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ENCODING/DECODING IDENTITY: COMMUNICATION IN CARSON MCCULLERS' THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER

Sarrah Wolfe

When Carson McCullers' novel *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter* was published in 1940, the queer undertones went mostly unexamined by critics, and reviewers. Overshadowed by the sense of loneliness that permeates the pages, queerness was a thought far beyond the heightened anxieties surrounding severe class inequality—a result of the depression—and the fears of the rising Nazi Party in Germany, both of which set the backdrop of the novel. Richard Wright, in a review of the novel shortly after publication, writes, "I don't know what the book is about; the nearest I can come to indicating its theme is to refer to the Catholic confessional or the private office of the psychoanalyst" (17). Certainly, the loneliness of the novel is limelighted in comparison to its queerness.

What was not overlooked by critics, however, was McCullers' adeptness at handling identities that were not her own, specifically the Black identity. In that same review, Wright commends McCullers for her ability to "handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race" (18). At her core, McCullers' was a white Southern author ascribing to Southern literary tropes that necessitated a depiction of a society founded upon racial injustice. Why then was McCullers' praised more for her handling of the Black identity than other white Southern writers, to whom she drew much comparison, such as William Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor? (Davis 207)

The novel's disjointed structure may shed some light on the adeptness with which McCullers' handles identities outside of her own. Much of the criticism of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* attacked the novel's "jerkiness or minor lapses in construction" (Clare 302). However, as Klaus Lubbers explains, the structure of the novel "leaves in the reader, a disjointed, if not chaotic, effect. Almost any of the main figures of 'truths' might then be selected as central, summing up the total experience" (34). Mick Kelly is

certain there is a world outside of their small southern mill town; Dr. Copeland preaches Marxism as the key to achieving racial equality, and justice; Jake Blount rambles to townspeople about his detest for capitalism, and the plight of the worker; and Biff Brannon is sure that everyone possesses some fatal, hidden flaw. The lack of focus on any one characters' plight indicates that the identity of the novel itself is influx, leaving room for negotiation.

And negotiate is precisely what these characters set out to do as they seek refuge, and consolation in the deaf-mute character of John Singer. When Blount says to Singer, "But what I'm getting at is this. When a person knows and can't make the others understand, what does he do?" (83) McCullers' is providing the reader the key to understanding identity within the novel.

In "Encoding/Decoding," Stuart Hall theorizes that "the degrees of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange—depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry...established between the positions of the...encoder-producer and decoder-receiver" (804). That is to say both Blount, and those to whom he speaks play active roles in the sense of misunderstanding felt by Blount. Hall continues, "But this in turn depends on the degrees of identity/non-identity between the codes..." For Blount, and the other characters, their identities are either falsely established or wholly unidentifiable: Dr. Copeland, and Blount both share an identity as Marxists though they hold different beliefs, and Mick, and Biff both are unable to identify their queer impulses altogether. As they confide in the deaf-mute Singer, they experience, finally, a symmetrical communicative exchange, but with themselves, not Singer. Combined with Hall's ideas of the identity as negotiable, as a process, the confused dynamics amongst the characters demonstrates that it is not the townspeople who are unable to understand the rugged cast of characters, but the charac-

ters who are unable to understand themselves, rendering them unable to communicate, and negotiate their identities.

I propose that the application of Hall's ideas to the communicative exchanges that happen between the characters, and their respective foils (I use that term loosely), as well as with John Singer reveal McCullers' own understanding of identity as processual, and in flux. It is perhaps this understanding that has appor tioned so much praise to McCullers' for her portrayal of the Black, and queer identities, and has allowed the novel to endure in the Southern gothic literary canon.

Jake Blount & Dr. Copeland as Marxist

Hall theorizes a model of communication akin to that of the Marxist idea of commodity production. The process of "encoding" discourse for production or relation to another, as well as the process of "decoding" discourse for consumption are influenced by a person or entity's frame work(s) of knowledge, relation(s) of production, and the technical infrastructure (Hall, *Encoding/Decoding* 804). When the underlying factors are not equivalent, the participants are engaging in an asymmetrical communicative exchange; if the factors are equivalent, it is said to be a symmetrical exchange, with the potential, depending on the "degree of habituation" for it to become a naturalized code (Hall, *Encoding/Decoding* 805).

