

EDITOR NOTE

Dialogues: Reviewing the Queer Caribbean

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Born of a cross-journal collaboration between *sx salon* and *Anthurium*, this conversation engages book reviews of critical works within queer Caribbean scholarship.

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This book review section is Part One of a special cross-journal collaboration between *sx salon* and *Anthurium*. As two open-access Caribbean studies journals, we have embraced the opportunity to co-curate a book review survey of recent queer Caribbean writing. For this collaborative Pride Issue, six reviews (curated by Ronald Cummings) will appear in *sx salon*, and six reviews (curated by Njelle Hamilton) will appear in *Anthurium*. We invite you to read these wonderful discussions in both journals together.

This also marks my (Njelle's) first issue as book reviews editor at *Anthurium*. I want to take a moment to thank our previous book review editor, Rafe Dalleo, as well as Donette Francis, Patricia Saunders and the rest of the *Anthurium* team for inviting me on board and welcoming me into this editorial community. As our co-written editorial below notes, there has been a history of reflections by editors at both *Anthurium* and *sx salon* about the work we do. Our state-of-the-field conversation here about queer Caribbean writing continues that practice of dialogue. Read, reflect, enjoy.

RC: We have come a long way since our paths first crossed in the graduate program at the University of the West Indies, Mona, so it feels meaningful to reflect together about the development in that time of one area of Caribbean studies where our scholarly interests intersect. One of the articles published just as I was preparing for graduate school was Rosamond S. King's essay, "Sex and Sexuality in English Caribbean Novels—A Survey from 1950."¹ I invoke this work not as a starting point but as a useful orienting point for this discussion. Indeed, as King's article demonstrates, a tradition of queer Caribbean writing had long been in existence and therefore her goal in that essay was to survey a body of queer Caribbean fiction from the latter half of the twentieth century, to produce, what Audre Lorde might term, "an interim report."² King's 2002 essay has also been a useful signpost for me in some of my work in queer Caribbean literary studies. As I was finishing graduate school, I published the essay "Queer Theory and Caribbean Writing" which surveyed some theoretical contentions, approaches and concerns as well as mapped key critical and literary texts that emerged in the intervening decade.³ I view this cross-journal special issue of reviews of recent queer Caribbean texts as another decennial interim report which maps the field not in terms of boundaries, but instead points to its expanse.

¹ Rosamond S. King. "Sex and Sexuality in English Caribbean Novels—A Survey from 1950." *Journal of West Indian Literature* 11, no. 1, 2002, pp 24–38.

² Audre Lorde. "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report." in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 2007.

³ See Ronald Cummings. "Queer Theory and Caribbean Writing." *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, edited by Michael Bucknor and Alison Donnell, Routledge, 2011, pp. 323–331. Also see: Faizal Deen and Ronald Cummings. "Sexual Subjects". *Caribbean Literature in Transition, 1970–2020*, edited by Ronald Cummings and Alison Donnell, Cambridge UP, 2021: pp. 386–404; as well as Matthew Chin and Ronald Cummings. "Queer." *Keywords for Caribbean Studies*, edited by Kelly Baker Josephs, 2020. caribbeandigitalnyc.net/keywords/2020/11/12/queer/.

While the survey essay has been one tool for doing this work, might the book review be similarly effective? In his essay, “Sitting down together and talking about a little scholarship: On the Necessity of Academic Reviewing,” the previous book review editor of *Anthurium*, Raphael Dalleo, argues that:

The review is a unique genre, with its own characteristics that can promote dialogue and the exchange of ideas ... Reading a review of a scholarly work can thus provide a sense of the significance of the book under review, as well as insight into the state of the field as a whole.⁴

The reviews of critical works included here situate the respective texts within the broader concerns of queer Caribbean scholarship, often extending their interventions in comparative and relational terms. For instance, Ryan Joyce’s review for *sx salon* examines queerness in the context of French Empire, connecting French Africa and the Caribbean through his engagement with Julin Everett’s concept of “Le Queer Impérial.” Rishi Nath’s review of Rajiv Mohabir’s book *Antiman* similarly attends to the complex dialogues between Mohabir’s work and other Indo-Caribbean texts but also situates the work in relation to the wider context of South Asian diasporic writing drawing on, for instance, the Mauritian poet Khal Torabully’s paradigm of “coolitude.”⁵

