

Introduction—"There is no Brazil": A Poet's Writing of Cultural History¹

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A paradox that should not be resolved

In one of his most intriguing poems, Carlos Drummond de Andrade provides inspiration for this current volume of *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies—Brazil 2001: A Revisionary History of Brazilian Literature and Culture*. The poem, called "Hino Nacional," is a paradoxical reconstruction of variegated efforts aimed at the building of the nation. In the final lines of the poem, however, it is "Brazil"—as an impossible Kantian *thing-in-itself*—that emerges and refuses all attempts to grasp its essence:

Brazil does not want us! It is sick and tired of us!
Our Brazil is in the afterworld. This is not Brazil.
There is no Brazil. By any chance, are there Brazilians?²

The paradox cannot be ignored.³ "Brazil" does not exist, yet it is the same "Brazil" that resists the attempts of some ghostlike Brazilians to render it translatable into, let us suppose, substantial volumes of literary and cultural history—such as, for instance, *Brazil 2001*. The poem belongs to the collection *No Brejo das Almas*, published in 1934. Four years earlier, the so-called "Revolução de 1930" began a process of modernization that, beyond the predictable transformation of economic and social structures, included an active cultural program whose aim was to make Brazilians "proud" of the country through the acknowledgement and promotion of its neglected potentialities. For that purpose, in 1936 the National Radio of Rio de Janeiro was founded and soon became a main tool for assuring Getúlio Vargas's

popularity. Seemingly, Brazil was there to be finally deciphered by Brazilians as well as properly propagated through radio waves, newsreel propaganda films, newspaper reports and books—novels, poems, histories, chronicles: every single genre was welcomed as long as it stressed the mainstream.

In a first reading, Drummond's poem would evidence that the naturalness of the official Brazil was but a cultural by-product carefully orchestrated by the revolutionaries who took power in 1930 with the project of modernizing the political and social life of the country. At least from this perspective, the paradox resolves itself into a critical statement: the official "Brazil" would not coincide with *Brazil*. Perhaps that is why, at the same time, there is no Brazil and yet it is Brazil that reveals its own non-existence. In other words, there is a Brazil that precedes the State and hence cannot naturally be reduced to the official image of the country. Brazil reveals itself as a sign overdetermined by meaning, and it is this abundance of meaning that prevents its being seized by any hermeneutic operation. The long-lived cliché seems to have the upper hand in this reading: as exuberant as its tropical nature, *Brazil-in-itself* can only be heartily felt, not merely interpreted.

This reading, nonetheless, does not meet the complexity of Drummond's insight. If it were adequate, how could the final question of the poem doubt the very existence of Brazilians? If *Brazil-in-itself* unsurprisingly exceeds its official fiction, wouldn't it have inscribed itself into the folk—the last resource of genuine resistance, as any competent Romantic narrative would have it? Even more disturbing than doubting the existence of Brazil is the questioning of the reality of Brazilians. If the folk is as fictional as the Nation-State's narrative of the country, then where are we? According to Miguel Tamen we are in a ghostlike configuration. In the introduction to *A Revisionary History of Portuguese Literature*—whose title we have adapted to our own purposes—Tamen shows how etymologically linked are the notions of *theoria* and *revisio* to the idea of *phantasia* and *phantasma* (Tamen xii-xiii). Let me unfold the consequences of this possibility for our endeavor.

In its Greek roots, a theoretical statement was a pronouncement that implied a complex act of re-vision, for it involved "a set of professional witnesses, perform[ing] ... the function of certifying that a certain event has taken place" and could thus become a subject of consideration within the city (Tamen xii). The listeners to the pronouncement, by definition, could not have seen the event referred to by the *theoroi*; it was the credibility attached to this position that performed the supplemental act of conferring truth on

