

**“Unembedded, Disappeared”:
Marlene NourbeSe Philip’s Hyper/In/Visible Literary Celebrity**

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Abstract: In her essays, Marlene NourbeSe Philip has been forthcoming about being “an unembedded, disappeared poet and writer in Canada” whose contributions to cultural life have been systematically obstructed, partly because of her public activism on behalf of Black communities. Her visibility is an oxymoronic, bedeviling combination of disappearance and unchosen hypervisibility, with the hypervisibility largely brought about by a radical misunderstanding and abjection of her work as a cultural activist. In this article, I examine how the “embedded, disappeared” and yet present, visible, audible literary and activist career of Marlene NourbeSe Philip challenges prevailing conceptions of authorship in Canada. In particular, I think about how and why Philip’s hypervisible invisibility offers a challenge to the regimes of visibility which tend to define literary celebrity. Any account of celebrity visibility needs to recognise the fact that the implications and consequences of visibility do not sit evenly on all public persons, as the theories of Katherine McKittrick, Jenny Burman, Sarah J. Jackson, and Toni Morrison testify. Neither is celebrity visibility the dualistic, either/or proposition so frequently framed by celebrity studies: either a much-desired good (an adoring audience) or a reviled evil, as in instances of notoriety, or in cases of overly intrusive, unwanted public attention. Instead, we need to reckon seriously with the ways visibility may be both systemically denied *and* reimposed as oppressive hypervisibility, as I argue it is in the celebrity of Marlene NourbeSe Philip and, by extension, in that of many racialised public figures.

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In March of 2019, I was looking forward with great anticipation to attending an event at Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario featuring Marlene NourbeSe Philip, whose work has been so central to my understanding of the field of Canadian Literature since I began teaching in the 1980s. On this occasion, I was preparing to teach Philip's two brilliantly trenchant essays on cultural appropriation, "The Disappearing Debate" and "Race-Baiting and the Writers Union of Canada," separated by 25 years but united by the unhappy persistence of acts of appropriation in the Canadian literary world. Alongside them, I planned to teach Philip's site *Set Speaks*, which documents in meticulous detail her own experience of appropriation at the hands of a Lebanese visual artist working in the Netherlands who used Philip's poetic masterpiece *Zong!* without her permission as the basis for a prize-winning art installation. In so many respects, I felt that Philip was central to this graduate seminar on Canadian literature and appropriation. But I had also read Paul Barrett's then-recent (September 2018) essay in the *Walrus*, "The Poetic Disturbances of M. NourbeSe Philip," and so was aware of the lack of recognition in the Canadian literary institution for Philip's impressive and powerful body of work; as Barrett notes, she has yet to win a major award in this country, though she won the Casas de las Américas Prize and a Guggenheim fellowship among other honours abroad, and the publication of her powerful poetry cycle *Zong!* was met with critical silence in Canada—not even one review—while it was warmly celebrated elsewhere. Even so, I was surprised that this situation—what Philip regularly refers to as being "disappeared" as a writer in Canada—was a major topic of discussion at the event, though in retrospect I shouldn't have been. Philip has been very forthcoming about being, in her words, "an unembedded, disappeared poet and writer in Canada" (*Bla_nk* 13) in essays like "Jammin' Still," "Interview with an Empire," and "Who's Listening? Artists, Audiences & Language," now all collected in her volume *Bla_k*. But I was so firmly convinced of her centrality to my own thinking about creativity in Canada that I suppose that I wanted, at some level, to give little quarter to or acknowledgement of this disappearance, to celebrate her work without reference to it, and, what's more, in the teeth of it. In that case, I wondered, what was the reason for my disappointment? More specifically, what was it about my notions of "field" and "centrality" that needed a long, second look?