Both Dalleo and former *sx salon* book review editor Vanessa K. Valdés also lament the fact that the book review is not always valued in tenure and promotion decisions despite its “critical function in the ecosystem that is the academy.” This has led to a general reluctance to review books.⁶ It is therefore heartening that this cross-journal issue features a mix of junior, mid-career and senior scholars. We also have reviews written by creative writers. Trinidadian poet Lauren K. Alleyne, with her attention to the intricacies of poetic craft in both of her reviews, demonstrates the unique value that can accrue from creative writers participating in the book review culture of the region. It is also fantastic to see engagement with new work from foundational queer Caribbean writers like H. Nigel Thomas alongside the work of emerging writers. This dynamic inter-generationality speaks to the vibrancy of queer Caribbean writing and criticism today as well as its ongoing function as a rich and provocative space of dialogue.

NH: This introductory dialogue is our attempt to reimagine reviewing as a “rich and provocative space of dialogue.” The continued resistance in academia to counting book reviews as scholarly labor can open for us opportunities to do really exciting and nimble things with the review genre. What would it look like to conceive of the book review less as a short piece of *academic* scholarship and more as a piece of *public* scholarship—published online, open to conversations with online readers, and engaging general audiences by connecting new critical and creative works in Caribbean literary studies with timely and ongoing issues in the region and around the world?

This cross-journal issue of queer Caribbean writing seems to me a signal example of the fact that writing about queer lives is not just an intellectual enterprise but bears on urgent issues—life and death issues—real people are facing as we speak. In that vein, it seems all the more timely that we are having this conversation at the start of Pride month. Although its official history locates Pride’s roots in the Stonewall riots of June 1969, an uprising of patrons and allies in response to police raids on the Stonewall Inn, then a space of refuge and precarious liberty for New York City’s LGBTQ community, Guyanese activist Vidyaratha Kissoon has suggested that the first ‘gay pride parade’ was actually a decade earlier, in the Caribbean—British Guiana—in July 1959.⁷ In that brief discussion of what I would call textual death, the destruction or repression of archives of gay Caribbean life, Kissoon draws attention to the imbrication of Pride and Carnival (this proto-Pride parade includes a carnivalesque wedding). In all its global iterations, Pride reminds us of that tension between repression and freedom, between life-affirming performance and the reality of violence and death.

Both H. Manuel Acevedo-Reyes and Isabel Guzzardo Tamargo open their reviews with an account of—or response to—the February 2020 killing of homeless Puerto Rican trans woman, Alexa Negron Luciano. The two monographs reviewed for *Anthurium* are both works of ethnography, written by queer Caribbean scholar-activists about ways LGBTQ Puerto Ricans and Trinbagonians negotiate life and death—linguistic and physical violence, policies, and practices—through distinctly Caribbean ways of knowing, being and loving. The other reviewed books are similarly ethnographic: whether poetry, fiction or memoir, they are works of personal testimony as well as art that breaks open the wounds and silences faced by queer Caribbean

⁴ Raphael Dalleo. “Sitting down together and talking about a little scholarship: On the Necessity of Academic Reviewing.” *sx salon*, no. 7, 2011, smallaxe.net/sxsalon/discussions/sitting-down-together-and-talking-about-little-scholarship.

⁵ Khal Torabully, *Cale d’etoile-coolitude*, Reunion: Editions Azalee, 1992.

⁶ Vanessa K. Valdés. “Introduction.” *sx salon*, no. 20, 2015, smallaxe.net/sxsalon/issues/sx-salon-20.