the account. Wlad Godzich clarifies that such an authority was provided in order to discipline the effects of speech in the organization of the city through a clear-cut distinction between “claims” and “theoretical statements.” The former could be made by anyone while the latter was an attribute only attainable by officials designated to the public function of *theoros*.⁴ This particular context creates a complex scene that might be relevant to a reflection on the writing of cultural and literary histories. In sum, the *theoros* has to convey an event witnessed by him to an audience that was not present at the circumstance of which they will be told. Let me stress that this scene indeed produces two acts of re-vision, and distinguishing them allows us to achieve a better understanding of the paradox intuited by Carlos Drummond de Andrade. The first, performed by the *theoros*, is properly speaking a ghostly statement, for “ghosts are always second to something” (Tamen xiv). In this case, the telling is second to the witnessing of an actual event, not to mention that the process of seeing-telling itself cannot entirely coincide with the event in all its multiple aspects. The second act of re-vision is far more complex, and bears a particular interest for my contention. In the case of the listeners, their re-revised ghosts are “second to nothing” and, at the same time, simultaneous to the speech act of the *theoros*. The listener does not have the memory of seeing an actual event but has to project into the telling of the *theoros* the credibility endowed by the public character of this function. Thus, the memory of the listener is socially engendered and becomes a fact insofar as it is imagined as being a faithful representation of a previous reality. In a nutshell, the performance of telling a story originally supposed the prior act of witnessing an event.

I may now suggest that projects such as *Brazil 2001* are special cases of this second mode of re-vision—cases in which the complexity of the relation between seeing and telling is brought to its utmost. As far as cultural and literary histories are concerned, there is no original event to which the narrative refers and according to which it is organized. In Greek terms, neither the *theoros* nor the listeners have actually witnessed any event—it is worth recalling that the Greek verb *theorein* means “to look at,” “to contemplate,” “to survey” (Godzich 164). Transposing that problem to the nineteenth-century building of the Nation-State, it becomes clear that, in spite of themselves, literary historians and their patriotic readers were indeed engaged in a playful activity of sharing a belief in an origin that could not be established, for the telling of a nation’s history cannot count on a prior vision

of its own origins. Rather, the classic relationship has to be literally inverted, for it is the telling that has to prove successful in order to create a retrospective seeing: once an originary event is chosen, the historical gaze organizes accordingly the sequence of events, which in turn attests to the truth of the account. The tautology is insurmountable.⁵ Therefore, this account as well as its reception are substantially substanceless; they are inexorably second to nothing; they are ghostly ghosts, so to speak. As such they cannot ground attempts at unveiling the “national character” of a nation—and, once again, the redundancy is unavoidable. Leo Spitzer has given to this problem a definitive formula in his review of Dámaso Alonso’s *Poesía Española*. According to Spitzer, this redundancy creates a “national tautology,” grounded on “the implied assertion that a Spanish work of art is great because it is genuinely Spanish and it is genuinely Spanish when it is great”⁶ (Spitzer 354). This is why Drummond’s paradox cannot (and should not) be resolved; otherwise we will be enmeshed in just such a tautology. Indeed, Drummond seems to suggest that, instead of a sign full of self-reinforcing meaning, a nation is much closer to an empty signifier that is given a semantic charge in accordance with different needs shaped by the contingency of historical circumstances.

Homi Bhabha has already keenly remarked that a nation is above all a matter of narration: “the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies” (Bhabha 2). Narrating the nation always produces discourses that, while they promise an all-encompassing inclusion, are mainly determined by exclusions. Therefore, “the ‘locality’ of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself” (Bhabha 4); it continuously engenders the “other” within the supposed discourse of sameness. As any narrative has to rely on an initial selection of elements, it cannot claim to be a representation of a totality and, at the same time, reveals its arbitrariness as well as the interests underlying it. As Ernst Renan already had recognized in his well-known lecture “*Qu’est-ce qu’une Nation?*”: “No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, a Taifale, or a Visigoth, yet every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century.”⁷ Therefore it is not only the origin that cannot be known; there is also a great amount of information that a citizen has to remember to forget in order to become “genuinely” French. Here the acuteness of Drummond’s insight comes to the

fore: such narration is but a *mise en abîme*: the more national histories are written, the less their readers will be able to seize the totality of the nation. By any chance, is there such a totality?

