerned with dictating modes of aesthetic practice (though I do indeed *champion* one that I believe has gone underappreciated) than with influencing current norms of aesthetic reception. For all that these norms presuppose the social-critical function of African American culture just sketched, as I believe they unquestionably do, they also generally assume that that function is best served by a type of realist aesthetics that casts racial blackness in overridingly “positive” terms.<sup>3</sup> Superficially connoting modes of depiction that are properly race-proud and -affirmative, such positivity more fundamentally entails an empiricist demand that racialized representations perceptibly mirror real-world phenomena, however favorable—or not—any particular portrayal may seem.<sup>4</sup> While there are arguably good historical reasons for its prevalence, to the extent that this positivist ethic restricts the scope of artistic practice, the realism that it underwrites emerges as a central problem within African American aesthetics. This book accordingly argues for the displacement of realism as a primary stake in African American cultural engagement, and asserts the critical utility of an alternative aesthetic mode that it characterizes as *abstractionism*.

Abstractionism as theorized in this volume entails the resolute awareness that even the most realistic representation is precisely a *representation*, and that as such it necessarily exists at a distance from the social reality it is conventionally understood to reflect. In other words, abstractionist aesthetics crucially recognizes that any artwork whatsoever is definitionally *abstract* in relation to the world in which it emerges, regardless of whether or not it features the nonreferentiality typically understood to constitute aesthetic *abstraction* per se. An *abstractionist artwork*, by extension, is one that *emphasizes* its own distance from reality by calling attention to its constructed or artificial character—even if it also enacts real-world reference—rather than striving to dissemble that constructedness in the service of the maximum verisimilitude so highly prized within the real-

ist framework just sketched. In thus disrupting the easy correspondence between itself and its evident referent, the abstractionist work invites us to question the “naturalness” not only of the aesthetic representation but also of the social facts to which it alludes, thereby opening them to active and potentially salutary revision.



This proposition that art might operate in a denaturalizing and reformative fashion is by no means novel. Indeed, it recapitulates almost exactly Bertolt Brecht’s claims regarding the function of the *alienation effect* within what Brecht conceived as “non-Aristotelian drama.”<sup>5</sup> Substantially coinciding with—and arguably directly deriving from—Victor Shklovsky’s seemingly less political concept of literary *defamiliarization*, theatrical alienation effect, according to Brecht, entails “taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labelling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of this ‘effect’ is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view.”<sup>6</sup> Above all, Brecht is concerned that social facts be recognized as specifically *historical* phenomena that are accordingly subject to progressive change, and he therefore argues against the attempt to generate audience empathy that he maintains characterizes conventional “dramatic theatre” as against non-Aristotelian “epic theatre,” since empathy implicates inertial passivity rather than engendering active social engagement.<sup>7</sup> He clarifies this point by positing that the spectator of dramatic theater typically responds to the presentation of a socially subjugated character by thinking, “Yes, I have felt like that too — Just like me — It’s only natural — It’ll never change — The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable”; the spectator of non-Aristotelian “epic theatre,” on the other hand, says, “I’d never have thought it — That’s not the way — That’s extraordinary, hardly believable — It’s got to stop — The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary.”<sup>8</sup> Brecht thus affirms the social-revisionary potential of theatrical alienation while also tracing the latter specifically to the theatrical work’s emphatic assertion of its own fictive character—the

*abstractionism* I described earlier: as he puts it in his discussion of non-Aristotelian theater's dissolution of the "fourth wall," "the audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place" but instead must recognize both the contrived quality of the production and the centrality of that quality to the performance's social-critical effect.<sup>9</sup>