In this article, I take that longer look at how the "embedded, disappeared" and yet present, visible, audible career of Marlene NourbeSe Philip challenges prior conceptions of authorship in Canada, particularly in light of my work on the hypervisible forms of authorship that announce a condition of cultural centrality: in a word, celebrity. In my first substantial work on this subject, *Literary Celebrity in Canada* (2007), I chose to analyse what I called the "how" rather than the "who" and "why" of celebrity, for I felt that the latter questions were already being addressed by the plentiful studies and debates over literary canonisation in Canada, and I was interested in *how* celebrity manifested itself and played

out in the Canadian literary field. And so, to choose my main case studies from the twentieth century, I relied upon the criterion of public visibility: I would examine writers who had been most frequently described as literary “stars” in Canadian media—at that time, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and Carol Shields. But as years went by, and my interest in celebrity grew beyond the boundaries of literary studies, I became more and more absorbed by instances of celebrity that featured a compromised, sideways relationship to visibility. I theorised a “reluctant celebrity”—certain celebrities’ publically avowed mixed feelings about being a celebrity—that I argued only those celebrities with a solid foundation of gendered, raced, and other forms of privilege could get away with expressing. Reluctance itself is an internally riven, undertow-like affect: when we are reluctant, we wish not to do the thing that we are nevertheless in the act of doing (*Reluctant Celebrity*). I was intent upon distinguishing reluctance from the refusal of reclusive artists dubbed by Siobhan Lyons “escape artists” (Lyons)—a response with which reluctance had often been conflated in discussions of celebrity.

But as I returned to think about the oxymoronically palpable disappearance of Philip from the Canadian literary pantheon, none of these formulations and variations of celebrity seemed to apply or even come close to describing or accounting for it. And the related concept of anti-fame did not seem helpful either, for it is also frequently understood as a recoil from fame (the singer Sia’s “Anti-Fame Manifesto” is often cited as a classic expression [Furler; Hansen, Karakus]), or as a desire on the part of the successful to refuse their present success by returning to an earlier period in which they were in the ascendant, a young aspirant steadfastly building that success. The latter theory, as first elaborated by Otto Rank, forms the basis of Joe Moran’s analysis of John Updike’s anti-fame (Moran). But what about an anti-fame that isn’t a matter of the celebrity’s refusal or mixed feelings, but is, rather, a condition imposed from without? Far from refusing acknowledgement, Philip had *been refused* by the Canadian literary world to which she had contributed so profoundly over several decades. In what follows, I think about how and why Philip’s hypervisible invisibility offers a challenge to the regimes of visibility which largely, and problematically, tend to define literary celebrity.

Before proceeding, we need to gain a solid, accurate understanding of what Philip means by being “disappeared,” for in several of her public discussions of her career in Canada, she defines the complicated lineaments of this condition with great precision. In the full context of her description of herself as an “unembedded, disappeared poet and writer” in her essay “Jammin’ Still,” Philip emphasises the acts of public expression and memory-making that she has undertaken in the face of that disappearance: “I write memory on the margins of history, in the shadow of empire and on the frontier of Silence; I write against the grain as an unembedded, disappeared poet and writer in Canada” (*Bla_k* 13). In that

powerfully anaphoric statement, Philip makes it clear that disappearance does not equate easily or entirely with “Silence,” whose frontiers she inhabits and speaks from.

Unsurprisingly for such a perceptive commentator on appropriation, Philip mindfully notes the specific histories of the term she has chosen to describe her condition—“disappeared”: “I am mindful that to be disappeared in certain contexts is an event that usually results in a death; it is a phrase that conjures a state of limbo for family members who, in contexts of political terror and instability, have lost contact with loved ones whose whereabouts remain unknown. Neither dead nor alive, they are disappeared” (*Bla_k* 26). Despite her awareness of this distinction, this powerfully emotive term, bespeaking a liminal existence on the borderlands of presence and absence, remains, for Philip, “the metaphor that best describes how I have felt as a writer in Canada” and testifies to “the hollowing out of my presence as a writer in this country” (*Bla_k* 26). As she remarked to Nasrin Himada, “It’s a deeply troubling place to be, because emotionally it’s as if you’re a memory of yourself” (*Bla_k* 323): not absent but *absented* and yet present.