In short, we do not produce collective volumes of cultural and literary history such as *Brazil 2001* because we do not yet know what Brazilians are and because we hope finally to unveil their essence through the very collection of essays. Most likely we organize them because we will surely never know what Brazilians might be—nor, for that matter, Chinese, Uruguayans, Portuguese, South Africans, etc., for, as Homi Bhabha has helped us to understand, this is not a *Brazilian* problem but a theoretical question related to the constitution of modern society. The production of such volumes is inevitably then a fictive enterprise for, as Wolfgang Iser has reminded us, fictionality is a tool through which we try to contact realities far beyond our reach, despite our awareness of the impossibility of actually seizing them.⁸ If *Brazil 2001* offers something besides the usual collection of essays it is that it tries to acknowledge the fictionality involved in its endeavor.

Let me conclude these introductory remarks by stressing that this acknowledgement does not imply that literary and cultural histories should not be written. On the contrary, I am suggesting that they should be conceived of in the same vein in which Jean-François Lyotard defined a philosophical question;⁹ namely, literary and cultural histories should not be written to provide answers—as the obsession with national identity would have it—but to envision new approaches and therefore give rise to new questions. After all, it does not suffice to remember that cultural differences, understood as “national identities,” are culturally “invented,” if that also means overlooking actual differences among nations. In the case of *Brazil 2001: A Revisionary History of Brazilian Literature and Culture*, the challenge is to write cultural and literary history while avoiding the tautology of searching for national identity.

The issue

This challenge was met through the reconstruction of different and sometimes opposing views of national identity.¹⁰ The illustrations distributed throughout the volume already evidence this diversity, which, due to its plurality, should discourage an essentialist approach to the question of national character. In other words, instead of embracing a predetermined conception, the collaborators were asked to develop reflections upon texts

and contexts that helped to shape portraits of Brazil. If a prior act of seeing is not available in the writing of cultural history, its reconstruction has to begin accordingly with the tradition of telling the nation—after all, traditional cultural history has been but its narration. It is, however, worth calling the reader's attention to the essayistic nature of those reflections, which are intended less to provide a final word on the subject than to entice the readers' imagination in order to prompt them to acquaint themselves with the work presented by our collaborators.

The first section of *Brazil 2001* pays homage to the work of Gilberto Freyre. His masterpiece *Casa-Grande & Senzala* appeared in 1933 at a time when Brazilian intellectuals were obsessed with the so-called negative effects of *mestiçagem*. Freyre's great achievement was related not only to a substantially new approach to the question of miscegenation—seen by Freyre as a culturally productive phenomenon instead of an insoluble racial problem—but also to a unique style that grants *Casa-Grande & Senzala* an interest that exceeds the value of some of its interpretations. Moreover, since its translation, undertaken by Samuel Putnam,¹¹ Freyre's voice has been highly determinant in the way Brazilian culture is perceived abroad.¹² Therefore, a critical reappraisal of Freyre's work should always be welcomed.

In the sections entitled "Literature" and "Culture," readers have at their disposal an array of textual inventions of Brazil—once again, the sheer plurality of perspectives is an emphatic sign of the fictionality of such endeavors. These textual inventions played an important role given the long absence of universities in Brazilian intellectual history, since universities became solidly established only after the third decade of the twentieth century. Until then, literary works and interpretative essays provided tools for framing the Brazilian historical process into narratives of the country's formation.¹³ Moreover, in these sections, the reader will encounter the very beginning of the creation of such images as well as their contemporary models and countermodels.

The following section, "Cultural Intermediaries," is inherently related to the conception of *Brazil 2001* as a paradoxical project. This section was inspired by a thought-provoking suggestion. In the introduction to *Formação da Literatura Brasileira*, Antonio Candido argues that a literature such as that of Brazil demands permanent contact with foreign literatures, since otherwise it runs the risk of losing itself in inevitable provincialism. He distinguishes literatures that do not depend on other literary experiences for their readers

to apprehend a particular worldview—such as Russian, English and French literatures—and those literatures that, in contrast, demand permanent contact with foreign texts, as in the case of Brazilian literature. According to Candido: “Those who fed from our literature alone may be identified at first sight because they display provincial taste and lack of proportion, even when they are erudite and intelligent. We are doomed, therefore, to depend on our experience of other literatures” (Candido, *Formação* 9-10).