The mere assertion of a theoretical claim does not, however, equal the universal acknowledgment of its validity, and African Americanist cultural commentary has not betrayed a thoroughgoing commitment to the line of Brechtian thought just outlined.<sup>10</sup> There is arguably very good reason for this, inasmuch as the principle of abstraction that necessarily founds *abstractionism* has routinely been marshaled *against* black persons and populations within the American context (as throughout the West), in both cultural and social-political terms. With respect to the former, abstraction has largely comprised a mode of genericization whereby the specificity of African American historical experience—and that of other minoritized populations too, for that matter—has been precluded from the representational field, and its value and significance thereby tacitly rejected. Social-politically, of course, by the late eighteenth century abstraction constituted the cognitive mechanism by which persons of African descent were conceived as enslaveable entities and commodity objects, and yet paradoxically denied the condition of disinterested personhood on which U.S.-governmental recognition has been based. While I elaborate the foregoing points—and thus explain what strikes me as a wholly comprehensible resistance to aesthetic and cognitive abstraction within African American culture—at full length in chapter 1 of this book, I am clearly much more concerned with discovering how and in what contexts of African American cultural production aesthetic abstractionism might be most profitably forwarded at the present juncture, since I remain convinced that it *can* in fact have the progressive critical effect that I have indicated.



That I am not entirely alone in this conviction was demonstrated by a cultural controversy that preoccupied residents of Indianapolis for the better



1 Bruno Schmitz, State Soldiers and Sailors Monument, 1888–1902 (detail of west face, sculpted by Rudolph Schwarz). Indiana limestone, total height, 284 ft., 6 in. Monument Circle, Indianapolis, IN.

part of two years before finally culminating in December 2011. At issue was the design for a proposed public sculpture that adopted as its central element the shirtless and unshod black masculine figure featured in that city's 1902 State Soldiers and Sailors Monument, where, seated at the feet of a personified Liberty and holding aloft a loosed chain and broken shackle, it evokes the slave's emancipation (fig. 1). In his rendering of the envisioned



2 Fred Wilson, rendering for *E Pluribus Unum*, 2011. Copyright © Fred Wilson. Photograph courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery.

piece, *E Pluribus Unum*, which was commissioned by the Central Indiana Community Foundation (CICF) for installation along the newly developed Indianapolis Cultural Trail, the New York City–based conceptual artist Fred Wilson replaced the chain and shackle with a flag of his own design meant to represent the contemporary African diaspora, and hence to signal blacks’ social and political progress since the nineteenth century. More than this, though, Wilson emphasized his intention to reorient the sculptural figure so that “he is no longer looking up at someone”: “I’m shifting him so that he’s moving forward . . . in . . . a more advancing position, a more active position” (fig. 2).<sup>11</sup> Not only would the resultant piece depict an “upright, empowered, twenty-first-century person of color,” as Wilson was reported to have said, but by at once recalling and revising the figure that appears in the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, the new work would elicit crucial questions on the part of its viewers—to wit: if the 1902 sculpture is “the only symbol for African American Indianapolis” among

the numerous public memorials on display in the locality (as none of the others represented any black people at all), then “what does that say about the city at that moment” when the monument was erected, “and what does that say about the city at this moment if it still is the only image?”—“why are there no other images of African Americans in monument form?”<sup>12</sup> Ideally, Wilson intimated, his work would indeed spur the creation of additional African American memorial sculptures, which would most properly be produced by people who, unlike himself, were members of the Indianapolis community (“When I do projects,” he told an Indianapolis audience, “it’s about making . . . questions visible, for *others* to answer—especially since I’m an outsider”)—and which, “if they were to be done, . . . should be done at the Statehouse and other locations,” Wilson having rejected the monument-rich capitol grounds as a site for *E Pluribus Unum* itself, since as he insisted, his own work was “not a monument.”<sup>13</sup>