This mindfulness of what is due to the political and cultural histories of a term like “disappeared” is not surprising, as I have suggested, in an appropriation critic of Philip’s thoughtfulness and perspicacity. However, the second term in Philip’s self-description—“unembedded”—deserves closer attention too, for it is just as specifically situated historically and politically. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) tells us that the adjectival form “embedded” originated in late eighteenth-century geological writings, and that it refers to something (originally a rock or mineral formation) that is “fixed firmly in a surrounding solid mass” (OED). But in a 2006 addendum, the OED recognised the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century usage of the term to indicate “(of a journalist) to be attached to a military unit in this way” (i.e., “to report on a military conflict”) (OED). While the OED traces this usage back to 1995, its frequency increased in the wake of 9/11, as journalists were increasingly “embedded” in military units, especially during and after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. I maintain that Philip’s usage of the term “unembedded” is deeply meaningful: she is both disappeared (“un”) and “fixed firmly” (“embedded”) as a witness offering testimony about conflicts of a different sort: those of class, race, gender. For, as with the military embeddedness of journalists around the turn of the twenty-first century, Philip is aware of the potential for cooptation by the state when artists are granted an unaccustomed space in and from which to speak. In a discussion with Nasrin Himada, Philip observes that the arts grants that were offered to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Canada’s Confederation had an effect similar to the risky allure of embeddedness for journalists: to “drop the artist in the middle of this issue by dangling in front of artists who are chronically underfunded, an extra opportunity to apply for grants.” Her answer to this danger of cooptation is to agitate for change from within the structures into which one has gained admission—much as she has done, as a poet, with the English language: “one way of subverting the intent would be to use

the grants to mount critiques of the colonial state” (*Bla_k* 331). Like those select journalists who used what was a gesture of cooptation to produce independent and critical journalism during the invasion of Iraq, the “unembedded” disappeared artist testifies to and through dislocation.

The concept of “tradition” is one in which Philip similarly both finds and loses herself as an artist in Canada; she recounts on several occasions that when she first came to this country, she felt alone as a Black writer, despite the traditions of Black writing in Canada that she is well aware that scholars such as George Elliott Clarke, Rinaldo Walcott and, more recently, Karina Vernon, among others, have studied and brought to readers’ attention. “What this loneliness meant,” she explains in “Jammin’ Still,” “was that one would either disappear in the nothingness or be forced to go deep to find the subterranean rivers of tradition that one could link oneself to” (*Bla_k* 15). At the same time, to identify with prominent Black writing traditions in the US or Britain held challenges for Philip, in terms of their already well-established nature; in that respect, she initially saw locating herself as a Black writer in Canada as potentially offering her extra space in which to create (“Interview with an Empire” 62). As it has turned out, though, Philip’s work has been far more recognised in the US than it has here; as Alexis Okeowo recounts in a recent *New Yorker* profile of the prominent critical race theorist Saidye Hartman, Hartman “calls her work a ‘history of the present’—writing that examines the past to show how it haunts our time.” Moved to provide examples of colleagues who are engaged in this same crucial, palimpsestic work, Hartman immediately “points to the Canadian writer M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, a book of poems, extrapolated from legal documents, about a hundred and fifty Africans who were drowned on a British slave ship, so that the owners could collect an insurance payment” (Okeowo). The critical references to Philip’s work as leading-edge are far sparser in Canada.

On top of this issue of non-recognition, there is the issue of *misrecognition*: being assumed to belong to a tradition that, in effect, “unembeds” you, as is the case with Philip’s relationship to experimental writing in Canada. On one hand, there is a lack of recognition of Philip as an experimental writer; as she has noted, prominent critical works on the subject such as Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy’s *Writing in Our Time: Canada’s Radical Poetries in English* have given her work scant attention, so she is “disappeared” from that literary location. But, on the other hand, there is the misrecognition of her work that a cooptation into the tradition of experimental writing, as it has been narrated in Canada, would occasion. As Philip has carefully explained, although there are textual overlaps between her writing and that tradition that become visible if one cursorily experiences her poetry, there are crucial underlying differences; as Kate Siklosi aptly notes, “her project is different from other works of experimental poetry—although *Zong!* and other of Philip’s poetic works manipulate language in similar ways to other experimental poetic works, she does so not in the spirit of *jouissance*, to revel in the realms of ethereal semantic possibility, but to

consciously and carefully critique the European colonial project, in which language was a central means of controlling and managing its subjects” (Siklosi). Indeed, the affective wellsprings and registers of Philip’s experimentalism could not be more divergent from *jouissance*; as Philip vividly puts it, “The language-based nature of poetry such as my own starts from a very different place. That of the wasteland between the *terror* of language and the *horror* of silence” (*Black* 53; emphasis mine).