⁷ Vidyaratha Kissoon. “Chantilly Lace.” *sx salon*, no. 6, 2011, smallaxe.net/sxsalon/discussions/chantilly-lace.

subjects, and activates new languages, modes of being and literary forms all at once. Raquel Salas Rivera's bilingual poetry collection, *X/EX/EXIS*, reminds us how physical violence—the murder of gender-nonconforming Caribbean people—emerges from both exclusionary policies that deny queer Caribbeans their citizenship, and exclusionary language that erases or ignores queer subjectivity. Transition and translation connect, and not always with liberatory outcomes, even while embracing the labels *transloca* and *trans* as potentially *transformative* to language, nation and literary form.

But while some reviewed books (Shivane Ramlochan's *Everyone Knows I'm a Haunting*; Lawrence LaFontain-Stokes's *Translocas*) bear witness to the ongoing violence and death that attends queer lives in the Caribbean, quite a few of the reviewers note how much pleasure, sensuality and joy pervades these new writings. Queer love (Ramlochan; Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch*) and performativity (Lyndon Gill's *Erotic Islands*; LaFontain-Stokes) dismantle and resist hegemonic systems, re-member selves dis-membered after sexual and physical violence, but they also enable *rasanblaj* or community-building. Queer is joy despite, regardless. It is future joy and liberation performed in the present. (Queer is futurity, apprehended in the spiral now).⁸

RC: The questions about activism and survival that you raise for consideration here, remain such crucial ones. The enclosures of queer freedom within everyday forms of (neo)colonial, cis-heteronormative life demand ongoing and insistent practices of freedom-making and, as you note, community-making. It is little wonder therefore that queer Caribbean writing has been at the vanguard of imagining Caribbean freedom as well as pushing at the limits of forms of belonging circumscribed by the nation state. If earlier interventions offered careful attention to questions of homophobia (either narrating and analyzing forms of social exclusion experienced by queer Caribbean subjects or contesting the often-repeated narrative of the exceptionality of Caribbean homophobia), I would argue that recent work offers us more expansive and rigorous interrogations of notions of freedom and sovereignty.

I offer here two examples. Rinaldo Walcott's work has long explored queer diasporas, contesting the foreclosures and perils of liberal state narratives of belonging. We see the legacies of Walcott's thinking on queer diasporas in Linzey Corridon's review of H. Nigel Thomas' recent novel *Easily Fooled* and its representations of queer migrations to Canada. Walcott's most recent book, *The Long Emancipation*, part of his ongoing exploration of the meaning of practices of freedom in our moment,⁹ rethinks historical renderings of emancipation and defines freedom as "ways of being human in the world that exist beyond the realm of the juridical and that allow for bodily sovereignty."¹⁰ His centering of "bodily sovereignty" returns us to some of the contestations of the limits of sexual citizenship previously articulated by Black feminist and queer studies scholars like M. Jacqui Alexander, even as he reaches towards a more expansive visioning of possibilities for freedom.¹¹

But whereas Walcott centers bodily sovereignty, Ana-Maurine Lara invites us to think about the spirit,¹² drawing on Black feminist and queer freedom work to different ends. *Queer Freedom: Black Sovereignty's* opening and closing ceremonies offer us a gathering of names, a circle of love and a genealogy of queer freedom thought. If for Walcott, actual or "potential Black freedom ... refuses that kind of linear narrative," for Lara, queer freedom/black sovereignty "requires a reorientation so radical as to be unknowable; we can only approximate this present-future-past through imagination, dreams, memory and the 'tactical recovery of Black soul.'"¹³ While Walcott's critical vocabulary is attuned to the language of emancipation, the concept of decolonization is important to Lara's work. This allows her to also trace dialogues between Black and Indigenous thinkers and writers. Sophie Marínez's review of Lara's 2017 poetry collection *Kohnjehr Woman* reminds us that these concerns have long been part of Lara's writing. It also illustrates the rewards of reading across borders between scholarship and creative practice in search of connections and sites of critical and narrative embrace.

NH: This dialogue is enabling me to see connections I would have otherwise missed. You drew attention to Lara's and Walcott's arguments on the temporality and narrative form of black and queer freedom. This echoes some fascinating findings of my current research on Caribbean time travel novels, as well as one of

⁸ Njelle Hamilton. "Another Shape to Time: *Tentacle's* Spiral 'Now.'" *sx salon*, no. 34, 2020, smallaxe.net/sxsalon/discussions/another-shape-time-tentacles-spiral-now.