By this account, it is easy to understand Wilson’s project in terms of the aesthetic abstractionism described earlier. For one thing, the sequence of critical reflection and motivated action that for Brecht arose from theatrical alienation is exactly what Wilson suggested would ensue among viewers of *E Pluribus Unum*, with the initial inquiry as to why Indianapolis boasts “no other images of African Americans in monument form” eventuating precisely in the creation of additional such images. Further, though, Wilson envisioned those responses as being precipitated specifically by his sculpture’s metarepresentational quality—the fact that it would reproduce and thus directly reference another, preexistent artwork rather than immediately lived experience, and indeed would be able to comment critically on the significance of that earlier work only because its featured human figure had itself been “abstracted” from the context provided by the original piece.<sup>14</sup> It is in this insistent distancing of itself from the real-world phenomena that it would have just as insistently (if indirectly) referenced that Wilson’s proposed work exemplified—and indeed epitomized—the abstractionism I described earlier.

In the event, however, *E Pluribus Unum*’s aesthetic abstractionism did not fully “take” among members of Indianapolis’s African American community, many of whom contended that its appropriated sculptural figure

constituted a “negative” black image simply by evoking blacks’ past enslavement, and thus urged that the project be canceled.<sup>15</sup> Convinced that Wilson’s comparatively “upright” rendering was still not upright *enough*, in any sense of the word (one group called for a figure that would be not only more fully *erect* but also more fully *clothed*, “like all of the scores of images around the city that depict men who are empowered”), these critics also put the lie to Wilson’s suggestion that viewers of his sculpture would inevitably regard it as primarily a comment on the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, given what he insisted would have to be its close physical proximity to the latter.<sup>16</sup> They were, after all, completely aware that *E Pluribus Unum*’s figural element was lifted from the earlier work, and yet they saw it as simply a reduplication of the Monument’s imagery, rather than as a critique of the circumstances that imagery connotes. Hence the group Citizens Against Slave Image (CASI) vigorously resisted “the plans to recreate *another slave monument* as our city’s only testimony to African American life and achievement,” arguing that “one slave image in Indianapolis’ public space is enough.”<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, after a series of community meetings in which 90 percent of the attendees voiced opposition to Wilson’s design, the boards of the CICF and the Indianapolis Cultural Trail voted unanimously to terminate the project.<sup>18</sup> Of greater analytical consequence than this outcome, however, is the fact that the sculpture’s opponents consistently disregarded a feature of the work that Wilson himself regularly emphasized—namely, the black-diasporan flag—in favor of the human figure whose ambiguous significance thereby became the flashpoint for the controversy.<sup>19</sup> No less than that figure’s relatively erect posture, the flag too was meant to signal blacks’ putative advancement since the demise of chattel slavery (via its clear allusions to contemporary black-national sovereignty), and yet it goes entirely unmentioned in the recorded comments of the sculpture’s critics. The reason for this is not especially mysterious, and if the *E Pluribus Unum* controversy itself suggests the relevance of this study even at a juncture when one had thought that worry over positive black images was a thing of the past, the fate of Wilson’s flag within the debate hints at the limitations of realist aesthetics that I intimated earlier, especially as they obtain within

visual representation. The problem, simply put, is that however powerful *E Pluribus Unum*'s techniques of abstractionist distantiation, they are no match for the figural verisimilitude that the sculpture would also have featured, having adopted it wholesale from the Soldiers and Sailors Monument itself. Of course, the primary purpose of that adoption, as Wilson made clear, was for *E Pluribus Unum* to recall and comment on the import of that very monument, but because by way of doing so it would have also minutely approximated the form of a real-life slavery-era black man, its reference in this regard inevitably emerged as the focal point of the piece, wholly subordinating both the allusion to the monument and the symbolism of the flag. That done, the figure immediately became subject to the assessment of moral propriety that I have suggested is so often elicited by realist racial depiction, evident in critics' determination that it constituted a "negative" black image. At the same time, though, if such assessment is completely irrelevant—and, indeed, antithetical—to *E Pluribus Unum*'s critical objective, the figural verisimilitude that precipitated it is also the chief means by which the sculpture would have registered its own racial-political investment—and thus *furthered* its critical objective—as the blackness whose significance the work was meant to interrogate is indicated much more forcefully by the physiognomy and deportment of the figure than by the complex iconography of the flag, however ingenious Wilson's design for the latter.<sup>20</sup>