Philip has mused over the way in which this linguistic-affective position at the crossroads of terror/horror and language/silence has potentially affected “issues of marketability and audience”—issues directly connected to and, indeed, constitutive of literary celebrity. In “Interview with an Empire,” she registers her wariness of literary texts that render the horrors of the slave trade in aesthetically beautiful language, and thereby win broader audiences and institutional *réclame*. On the other hand, as she acknowledges, every artist wants and needs a wide audience, but the besetting question for her is how far she can bend to their desires, “how much you are willing to give up for such an audience and market” (*Black* 59). In another essay, “Who’s Listening? Artists, Audiences & Language,” Philip delves deeper into this question, offering a pertinent distinction between audience and market; as she explains, she may have an audience for her work, composed of “those Black people who are eager to read about themselves, as well as a growing number of whites who have begun to come to the understanding that other worlds apart from theirs exist” (*Black* 78). At the same time, though, she may be understood by publishers not to have a market because institutional assumptions do not necessarily operate in tandem with the experiential evidence of audiences; indeed, in Philip’s case, she is convinced, they have operated in defiance of that evidence. “Despite the audience that I may have,” Philip concludes, “the perceived market forces, interpreted with a sizeable dollop of racist arguments, supersede” (*Black* 78). This analysis of the relationship between audience and market maps onto Philip’s self-described condition of “disappearance” on the borders of language and silence, for audience marks a presence, a palpable receiving of and participation in artistic testimony, while market, as an institutionally wielded concept, silences Philip and other artists who find themselves inhabiting the negative ledger of “perceived market forces.” Such an insight is enormously valuable to scholars of celebrity in general and literary celebrity in particular, for the field often conflates market and audience in its assessment of celebrated authors who are assumed to have both in abundance. Part of the methodological problem here is that studies of literary celebrity have tended to choose institutionally defined exemplars of “success” as case studies. We need to shift the optics, and consider not only the dimensions of celebrity as manifested in those who are widely perceived to possess it, but also, importantly, the perspective of those who seek to enter and thrive in what Pierre Bourdieu called “the field of cultural production.” Martha Orgeron offers a similar argument in specific reference to aspirants to early cinematic fame; in

Hollywood Ambitions (2008), she examines aspirants whose desires either were frustrated or were satisfied in ways that they did not anticipate. In the literary field, too, we need to understand celebrity from the outside-in, rather than from the inside-out; our view of the phenomenon will, I predict, be radically changed by taking up the perspective of artists whose positioning vis à vis celebrity is fraught and complicated by systemic obstruction. As Bourdieu observed of those writers who find themselves with what Philip would call a (select) audience but not a (large) market, “the absence of audience, and of profit, may be the effect of privation as much as a refusal, or a privation converted into a refusal” (50). For Philip, the various privations enacted by racism in the arts constitute one such systemic refusal.

What those privation-fueled refusals create is, in essence, a disappearance against which Philip’s career has repeatedly and mightily struggled and resisted. To draw on one specific instance from her career, in her coda to “Letter, January 1989: How Do You Explain?,” Philip recalls that when she sought to publish her young adult fiction *Harriet’s Daughter* in the 1980s, “I had to confront the fact that publishers admitted to having a problem with the characters—read: Black characters,” but when she sent the manuscript to Heinemann in England, it was “immediately accepted” and then only “later published here” (*Bla_k* 173). The prevailing of those “perceived market forces” created a situation in which Philip, as author of this beloved book, was both present and absent as its author in Canada.²

When, in the years that followed, Philip was subjected to the gaze of the Canadian media because of her role as an activist, when, for example, she protested at PEN’s 1989 Annual General Meeting at which writers of colour were underrepresented on panels, as well as the Royal Ontario Museum’s *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibition also in 1989, this condition of being both present and absent found a new, troubling expression. As Linda Morra argues in *Unarrested Archives*, Canadian journalists have tended to rely upon a 1993 account of Philip written by the *Toronto Star* columnist Joey Slinger in which he attacked Philip for her activism, referring to her as “a writer hardly anybody had [ever] heard of” (qtd. in Morra 158). The result, Morra argues, was “the formation of a media-based discourse about Philip’s person, one that legitimated the characterisation of her as antagonistic and aggressive” (159)—and, I would add, anonymous, not worth knowing. Morra reaches the same conclusion about another, high-profile attack on Philip by Michael Coren on his CFRB radio talk show in 1995 that led to painful, years-long legal action. Morra perceptively notes of