For Jake Blount, and Dr. Copeland, their frameworks of knowledge are entirely different. Blount's origin is allusive. From the perspective of Biff Brannon, "it was hard to tell what kind of folks he had or what part of the country he was from" (McCullers 20). When asked about the matter, Blount simply replies, "Nowhere" (McCullers 24). Contrarily, Dr. Copeland's background as an educated Black man is clear: "When he was seventeen years old they had sent him North with eighty dollars hidden in his shoe. He had worked in a blacksmith's shop... And all the while he studied and read and went to school" (McCullers 150). How then do both characters arrive at their Marxist identity?

For the two characters, there exists "critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute "what [they] really are"..." (Hall, *Cultural Identity* 546). These differences may be understood by examining their encoding of Marxist ideas. Blount, and Copeland both proselytize the workings of Marx to the townspeople while encoding entirely different messages. Blount, drunk, and rambling to the diners at the New York Café, buys a cigarette from Biff Brannon, and says, "Five mills for the crackers who grew the weed and five for the dupes who rolled it... a cent for you, Biff" (McCullers 23). He pesters the townspeople with his incoherent rants about the obfuscation of freedom to "mean for one rich man to sweat the piss out of ten thousand poor men so that he can get richer" (McCullers 165). Blount's decoding of Marxism centers around its implications for the working class. However, Dr. Copeland understands Marxism for its racial ramifications. He emphasizes to the attendees of his Christmas party that "[they] have been freed from one kind of slavery only to be delivered into another" (McCullers 198). He galvanizes

the Black community as he presents Marx as a messianic figure holding the key to free the world from all forms of slavery. Dr. Copeland's decoding of Marxist thought then centers around its implications for racial justice, and equality. However, the characters share a Marxist ideology only so far as the linguistic sign of the "Marxist" will allow them, when operating within an essentialist idea of identity. Blount, and Copeland's essentialist thinking causes their failure to recognize the "conditions of perception" that impact their understanding of the identity (Hall, *Encoding/Decoding* 805).

This oversight on the part of the characters then reveals a need for negotiation of identity, as they are unable to recognize their own conditions of perception, and frames of knowledge. Copeland, while emphasizing the importance of Marxism to the plight of the Black race, simultaneously emphasizes that "to Karl Marx it seemed that being one of the millions of poor people or one of the few rich was more important to a man than the color of his skin" (McCullers 196). He announces to the attendees of his annual Christmas party, "And we are not alone in this slavery. There are millions others throughout the world, of all colors and races and creed." However, throughout the novel he asserts that John Singer is the only "white man of intellect and true knowledge" (McCullers 198, 203). Copeland attributes his envisioning of a de-racialized world to Marxism, while encoding his ideas primarily through a racial lens. His identity as a Marxist then becomes one in need of negotiation. Blount also displays a need for the negotiation of his Marxist identity, but his allusive origin makes such negotiation nearly impossible. While Copeland possesses a frame of knowledge (his Black identity, and educational upbringing), Blount appears to lack one altogether:

But most of the time nobody was sure just what he was saying. Talk—talk—talk. The words came out of his throat like a cataract. And the thing was that the accent he used was always changing, the kinds of words he used. Sometimes he talked like a linthead and sometimes like a professor. He would use words a foot long and then slip up on his grammar. It was hard to tell what kind of folks he had or what part of the country he was from. He was always changing.

McCullers 21

The appearance that Blount is always changing is not an indication of him negotiating his identity, but an indication that his frame of knowledge, necessary to the communicative exchange, and therefore identity negotiation, is altogether absent. His sole identity is that of the Marxist. For both Dr. Copeland, and Blount, that identity becomes non-negotiable due to their failure to recognize their conditions of perception.

This non-negotiability culminates in an argument between the two characters as they discuss means of justice for Dr. Copeland's son, Willie, who is so badly abused by prison guards that he contracts gangrene, and undergoes amputation of both of his legs. Jake offers to testify in court on behalf of Willie, while Dr. Copeland intends to organize a march on Washing-

ton. In this moment, what should have been an opportunity for the characters to negotiate their identities becomes instead a collision of unwavering identities.