It is worth acknowledging that this suggestion has given rise to a series of polemical remarks, which I will not be able to contemplate in this introduction.¹⁴ However, I want to call attention to the underlying potential of Candido’s approach. It stresses the comparatist nature of Brazilian culture, indeed of post-colonial cultures. Since its very beginnings, the invention of Brazil has been linked inextricably to the contributions of so-called cultural intermediaries, and to such an extent that it may not be paradoxical to conceive of Brazilian culture at least in part as a creation of foreign perspectives.¹⁵ In the section, “Cultural Intermediaries,” the reader will find several examples of the presence of such perspectives at different moments of Brazilian history.

The next group of essays provides a panoramic view of “Literary History and Literary Criticism,” from its first attempts up to the contemporary scene. Its reach should give the reader a sense of the issues and problems faced by the institution of literary studies in Brazil, which have mainly been concerned with the search for national identity. Therefore, this section offers a strategic location for addressing the project of *Brazil 2001*, namely, the writing of an alternative history—alternative precisely because it aims at detaching itself from any concern with such identity. The careful reader will notice this underlying tension among the essays of “Literary History and Literary Criticism.”

The final section, “Audiovisual,” represents a necessary although sometimes overlooked acknowledgement, namely, that the inventions of Brazil depended (and still depend) on means other than the representatives of a bookish culture. Due also to high levels of illiteracy, orality has preserved its importance in the transmission of culture—but this should not be understood as a merely negative phenomenon.¹⁶ In the 1960s, films were seen as tools for revolutionary changes. Popular music, for instance, plays a significant role in the definition of Brazilian identities, as do television networks, which are the strongest bonding element in contemporary

Brazilian society. Therefore, an account of Brazilian cultural history would be incomplete without including the audiovisual dimension. This volume aims at advancing in this direction.

In a lucid review, Paulo de Medeiros commented upon the impressive collective work *Portugal heute. Politik. Wirtschaft. Kultur* edited by Dietrich Briesemeister and Axel Schönberger. In spite of the fact that Medeiros raised some pertinent questions concerning the organization of the volume, he envisioned the main achievement of the publication as having made “explicit how much Portuguese Studies needs a serious consideration of its goals, methods and practices” (Medeiros 229). I willingly acknowledge the shortcomings of *Brazil 2001* but would hope that it will represent an important tool for such a reconsideration of Brazilian Studies. Given that this is the first time that such a comprehensive presentation of Brazilian literature and culture is offered to an English-speaking audience, such shortcomings are unavoidable. Shortcomings: by now it should be clear that one can only ever come up short, that despite our best efforts we will always fail to arrive at a Brazil that is not there. Ghostly efforts for a ghostly Brazil, so to speak. Therefore, only those who still believe in achieving totality—that is, still conceive of grasping the essence of the nation—might see in the gaps something other than a stimulus to propose alternative writings and collections. Let us welcome them, for, if ghosts are ultimately what we get closer to, we seem to have no option but to try continuously to conjure them up through the cultural histories that we write.

Acknowledgements

Obviously, an enterprise such as this could never be achieved without extensive collaboration. First of all, let me risk redundancy by thanking Frank F. Sousa and Victor J. Mendes. Without their enthusiasm and unflinching belief this issue (like Drummond’s *Brazilians*) would simply not exist. Gina Reis has provided constant support throughout the difficulties inherent in this project. Memory Holloway always had perfect solutions for difficult problems and still found time to contribute a remarkable piece. In other words, the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth has proven to be much more than a friendly place for Brazilian Studies—it has become the main architect of *Brazil 2001*.

Maria Aparecida Salgueiro and André Lázaro represented what Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) is at its best: unconditional support for intellectual projects that make academic everyday life surprisingly pleasant. UERJ's Cultural Department sponsored *Brazil 2001* within the "Comissão UERJ: Brasil 500 Anos," which has proven instrumental for organizing this special issue. Valdeí Lopes has contributed from the beginning to the completion of the project. Peonia Viana Guedes and Roberto Acízelo de Souza also have offered the support of the Graduate Program of Literature at UERJ regarding the translation. I also want to thank Muriel Lydia for helping in the editing process. As in many other projects, José Mario Pereira has given me the benefit of intellectual exchange.