² But Philip has also reflected that, in some ways, the situation has gotten even tougher for emerging Black writers today, for whereas she was able to publish her first two collections of poetry, *Thorns* and *Salmon Courage*, with Williams-Wallace, a small press run by poet Ann Wallace that was committed to publishing work by Black Canadian writers like Philip, Dionne Brand, Ayanna Black, and Claire Harris, “in 2017, there exist no Black-owned publishers here in Toronto or even in Canada, as far as my research has revealed,” leaving emerging writers of colour to contend with “the continuing, overwhelmingly white composition of the publishing industry” (*Bla_k* 84).

Coren's on-air attack, which she quotes at length, that its repeated anaphoric broadside, "This is a woman who ..." "consistently refuses her the name and status of a writer, the effect of which is to reinforce anonymity" (162). Over the airwaves and in the print media, then, Philip was simultaneously rendered hyper-present as an object of attack and absent(ed), anonymous.

Much the same could be said of another painful chapter in Philip's artistic career: the already-mentioned appropriation of *Zong!* in 2017 by a Lebanese artist working out of Amsterdam, for there too, Philip's writing was rendered both omnipresent and anonymised. One of the most distressing aspects of this episode was the way in which, although the artist in question, Rana Hamadeh, was well aware of Philip's status as author of the work, for she wrote to her to request permission (albeit in a manner that suggested that she assumed that agreement was forthcoming), which was not granted, once she proceeded with the project she dropped all public reference to Philip and to *Zong!*, referring only to the legal case, Gregson vs. Gilbert, that documented the Zong affair. Nowhere, not in the interviews Hamadeh gave, nor in her prize acceptance, did she acknowledge Philip, without whom neither Hamadeh nor anyone else, for that matter, at that time, would have been conversant with the long-disregarded case decision document. As Siklosi rightly observes, "Not only did she use the material and spirit of *Zong!* without permission, but she also enacted an extremely ironic erasure of Philip's poetic and archival labour"—ironic because it "contributes to an ongoing archive of erasing Black presence and subjecthood that Philip's work, including *Zong!*, was and is resisting" (Siklosi). Siklosi's conclusion, that Philip was "Erased before she could disappear" (Siklosi) speaks pointedly and poignantly to the silencing of her artistic labour, but it is also true that resistances to this theft, like Siklosi's published essay and, especially, Philip's extensive documentation of the theft and its aftermath in *Set Speaks* bring *chosen* visibility and testimony into the site of that erasure.

Marlene NourbeSe Philip's status as a writer in Canada, then, is ultimately an oxymoronic one: a bedeviling combination of unchosen hypervisibility and disappearance, with the hypervisibility largely brought about by a radical misunderstanding and abjection of her work as a cultural activist. But this hypervisible dislocation is a condition that many Black women face when they enter a public sphere, especially when the purpose for that entrance is to pursue social justice. Drawing on Jenny Burman's concept of the "spaces of removal" to which Black women who voice critique are consigned by the media, as "internal 'Others,'" Morra argues that the Coren attack rendered Philip "hypervisible" in precisely this dislocating, silencing way (Burman 179; Morra 149). Even the settlement of the dispute, whose terms remain subject to a non-disclosure agreement, is a further instance of hypervisible disappearance; because Philip was not willing to make her personal journals public, which she would have had to do were the legal process to continue, she agreed to a settlement that rendered her silent on the subject of its resolution (Morra 150). Silence was,

in this instance, the only protection possible at that juncture against further acts of non-consensual hypervisibility (though, as Morra goes on to argue, Philip's retaining of her privately held archive that documents, like *Set Speaks*, the incident, becomes a means of resistance: a powerful, because privately held and managed "counter-archive" [150]).