Biff Brannon & Mick Kelly as Queer-Coded

Like Copeland and Blount, Mick Kelly and Biff Brannon serve as a mirror for the other character to reflect on their identity. Whereas Mick Kelly, a twelve-year old girl, expresses herself in masculine ways, Biff Brannon assumes a more feminine role after his wife, Alice, suddenly passes away. Mick Kelly dresses in boys' clothes and despises her older, tabloid-obsessed feminine sisters, Etta, and Hazel. Conversely, Biff finds himself enjoying sewing, gardening, and homemaking in Alice's absence. While both characters engage in gender non-conforming modes of expression, they struggle to articulate their impulses, and desires, settling often to describe them as "queer."

Much has been said about McCullers' use of the words "queer," and "freak" to describe the inexplicable feelings felt by characters throughout her oeuvre. Rachel Adams proposes that "the queer and the freak are terms that counter the binary logic of sexual and racial division and... [provides] rather a place to begin thinking about what it would be like to inhabit a community rooted in heterogeneity rather than sameness, desire rather than prescription, where each member can find in herself 'a mixture of delicious and freak'" (576). For Hall, such divisions are a facet of essentialist thought surrounding identity which inhibits the production of identity: "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent, we should think instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process..." (544). For Blount & Copeland, the Marxist identity was already established, an "already accomplished historical fact." But for Mick, and Biff, the queer identity had yet to reach such an accomplishment. Unlike Jake, and Dr. Copeland, Biff Brannon, and Mick Kelly are therefore unable to identify or attach a linguistic sign to their identities, making negotiation, nearly impossible.

Because Mick, and Biff possess no framework of knowledge with which to encode their queer impulses, they find themselves instead encoding according to their relations of production:

What was it made her act like she suddenly did? Maybe it was remembering the times when they were younger. Maybe it was because the sadness made her feel queer. But anyway all of a sudden she gave Harry a push that nearly knocked him off the steps. 'S.O.B. to your grandmother,' she hollered to him. Then she ran. That was what kids used to say in the neighborhood when they picked a fight.

McCullers 258

Mick Kelly is able only to identify the "queer" feeling, and misconstrues it as a desire to pick a fight, based on interactions she's seen of other children. Conversely, Biff, a much more self-assured character, despite his inexplica-

ble impulses, believes himself to have negotiated his feminine impulses:

Mick had grown so much in the past year that soon she would be taller than he was. She was dressed in the red sweater and blue pleated skirt she had worn every day since school started. Now the pleats had come out and the hem dragged loose around her sharp, jutting knees. She was at the age when she looked as much like an overgrown boy as a girl. And on that subject why was it that the smartest people mostly missed that point? By nature all people are of both sexes. So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means. The proof? Real youth and old age. Because often old men's voices grow high and reedy and they take on a mincing walk. And old women sometimes grow fat and their voices get rough and deep and they grow dark little mustaches. And he even proved it himself—the part of him that sometimes almost wished he was a mother and that Mick and Baby were his kids.

McCullers 139

Because of the lack of linguistic resources available to the queer identity, and the numerous expressions of it, Biff conflates his feminine impulse with motherly impulse. He bases his assertion on the social interactions with the "real youth and old age" to establish his own desire to become a mother (McCullers 139).

The implications of such connotations, and misunderstandings are later seen when Biff conflates the motherly impulse with one of a potentially sexual nature. Biff begins to purposefully walk by the Kelly's house on his breaks from work at the New York Cafe. The narrator, and by proxy, Biff, reflects that "there was something about it that was—not quite right. Yes. Wrong," and that "He had done nothing wrong but in him he felt a strange guilt" (McCullers 241). Like Blount, Biff's changing modes of expression are not an indication of a processual identity, but of an inability to engage in the negotiation of the identity.