*E Pluribus Unum* thus exemplifies a conundrum that must necessarily be negotiated by any artwork that aspires to effective African Americanist abstractionism—specifically, how can a work clearly enough ground itself in the real-world racial order as to register as *black* while at the same time clearly enough *dissociating* itself from lived reality as to register as productively *abstractionist*? In addition to reviewing African Americans' fraught history with abstractive principles, chapter 1 argues that works of visual art are especially ill equipped to resolve this dilemma, partly because the visual realm is a classic focus of worry over proper—and hence properly *realist*—black-racial representation, and partly because visual abstractionism is

in any case especially susceptible to realist recuperation. The chapter's primary exhibit in this regard is a controversy that predated the *E Pluribus Unum* debate by a dozen years or so, in which large-scale silhouette installations by Kara Walker were likewise condemned for presenting "negative" depictions of black people. In my own estimation, Walker's imagery is so clearly abstractionist (which is to say emphatically stylized and thus indisputably nonrealist) as to make questions about its "negativity" wholly irrelevant. If that abstractionism nevertheless failed to impress itself on Walker's critical viewers (as it quite evidently did), this, I contend, indicates not only continued African American concern with appropriate black-racial portrayal but also the degree to which abstractionist visual representation per se had become wholly naturalized—and hence largely imperceptible to spectators—by the last decades of the twentieth century. In other words, no less than the social facts whose revisability we seek to disclose, aesthetic abstractionism's critical efficacy is itself a historical phenomenon that does not necessarily obtain in every time and circumstance.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, I argue, precisely because Western viewers have by this point assimilated all manner of cognitively discrepant—or *abstractionist*—visual display to the norms of everyday—or *realist*—perception, visual art is today one of the *least* likely contexts in which abstractionism might gain the critical traction it is theoretically capable of achieving.

If we thus disallow contemporary visual representation as a domain in which abstractionist aesthetics can be expected to operate effectively, we might on the contrary imagine that African American music offers an optimum site for abstractionism-driven critique. Music is, after all, held to constitute the quintessence of black culture while at the same time being generally conceived as the epitome of aesthetic abstraction, since it appears fundamentally nonreferential and hence wholly "autonomous" in relation to the world beyond itself.<sup>22</sup> Of course, its presumed supreme abstractness relative to the social surround may well *preclude* music from attaining to an abstractionist function, insofar as the latter depends on an artwork's clearly evoking lived social reality even as it registers its unbridgeable distance from that reality. On the other hand, though, for music to be understood as "African American" to begin with is for it *necessar-*

ily to be understood as in some way signifying social phenomena—most specifically, black racial identity and its complex import—and thus for it not to be received as *abstract* at all. That signification is accomplished not through explicit *reference* (for music as such is indeed resolutely nonreferential) but through what we might call genetic *expression*, in that any given musical instance attains to “blackness” specifically by featuring characteristics of an indigenous African musical practice whose “tradition” it is understood to continue. It is thus by being conceived as an element in a historical sequence that music manifests as African American—a fact that explains the seeming paradox whereby music can be understood as at once fundamentally abstract (and so wholly unimplicated in social signification) and yet eminently admmissive of racial blackness (and thereby fully *liable* to social signification), inasmuch as when we apprehend music as *black* we are apprehending it not in its phenomenal modality *qua* music but in its specifically *historical-narrative* function.