⁹ See Rinaldo Walcott. *On Property*. Biblioasis, 2021; and *The Long Emancipation*. Duke UP, 2021.

¹⁰ Walcott, *The Long Emancipation*, 2.

¹¹ M. Jacqui Alexander. "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas." *Feminist Review*, vol. 48, 1994, pp. 5–23.

¹² Ana Maurine Lara. *Queer Freedom: Black Sovereignty*. SUNY Press, 2020.

¹³ Walcott, *The Long Emancipation*, 3; Lara, *Queer Freedom*, 16.

the things that emerges from these reviews. Since my very early scholarship on Lawrence Scott's *Witchbroom* and *Night Calypso*, two novels that, like much of the Trinidadian-born novelist's larger oeuvre, intertwine non-linear digressive narrative form, gender nonconformity and transdressing, I've only recently returned to queer Caribbean studies via Rita Indiana's *Tentacle*, which I wrote about in a special discussion section I edited for *sx salon* last summer.¹⁴ As I researched what is, in *Tentacle*, both a transition surgery and a Santería initiation, I was struck by the imbrication of a number of fields I hadn't previously considered together: queer ontology and time travel, queer time and spiral time, queer studies and environmental studies (specifically queer and amphibian, which connects to Afro-Caribbean water divinities from Olokun/Yemaya to Erzulie). Most intriguing for me was the implication that queerness and Caribbeanness—*Caribbeing*—might actually be synonymous.

What inspired me to solicit reviews on this subject was precisely to see how writers and scholars are (un) thinking the queer Caribbean in this moment. The majority of the *Anthurium* reviews are on works by authors who identify as LGBTQ, with "queer" retaining its more conventional designation as a marker of gender and/or sexuality. Nevertheless, a multi-pronged articulation of 'queer' and 'Caribbean' emerges from all the pieces: they highlight how recent works of fiction, poetry, memoir and ethnography simultaneously i) describe queer Caribbean lives, deaths, performances, and resistance; ii) articulate modes of activism and alternate vocabularies and ways of being in the face of hegemonic and often deadly heteronormativity; and iii) innovate on traditional literary form with multigenre, multimodal, border-crossing, trans*gressive texts. As someone interested in both queerness and Caribbeanness as form and method, I found this really exciting.

Another recent book that engages with these concerns is Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's exquisite *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*.¹⁵ As much as it is an account of black queer sexuality, of same-gender loving women and femmes, about spaces, practices and performances of freedom and transgression (of entrenched sexual, gender, class, and juridical rules), *Ezili's Mirrors* is also deeply meditative about queer form, about "how to write about Ezili ..., write of Vodou and Ezili as epistemology" (Tinsley 22). The resulting text is simultaneously history, memoir, and literary and cultural criticism—a queering of the academic monograph through uniquely Caribbean epistemologies. Similarly, the six *Anthurium* reviews highlight how queer Caribbean writing seeks language and form beyond the hegemonies of the Global North. In Gill's *Erotic Islands*, queer is Carnival, queer is soucouyant-like shapeshifting. This is true too of Roffey's *Mermaid of Black Conch* and Ramlochan's *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting*, which are peopled with fantastic non-human or hybrid interspecies creatures from Caribbean myth and folklore. Queer is also formally innovative: poetry collections that audition multiple formal modes to speak the unspeakable of sexual violence and its shattering, haunting trauma (Ramlochan), autobiography moonlighting as theory and vice-versa (Dionne Brand's *An Autobiography*), ethnography interrupted by personal interludes (Gill; LaFontain-Stokes), novels that shapeshift from journal to verse to novelistic prose (Roffey), and bilingual poetry that holds Spanish and English beside each other, making visible what does not cross over between languages (Salas Rivera).