Such resistance recalls and is an instance of Katherine McKittrick's notion of the "(un)silencing" of Black women's bodies; writing about Philip in 2000, McKittrick had initially thought to position black women's corporeality as a much-needed corollary to Paul Gilroy's notion of the Black Atlantic, but as she proceeded with her analysis she became troubled by the way Black women's bodies might thereby become "over-determined and hypervisual" (224). As she wrote, "The bodies ... began to haunt me: they united and coalesced, and importantly, I could not seem to find M. NourbeSe Philip anywhere" (224); once again, the danger emerges of hypervisibility effecting disappearance. But the opposite tendency, towards a lack of cultural visibility, was equally troubling to McKittrick, and so the challenge, for her, was "how we might think about the precarious place of black women in diaspora studies (and Canada/nation) without over-determining, annihilating, and/or silencing their bodies" (225). So instead, working from Toni Morrison's idea of Black women's bodies as powerfully contradictory, McKittrick argued that "black women produce diverse narratives that both reinscribe and debunk the racial tropes that emit from their bodies" (224), that "Inscriptions and experiences of the flesh provoke psychic renewal and oppression simultaneously, while black women, as New World subjects, are continually (un)silenced" (233-34). McKittrick's notion of (un)silencing applies not only to the creative works of Philip's that she analyses, but also to the position-takings and conditions of Philip's artistic career that form the subject of this article.

That being the case, how does the oxymoronic "(un)silencing" that has characterised Marlene NourbeSe Philip's "hyper/in/visible" career hold the potential to redraw conceptions of literary celebrity, as I have suggested it might have the power to do? First of all, it unsettles the definition of celebrity as visibility: an equation that has been foundational and widespread in celebrity studies. But it is important to understand that this visibility is by no means a stable concept; it exists within and through ideology and relations of power. And any account of the "reception" of that visibility needs to recognise the fact that the implications and consequences of visibility do not sit evenly on all bodies, as the theories of McKittrick, Burman, Sarah J. Jackson, and Morrison definitively show. Still, within celebrity studies, there is a persistent assumption that the kind of visibility that characterises celebrity is a dualistic, either/or proposition: either a much-desired good (an adoring audience) or a reviled evil, as in instances of notoriety, which some celebrity theorists consider a subset of celebrity, or in cases of overly intrusive and therefore unwanted public attention. There is little work that considers the ways in which visibility may be both systemically denied and reimposed as oppressive hypervisibility in the celebrity of racialised subjects. In this respect,

Jackson's work is exemplary; in studying dissent in Black celebrities such as Paul Robeson, Eartha Kitt, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, Sister Souljah, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, and Kanye West, she concludes that "the inclusion of African American celebrities was only celebrated in mainstream discourse so long as their visibility did not result in a violation of the dominant gaze" (9). In the study of literary celebrity, what is needed is a commensurate and thoroughgoing awareness of the visibility-with-strings-attached that pertains to writers of colour and writers of other communities that have been historically and persistently undervalued by literary institutions when they enter the literary marketplace.

Thinking back to the conversation between Marlene NourbeSe Philip and Donna Bailey Nurse at the Art Gallery of Ontario back in 2019, I now understand that my feeling of regret at Philip's systemic disappearance being so publicly acknowledged had to do with my desire to celebrate decades of her brilliant, boundary-pushing work by shoehorning it into my pre-existing conceptual framework of the Canadian literary field. Insisting on Philip's centrality to that field may have been intended by me to recognise the enormous effect that her work has had upon me, upon other readers, and certainly within and beyond the classrooms in which I have taught it. But that desire was premised upon a disavowal of what I knew all too well: that the "field" to which I'd devoted much of my teaching and writing career worked, precisely through its concepts of "centrality," not to mention "celebrity," to disappear Philip and many other writers who have sought through dissent and social action to make that cultural space more capacious and welcoming. I needed to learn, and continue to learn, what the hyper/in/visibility of Marlene NourbeSe Philip had to teach. The powerful words of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which Philip quotes in her "Letter, June 1991: James Baldwin," are germane to her own career as an "unembedded, disappeared poet and writer in Canada" (*Bla_nk* 13): "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (*Bla_k* 185).

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