This point is the burden of chapter 2, and in addition to rendering music marginal to this study’s primary concerns (notwithstanding its accustomed centrality within African Americanist discussion), it sets the stage for the book’s ultimate argument. Having been established as a presentational mode whose cognitive import contrasts with that of aesthetic abstraction, *narrative* accordingly emerges as a prime context in which abstractionist alienation effect might register with optimum force. This emergence in turn suggests that *literature* is the domain in which abstractionism can gain maximum critical purchase at present, given that it comprises the *locus classicus* for narrative function. This is to say not only that literature is a principal means for offering up the stories that we take to constitute narrative “content” but also that it presents those stories in a medium—language—that itself implicates a narrative *logic*. Consisting in regularized syntactical formulations that convey intelligence only insofar as they are properly apprehended over the course of time, linguistic productions in their very structure entail a principle of narrative signification whereby meaning derives through temporal elaboration and sequential development. Any disruption to such narrative progression—or to the syntactical flow on which it depends—thus potentially works to denatu-

ralize both the linguistic production in which a given story is recounted and that story itself, in the manner outlined by Brecht in the passages quoted earlier. The potential in this regard is especially great, of course, when there is minimal expectation that such disruption will occur, and while the mobilization of language per se does typically lead us to anticipate unimpeded syntactical flow (since we know that any linguistic instance must indeed conform to certain structural rules if it is to make sense), some kinds of print discourse are in fact “more equal than others” in this respect.

As I note in chapter 3 of the book, of the major genres of English-language literary production generally recognized at present, verse poetry is widely understood to be characterized by syntactic complexity and concomitant semantic difficulty, and this means that it is *not* generally expected to manifest the unencumbered developmental progression discussed earlier, even when it frankly partakes of a narrative mode that would seem to make such progression appropriate. Print prose, by contrast, is largely held to be relatively straightforward and accessible by definition, in keeping with its receivedly workaday character; indeed, it formally implies such directness in the continuous flow of its lines, whereas the deliberate truncation of the poetic verse line itself serves to check poetry’s syntactic coherence. Thus prose texts apparently constitute the perfect venue for the social-critical operation of aesthetic abstractionism, in that they seem to extend a promise of easy and transparent communication in light of which none of their cognitively disjunctive features can fail to make an impression, since these evidently violate that very promise. Such disjunctive features (including the attenuated characterization, referential indeterminacy, and rhetorical repetition on which chapter 3 primarily focuses) are the defining elements in what is typically called “experimental” prose, where they persistently thwart the will to aesthetic realism that permeates the African Americanist cultural field.

Ultimately, then, this volume contends not only that aesthetic abstractionism is a potentially vital element within African American expressive culture—nor even simply that literature is the art form in which abstractionist “alienation” can achieve maximum efficacy at this histori-

cal juncture—but, more specifically, that critical abstractionism is most powerfully operative in the sort of nonconventional printed prose works whose renunciation of narrative realism makes them marginal at best within the African Americanist canon. Thus the book is as much an argument for the broadening of our idea of what constitutes African American literature as it is a brief for abstractionist aesthetics and, by extension, the critical utility of literature as such. A short coda posits that while print prose is by no means the only vehicle for narrative expression within the contemporary cultural context (beyond the theatrical performance that Brecht sought to revolutionize, film immediately suggests itself as a prime alternative), its dependence on language still makes it most susceptible to the sort of abstractionist defamiliarization for which I am advocating throughout the volume.



I am hardly the first person to bemoan the hegemony of realism within African American aesthetics, to assert the importance of black literary experimentalism, or to champion the abstractive principles that I contend necessarily inform the latter, even if these remain distinctly peripheral pursuits within African Americanist criticism.<sup>23</sup> Nor am I the first to suggest that it might be precisely through the mobilization of such principles that an artwork affirms its African Americanist commitment, rather than through the mode of positivist depiction alluded to earlier. Indeed, in 1993 Nathaniel Mackey observed that some writers not only tell stories of black social marginalization while at the same time calling into question received conventions for that telling but actually “tell their stories *by* calling such conventions into question.”<sup>24</sup> Notwithstanding his reference here to “telling stories,” however (terms which he is in any case adopting from his immediate interlocutor)—or the reality that his own most signal literary offering is the multivolume epistolary novel *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*—Mackey has focused the majority of his indispensable critical analysis not on prose narrative and its variations but on poetry as such, which in most commentary on the subject (by, for instance, Aldon Nielsen, Evie Shockley, and Tony Bolden, in addition to Mackey) appears