Finally, I would like to thank both the translators—whose work made it possible to present *Brazil 2001* completely in English—and our assistant to the editors, Mark Streeter, whose commitment and intelligence were most appreciated. Because of their combined efforts, the essays here published will hopefully acquire a wider readership.

Notes

¹ I want to thank Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Luiz Costa Lima, Eduardo Neiva, Victor Mendes and José Mario Pereira for their suggestions and above all criticism regarding this introduction. I want especially to thank Mark Streeter for a thorough revision of this introduction as well as for his perceptive comments.

² This is only a literal rendering of the original: "O Brasil não nos quer! Está farto de nós! / Nosso Brasil é no outro mundo. Este não é o Brasil. / Nenhum Brasil existe. E acaso existirão os brasileiros?"

John Gledson has proposed for the last line of the poem the following translation: "No Brazil exists. And who's to say Brazilians do?" (Gledson 6).

³ The relevance of the notion of paradox in order to approach Brazilian culture was also remarked by John Gledson: "Brazil is a country of paradoxes, and not the least of them is that it seems easy to get to know, and yet the more one gets close, the more complex, the more contradictory it becomes" (Gledson 1).

⁴ "The city needed a more official and more ascertainable form of knowledge if it was not to lose itself in endless claims and counterclaims. . . . Only the theoretical attested event could be treated as a fact" (Godzich 165).

⁵ In a perfect formulation, Wolfgang Iser synthesizes the impasse created by such a tautology: "Whenever beginnings and ends are postulated, history turns into a testimony for preconceived notions, which are supposed to reveal themselves through history but cannot be identical to it. Moreover, understanding facts would be of minor importance if history were considered as a process of unfolding something existing prior to itself or a march to a goal that by definition would be outside itself" (Iser, *The Range of Interpretation* 58).

Regarding the obsession with "national identity," its tautological understanding turns the very writing of literary histories curiously unnecessary or, at best, an exercise of antiquarians whose sole obligation is to assemble facts concerning a truth that is always already known. In that context, acts of interpretation are obviously unwelcome.

⁶ Further in the same review, Spitzer complements his criticism of the “national tautology” with an insightful remark on “the North-American usage of *this country*: it is as if the North-American understands his own country as one among other possible countries, as if he had just arrived in the United States! This relativistic attitude—naturally impossible in Europe—constitutes a healthy lesson towards a national self-criticism” (Spitzer 371 [endnote 2]).

⁷ Renan 11. The lecture was held at the Sorbonne, 11 March 1882. Obviously, Renan pronounced it under the effect of the defeat of France by Prussia in the 1871 Franco-Prussian war. Indeed, there was a more recent and troubling massacre to which Renan could have referred: that of the Paris Commune. Thus, in 1882, to be a French citizen required above all forgetting the 1871 massacre of the communards.

⁸ See, especially, Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*.

⁹ “You philosophers ask questions without answers, questions that have to remain unanswered to deserve being called philosophical. According to you answered questions are only technical matters” (Lyotard 8).

¹⁰ In a recent book, Marilena Chauí has proposed an interesting distinction: “whereas the ideology of ‘national character’ presents the nation as an achieved totality . . . the ideology of ‘national identity’ conceives the nation as an incomplete and lacunar totality” (Chauí 27). Nonetheless, in this introduction, I will stress the similarities of both ideologies insofar as they evolve around the obsession with the “national.”

¹¹ Randal Johnson remarked properly that “Putnam’s contribution to the study of Brazilian literature has yet to be fully appreciated. In addition to publishing one of the histories of the subject [*Marvelous Journey*, 1948], he has also initiated the Brazilian literature section of the Library of Congress’ *Handbook of Latin American Studies*” (Johnson 3).

In 1944 Putnam had already translated Euclides da Cunha’s masterpiece *Os Sertões*. It was given the English title, *Rebellion in the Backlands*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944, with introduction and notes by Samuel Putnam.