In the hands of these Caribbean writers, queer form unsettles ways of reading; queer method enables taboo-breaking within particular genres and disciplines. At the recent launch of his essay collection, *Things I Have Withheld*, Jamaican writer Kei Miller explained that he moves between fiction, poetry and essay because each genre not just codifies generic conventions but also enables, perhaps requires, different kinds of truth telling.¹⁶ While his autobiographical 'I' is largely absent from his poetry (perhaps playing mas' under the poetic 'you'), it is activated and 'bare-faced' in his essay-writing. It is as if polyvocality and "formal polyamory" enable LGBTQ Caribbean people to speak *things withheld* from the wider community.¹⁷

RC: An attention to the interleaving of many voices, registers and forms has certainly been important to recent work. It now proves hard, for example, to engage with the field, particularly in the wake of Thomas Glave's *Our Caribbean*, a resonant gathering of so many islands, voices and tongues, without attending to the region's multiple languages and traditions.¹⁸ I am also interested in how the archipelagic turn in recent critical scholarship might further reorient our thinking and writing about and across queer sites of rela-

¹⁴ See Njelle Hamilton. "Rita Indiana's *Tentacle*: An Introduction." *sx salon*, no. 34, 2020, smallaxe.net/sxsalon/discussions/rita-indianas-tentacle-introduction/; "From Silent Wounds to Narrated Words: Calypso Storytelling in Lawrence Scott's *Night Calypso*." *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2013; and "On Memory and the Archives of History: A Conversation with Trinidadian Novelist Lawrence Scott." *Wasafiri*, March 2017, wasafiri.org/article/conversation-lawrence-scott/.

¹⁵ Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley. *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*. Duke UP, 2018.

¹⁶ Kei Miller. *Things I Have Withheld*. Canongate Books, 2021.

¹⁷ Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors*, pp. 172.

¹⁸ Thomas Glave. *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles*. Duke UP, 2008.

tion.¹⁹ Yet it is also important to attend to some of the silences and elisions that persist. I note, for instance, the ways in which the Dutch Antilles continues to be marginal to our discussions despite a rich body of critical writing by scholars such as Gloria Wekker and more recently Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley as well as the work of novelists such as Astrid Roemer (an important writer who still doesn't have a wide readership across the region because of the boundaries of translation).²⁰

Additionally, as Wekker and Tinsley remind us through their attention to *mati work*, our creole traditions (linguistic, social, gendered and sexual) also have to be taken seriously in our interventions.²¹ Rajiv Mohabir's *Antiman*, reviewed in *sx salon*, and which uses a Caribbean creole term for men who desire men as its title, reminds us of some of the rich and complex signifying possibilities of Caribbean vernacular traditions and sexualities. The text, in a really nuanced way, through its movement between different languages also asks us to think about the politics and practice of translation and about the untranslatable. *Antiman* is also notably subtitled "a hybrid memoir." Indeed, if genre potentially functions as a normative mode for reproducing texts, then the queer Caribbean textual innovations that you outline for us potentially also become resistant formations that enact other world-making possibilities and engage textual form as creative frontier. This kind of innovation can be seen in Andre Bagoo's essays in *The Undiscovered Country* which won the 2020 OCM Bocas Prize for nonfiction. Bagoo's writing, as Andil Gosine reminds us in his review, engages in quirky, playful, subversive yet thoughtful ways with the essay—a form which we often take all too seriously. The work of Bagoo, Mohabir and Shivane Ramlochan are also part of an exciting body of queer Indo-Caribbean writing that has been important in this most recent period of literary production.

NH: Indeed, contemporary Indo-Caribbean writers like Bagoo, Mohabir and Ramlochan, as well as the other writers reviewed here, are continuing a tradition of formal innovation in pioneering works like Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, with its triad narrative voices signaled by font changes; a multiply-fractured narrative revealed to be the fruit of sexual violence in one instance and in another, queer subjectivity that is not allowed freedom to thrive.²² Similarly, Lawrence Scott's *Witchbroom*'s shifting between past and present, fiction, history and memory, and between first-person journal and third-person historical chronicle is held together by Lavren, who is born with both male and female genitalia and whose gender-shifting empowers him/her with the proleptic and analeptic in/sight to narrate Caribbean history queerly.²³ In other words, these authors suggest that to narrate the Caribbean requires a queer form, since, as the narrator of Erna Brodber's *The Rainmaker's Mistake* concludes, post-plantation Caribbean biology (like its geography and history) is "queer."²⁴