as the unexamined default locus of black literary experimentation.<sup>25</sup> Alternatively—or, again, simultaneously—formally innovative black writing in whatever genre is assimilated to a larger radical aesthetic project that manifests (*mutatis mutandis* but still comprehensively) across multiple forms of artistic practice. Thus, in his own indispensable account, Fred Moten demonstrates how novelistic, verse-poetic, and critical writings (by the likes of Ralph Ellison and Amiri Baraka, among others) join with musical collaborations, spoken-word productions, jazz and soul recordings, and conceptual performance pieces (by such artists as Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, and Oscar Brown, Jr.; Cecil Taylor; Billie Holiday; Marvin Gaye; and Adrian Piper) in registering a distinctive experiential blackness that is itself “an avant-garde thing.”<sup>26</sup>

To the extent that the means of that registration approximate the aesthetic abstractionism that is the focus of this volume, Moten and I are clearly working in concert; but while Moten is concerned to show the wide variety of artistic activity in which a radical black aesthetics is discernible, I am interested in identifying the particular artistic context in which black abstractionist aesthetics is most critically *effective*, which is to say that my objective is more tightly focused than his. As for the centrality of poetry within considerations of black experimental writing, this is no doubt largely due to a pervasive sense that it is poets, more than any other type of writer, who “test the limits of language,” as Aldon Nielsen has put it.<sup>27</sup> While this of course might well mean that any writer who tests those limits—through whatever generic form—is by definition a poet, practically speaking it has meant that most of the critical attention garnered by black literary innovation, such as it is, has been accorded specifically to verse.<sup>28</sup> Then, too, insofar as black music is the avowed model for African American literary experiment—as it certainly has been for Baraka and many of his successors, including some of the commentators cited here—it perhaps stands to reason that such experiment should be sought after primarily in poetry, which clearly shares music’s concern with rhythm, phrasing, sound patterning, and the like.<sup>29</sup> To suggest this, however, is both to imply that nonverse literary genres cannot further musically derived projects and to underplay nonmusical sources of black literary innovation,

while to claim poetry as the prime site for linguistic experimentation is potentially to limit the impact of that experimentation by circumscribing it within a realm where it already appears routine. Although I am relatively unconcerned in this volume with the specific impetuses behind any given abstractionist venture, I am very much interested in maximizing the critical effect of abstractionism per se, and it is for this reason that I trace its operation in prose, the ubiquity and seeming transparency of which potentially underwrite precisely that maximization.



A concomitant of *Abstractionist Aesthetics*' polemical character is that the work is also an *essay* in the true sense—a trial inquiry that, in this particular case, moves more or less inductively from point to point as these are suggested by the occasional evidence at hand. The argument overall is thus meant to be associative but not by that token illogical; whether it succeeds in this regard must be determined by the reader. For my part—and notwithstanding my advocacy of abstractionist disruption—I have tried to honor the book's essayistic character by presenting my case in as unitary and unmediated a narrative-expository voice as I could muster. Practically speaking, this means that while I base my claims on a wealth of prior scholarship, I do not in the text explicitly announce my every mobilization of earlier critical work or regularly name the other commentators on whose insights I draw. This strategy is meant to provide for maximum fluidity, and it should not be taken to imply that my account is not informed by the contributions of thinkers from a wide variety of fields. The reader is urged to consult the notes, which are both plentiful and extensive, in order to identify the basis for any assertion that incites curiosity, and to take stock of my extensive intellectual debts. The more immediate and personal of these I am pleased to indicate in the Acknowledgments, which appear at the end of the book.

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