Looking at Mick Kelly's perception of Mister Brannon reveals an asymmetry in the encodings, and decodings of their interactions. Hall asserts, "What are called 'distortions' or 'misunderstandings' arise precisely from the *lack of equivalence* between the two sides in the communicative exchange" (Hall, *Encoding/Decoding* 804). Mick Kelly despises Biff Brannon, but not for his perturbing impulses:

'I hate Mister Brannon,' Mick said. It was true that even though he never said anything mean to her he always spoke in a rough, funny way. He must have known all along about the pack of chewing-gum she and George swiped that time. And then why would he ask her how her business was coming along—like he did up in Mister Singer's room?

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Mick decodes Biff's concern as accusation. Once again, what was initially the opportunity for negotiation of identity is obfuscated by the characters' s inability to

participate in symmetrical, or naturalized, communicative exchanges.

John Singer as God

For Jake Blount, Mick Kelly, Dr. Copeland, and Biff Brannon, their unnegotiated identity creates the sense of alienation that marks the novel. When John Singer, a queer-coded deaf-mute character, begins to frequent the New York Café, and take up residence at the Mick Kelly house, he provides hope for the characters that someone might finally “understand” them: “The fellow was downright uncanny. People felt themselves watching him even before they knew that there was anything different about him. His eyes made a person think that he heard things nobody else had ever heard, that he knew things no one had ever guessed before” (McCullers 30).

Singer brings to the rugged cast of characters a temporary relief from the loneliness, and isolation caused by their unnegotiated identities. More aptly, the rugged characters bring their sense of loneliness, and isolation to Singer. As Blount, Copeland, Mick, and Brannon deify Singer, and make him “a sort of home-made God,” they once again fail to recognize their conditions of perception, exacerbating their own loneliness as well as Singer’s (McCullers 240). I have already elaborated the ways in which the frame of knowledge, and relations of production have affected the characters’ ability to communicate, and negotiate their identity. The final element in the novel that Hall theorizes, which affects Singer more than any other character, is the technical infrastructure used to encode, and decode discourse. As Singer adapts his discourse to their forms of technical infrastructure, the characters fail to reciprocate such care. As a result, Singer is altogether excluded from the exchange, and the characters find themselves in a communication loop, encoding, and decoding their own messages, unable to create or find meaning.

Though McCullers describes him as a “deaf-mute,” she makes clear that Singer was not voiceless. He reads lips, writes notes, and uses body language to encode his messages. In applying Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* to McCullers’ work, Melissa Free asserts that “silence and discourse do not constitute a binary” (429). Although Singer did not vocally speak, he was not incapable of engaging in discourse: “Singer wrinkled his forehead and considered. He reached for his silver pencil and wrote on his pad of paper that he didn’t know” (McCullers 162).

Analyzing the deafness of the novel, Alexander Steele asserts that, “The communal violence done to Singer comes...from the urges of his able-bodied visitors to place his deafness within a purely symbolic register... Yet at a material level, these forces understand Singer’s deafness only as a medical impairment, disavowing his painful affective response to an ableist society which fails to understand even basically what it is to be deaf” (59). Blount, Mick, Copeland, and Brannon fail to acknowledge the technical infrastructures that affect their exchanges with Singer. Mick expresses a curiosity about “what kind of things he would say if he could talk,” and assures herself that “Nobody knew...” (57). As a result, these characters

are often unable to decode Singer’s messages, and tend to dismiss them entirely.

For Hall, “If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect” (*Encoding/Decoding* 802). As the characters are unable to decode Singer’s encodings, the process of exchange is essentially broken. Similarly, Hall asserts that “no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated” (*Encoding/Decoding* 802). Singer, writing a letter to Antonapoulos, tells him about the four characters who have been visiting him in his apartment. He writes, “They talked and they talked—and as the months went on they talked more and more. He became so used to their lips that he understood each word they said. And then after a while he knew what each one of them would say before he began, because the meaning was always the same” (McCullers 246). If the meaning remains static, and Singer is able to then anticipate what the characters are going to say, Singer has in effect been excluded from the circuit of communication as a whole. Whose messages then are the characters encoding, and whose are they decoding?