¹² Indeed, the main works of Gilberto Freyre are already available in English. For instance, in 1945 there appeared published by Knopf, *Brazil, an Interpretation*. In 1946, also by Knopf, *Casa-Grande & Senzala. Formação da Família Brasileira sob o Regime de Economia Patriarcal* (1933) received the English title *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study of the Development of Brazilian Civilization*. In 1986, a paperback edition, with an introduction by David H. P. Maybury-Lewis, was published by The University of California Press. *Sobrados e Mucambos. Decadência do Patriarcado Rural no Brasil* (1936), translated by Harriet de Onis and published by Knopf in 1963 with an introduction by Frank Tannenbaum, received the English title *The Mansions and the Shanties: The Making of Modern Brazil*. In 1986, a paperback edition, edited by E. Bradford Burns, appeared from The University of California Press. Finally, *Ordem e Progresso; Processo de Desintegração das Sociedades Patriarcal e Semipatriarcal no Brasil sob o Regime de Trabalho Livre: Aspectos de um Quase Meio Século de Transição do Trabalho Escravo para o Trabalho Livre; e da Monarquia para a República* (1959) was translated by Rod W. Horton and published by Knopf in 1970, receiving the English title *Order and Progress: Brazil from Monarchy to Republic*. A paperback edition, with an introduction by Ludwig Lauerhass, Jr., was published by The University of California Press in 1986.

¹³ Regarding this issue, Antonio Candido had already remarked: “Differently from what happens in some other countries, in Brazil literature has been, more than philosophy or human sciences, the central phenomenon of the life of the spirit. . . . An Alencar and a Domingos Olímpio were, at the same time, the Gilberto Freyre and the José Lins do Rego of their time; their fiction acquired the meaning of an initiation in the knowledge of the reality of the country” (Candido, “Literatura e Cultura” 130, 136).

¹⁴ Nevertheless, let me mention some of the most important criticisms regarding Antonio Candido’s ideas. Afrânio Coutinho replied immediately after the publication of Candido’s *Formação da Literatura Brasileira in Conceito de Literatura Brasileira*. See also Eduardo Portela,

“Circunstância e Problema da História Literária”; Haroldo de Campos, *O Sequestro do Barroco na Formação da Literatura Brasileira: O Caso Gregório de Mattos*; and Luiz Costa Lima, “Concepção de História Literária na Formação.”

Ligia Chiappini has considered these criticisms in “Os Equívocos da Crítica à Formação.”

I have already attempted an alternative reading of Candido’s suggestion in “*A Formação da Literatura no Brasil*—Esboço de Releitura de Antonio Candido.”

¹⁵ In a recent groundbreaking book, Luiz Felipe de Alencastro has given an unprecedented historical consistency to this hypothesis: “Formation of Brazil in the South Atlantic:’ the reader who has looked at the cover of the book might be intrigued by its subtitle. Does it mean that Brazil was formed outside Brazil? That is exactly the point: this is the historical paradox that I am aiming at showing in the following pages” (Alencastro 9).

In a nutshell, Alencastro argues that Brazilian colonial history cannot be seen as either an extension of the colonial territory or as a progression towards independence from Portugal, for it was mainly determined through its relationship with the zone of reproduction of slaves sustained by the Portuguese in Angola. Thus, more than a “Brazilian” history, the colonial period witnessed the emergence of a “space without territory, a Lusophone archipelago composed by the enclaves of Portuguese America and of the trade posts of Angola” (9). Alencastro concludes the book with an epigrammatic statement: “The history of the Brazilian market dominated by pillage and commerce is long, but the history of the Brazilian nation dominated by violence and consent is short” (Alencastro 355).

¹⁶ In an interview to *L’Express*, Caetano Veloso touched upon this subject: “I believe that, in general, from the 1920s or the 1930s onwards, Brazilian popular music has become an expression which is considered reliable. It is a force that is respected because it says the truth of Brazilian society. (...) There is a very simple reason for that: the poverty of the country, the simplicity of the formation and of the education. The popular songs are a form of expression that is accessible to all” (Faure 10). Indeed, Arto Lindsay had remarked perceptively in his presentation of the CD *Beleza Tropical*: “Brazilian popular music plays a larger role in the cultural life of Brazil than popular music seems to elsewhere. It wasn’t until the second half of the twentieth century that a majority of the population was literate. And a large majority of Brazilians still live below the poverty line. Perhaps these facts contributed to the importance of oral traditions in Brazil” (Lindsay, “Presentation”).

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