In the wake of the ongoing contestations about gender-pronouns,²⁵ it is also worth underscoring how Mootoo, Scott, Michelle Cliff, Dionne Brand, Patricia Powell and others challenged us as early as the 1980s and 1990s with intersex, non-binary, transdressing, same-sex-loving characters for whom readers and scholars didn't yet have language, as evinced by the early scholarship on queer Caribbean writing you cited earlier.²⁶ Otoh, Tyler, Lavren, Sylvie, Harry/Harriet and others interrogated and made us interrogate "the gender and sex roles that seemed available to people, and the rules that went with them" (Mootoo 47). These foundational texts not only anticipated recent work by a new generation of queer Caribbean writers

¹⁹ Michelle Stephens and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, editors. *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking: Towards New Comparative Methodologies and Disciplinary Formations*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2020; Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens, editors. *Archipelagic American Studies*. Duke UP, 2017.

²⁰ Gloria Wekker. *The Politics of Passion*. Columbia UP, 2006; Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley. *Thieving Sugar*. Duke UP, 2010.

²¹ For one examination of the region's queer creole tradition see Ronald Cummings. "Literature, Caribbean (Anglophone and Creole)." *Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, edited by Howard Chiang, Anjali Arondekar, Marc Epprecht, Jennifer Evans, Ross Forman, Hanadi al-Samman, Emily Skidmore, and Zeb Tortorici. McMillan Reference USA, 2018, pp. 971–976. Also see Alison Donnell's *Creolized Sexualities: Undoing Heteronormativity in the Literary Imagination of the Anglo-Caribbean*. Rutgers UP, forthcoming, 2021.

²² Shani Mootoo. *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Avon Books, 1996.

²³ Lawrence Scott. *Witchbroom*. Allison and Busby, 1992. Both Mootoo and Scott continue to publish. Mootoo recently published her newest novel, *Polar Vortex*. Book*Hug Press, 2020; while Scott's most recent novel, *Dangerous Freedom*, a reimagining of the life of Dido Belle, was published by Papillote Press in 2021.

²⁴ Erna Brodber. *The Rainmaker's Mistake*. New Beacon Books, 2007, pp. 46.

²⁵ I pause here to shout out the visionary fictions of Caribbean-born maestra@ of SFF, Nalo Hopkinson. See in particular her vision for an ethical interspecies Caribbean future in her novel *Midnight Robber* (Warner Books, 2000), where the folkloric figure of the douen emerges as a speaking, intelligent creature who unsettles the exiled humans' traditions of personhood, gender and gender pronouns.

²⁶ In addition to the aforementioned *Witchbroom* (1992) and *Cereus Blooms* (1996), see Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*. Plume, 1987; Patricia Powell. *The Pagoda*. Harcourt Brace, 1998; and Dionne Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. Knopf, 1999. Powell's *A Small Gathering of Bones* (Heinemann, 1994) was also groundbreaking for its early and harrowing evocation of gay Caribbean life and the incipient AIDS epidemic.

including many other not reviewed here—Marlon James, Staceyann Chin, Nicole Dennis-Benn, Leone Ross, Helen Klonaris, to mention a few—but also established models of postcolonial Caribbean narrative form, particularly in the non-linear, digressive, fragmented, multimodal narratives that characterize the region's literary expression.

If queer is futurity, a quest for what is otherwise possible, then perhaps it is in queer Caribbean writing that we get to glimpse both the future of Caribbean literature and the still-to-come just, safe and liberatory future for all the region's citizens. As Kara Keeling suggests, "*another world is possible*," and not only possible but "already ... here now and it listens, with others, for the poetry, the refrains, the rhythms, and the noise such world is making" (Keeling ix). Listen with us to the vibrant present and future of queer Caribbean writing.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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