The characters engage in discourse in which they are both encoder, and decoder. They become stuck in a communication process with themselves, reaching a symmetrical, and “achieved equivalence” only for it to strengthen what they perceive to be their ideals while inhibiting their ability to negotiate their identity. So assured are the characters in their ideals that their identities become static, and reduced to boilerplate descriptions, as evidenced in Singer’s letter to Antonapoulos:

Yah Capital and Democrats, says the ugly one with the mustache. Then he contradicts himself and says, Freedom is the greatest of all ideals. I just got to get a chance to write this music in me and be a musician. I got to have a chance, says the girl. We are not allowed to serve, says the black Doctor. That is the Godlike need of my people. Aha, says the owner of the New York Café. He is a thoughtful one.

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But Singer is not without his own inhibitors to negotiating his identity. Singer is arguably the most overtly queer-coded character of the novel in his intimate friendship with Antonapoulos, another deaf-mute. The two live together, and share a bedroom “furnished mainly with a large double bed...for the Greek and a narrow iron cot for Singer” (8). Singer obsesses over Antonapoulos, escorting him to work, and waiting outside after the workday to escort him back home. In their friendship, Singer is content, and feels no need to negotiate his identity.

However, Singer’s friendship with Antonapoulos is fraught with the same one-sidedness that reveals a necessity for negotiation. Singer signs frequently to Antonapoulos, but “it was seldom that [Antonapoulos,] ever moved his hands to speak at all” (McCullers 7). Antonapoulos does not reciprocate any of Singer’s signs except “to say that he wanted to eat or to sleep or to drink” (McCullers 7). He demonstrates a passivity unregistered by Singer. But for Singer, Antonapoulos was “the one who always

steered the way," deifying him just as Mick, Biff, Dr. Copeland, and Blount deified Singer (McCullers 7).

When Antonapoulos is sent to a mental asylum after falling ill, Singer is forced to ingratiate himself with the community. In doing so, his struggle to negotiate his identity becomes two-fold as he must now negotiate his queer identity against a compulsory heterosexuality, and his identity as a "deaf-mute" against a compulsory able-bodiedness. Excluded by the other characters from the communication process, Singer relies on writing letters to Antonapoulos to negotiate both identities, despite "the fact that Antonapoulos could not read" (McCullers 220). Singer, however, never sends the letters. Spivak examines the unsent letters sent by Singer, describing them as "the fiction of a paradoxically impure pure signifier that will never be sublated—that is, contradicted and preserved in a higher form—through its own contradiction and become a meaning-filled signified because the addressee receives it" (Spivak 135). For Singer, then, the letters become a discourse akin to the kind that Biff, Mick, Blount, and Copeland engage in with him. Singer becomes both encoder-producer, and encoder-receiver of his own discourse.

Frances Freeman Paden argues that "in reality, Singer is more a mirror than a god. As the people reach out to him, Singer reflects rather than absorbs their gestures" (454). However, this view of Singer as a mirror is reductive, and does little more than metaphorize the "deaf-mute." Singer's suicide is often interpreted as an act of martyrdom for the characters as it "fragments their vision of themselves, forcing them to change the direction of their energies" (Paden 456). Certainly, the final part of the novel depicts a noticeable change in the characters' outlook. Mick leaves vocational school to work at a Woolworth's, and bring in money for her struggling family; Copeland falls ill, and moves in with his family who had previously ostracized him for his zealous beliefs; Blount leaves town, but not before trying to reconcile the argument between him, and Dr. Copeland; and Biff observes that the feelings he had for Mick had dissolved. But, as Lawrence Graver ascertains, the change in direction of the characters' energies "are not causally related to Singer's death" (55). The parallels between John Singer's own symmetrical communication loop via letters, and the other characters' communication loops via John Singer refute the interpretation of Singer as a sacrifice for the characters. Instead of a mirror that needed to be destroyed for the character's catharsis, Singer suffers from his own incommunicable negotiations of identity.

Although this interpretation of John Singer favors McCullers as an author able to look beyond damaging societal conceptions of disability, specifically regarding Deafness, it overlooks close examination of Spiros Antonapoulos. Ultimately Antonapoulos is one-dimensional. He is depicted only through Singer's perspective, and is given no agency in the novel. But an analysis by Steele holds implications beyond McCullers' handling of the deaf characters: "If she falls short in some regards in her treatment of deafness, one of McCullers's unheeded offerings is her refusing to assume she can access Singer's body and mind as a hearing person. Crucially, she bars both herself and hearing readers from embodying this disabled space"

(Steele 68). Her depiction of Antonapoulos was not to metaphorize deafness, but to demonstrate the need for communication in the negotiation of identity. His flatness as a character serves to humanize John Singer, depicting him in his own struggle to communicate, and demonstrating its effects in the negotiation of the identity. Just as Singer does not serve as a mirroring object, neither does Antonapoulos. The lack of insight into the character of Antonapoulos, therefore, cannot be equated with one-dimensionality because of Singer's own biases in their communicative exchanges.

For Hall, and McCullers, one's relation to their cultural identity is processual even when it examines facets that are unchangeable. Looking at how the characters encode, and decode their exchanges with other characters brings together new interpretations that shed light on the interrelation between communication, and the development of one's identity. While some facets of identity are definitively immutable, it does not mean that they are non-negotiable.

Yet, the characters of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* all seem to understand themselves as static, essential beings: the Marxist, the queer, the able-bodied. Their perception of identity as fixed blinds them to their conditions of perception, and in that they are unable to engage in meaningful discourse surrounding their identity.

This is not to say that the inability to communicate is entirely the fault of the characters, for their frames of knowledge, relations of production technical infrastructure have been determined by a society that hardly acknowledged the identities they sought to negotiate. For Singer especially, the town's attempt to understand just what was so uncanny about him "reveals more about the able-bodied culture doing the asking than about the bodies being interrogated" (McRuer 357). Likewise, for Biff, and Mick, the inability to communicate was the outcome of a Southern community whose homophobia was ingrained to a point of prior self-restraint. The characters are not villainous, only naïve in their understanding of their own identities.

Understanding the problems that arise from the characters' inability to communicate illuminates aspects of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* that might have otherwise gone unexamined. Singer is displaced from the position of a Christ-like figure who must die for the other characters' salvation, and is instead humanized as a figure who suffers from the same inability to negotiate his identity. The sense of uncanniness that the characters feel in the presence of Singer, is not a physical uncanniness, but a mental one. Their mutual inability to communicate, and have someone "really understand" evokes a sense of strange familiarity (92).

Richard Wright's review of McCullers' novel then takes on new meanings. How was it that McCullers was able to juggle so many identities, including ones that she did not embody, "without collapsing the difference of race and gender"? (Davis 207) It is precisely her understanding of identity as influx that allows for this. The structure of the novel itself adheres to no fixed identity. Although John Singer is central to the characters' lives, his arc is no more

Escuincles

Ferdinando del Arroyo

Small bodies,
In dark closets.

My eyes barely making out his,
his lips.

Boxes stacked to make a perfect bench,
Hidden behind racks of clothes, stuffed and
heavy with his dad's dress shirts,
shiny satin and colorful,

Mi tío.

Enojado, como se pone
porque la caja de sus botas
Topped down behind us as we climbed down,
out into the bedroom,
Its crisp corners crushed beneath our weight

La primera comunión de Dani,
My older brother.

We snuck under one of the tables,
tablecloth curtains,
with one of the bottles of sparkling cider,
sirviéndonos en copitas de plástico
and tossing them back like we saw our dads do.
Grabbing each other around the shoulders,
like the night they broke the glasses
and left them on the porch for us to find in the morning,
The bottle empty

My eyes were closed when he opened the door,
Mi primo.
Light, milky red behind my eyelids.
His brother's shoes, I recognized in the doorway.
The uneasy shame in his eyes
That wouldn't meet mine,
told me not to look up.
We didn't dare look up.

Malcriados

developed than that of Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, Jake Blount, or Dr. Copeland. He is not a deity, just another towns person struggling to work out his identity. To assert that any one main character is the protagonist would be a decoding of the novel that reveals one's own conditions of perception. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers envisions a world where identity is static, communication collapses, and all identities, regardless of categories of social identity, and their mutability or immutability, suffer as a result.

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