

# Changing Habits

## Deconstructing One Convent School Song

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**T**HE STORY, *Oasis in the Desert of the Unspoken Word*, which I wrote in 1993, was my response to the first assignment in a graduate level curriculum inquiry course. We were asked to write an anecdote based on an experience we had had as a student in school, then analyze and interpret what happened. It was my introduction to reflective practice, and it stumped me. My assignment was a month late, not because of writer's block but because of what seemed to be a memory block: I could not recall anything that would qualify as an anecdote. An anecdote is defined as a story with a point to make, a "narrative that tells something particular while really addressing the general or universal" (van Manen, 1990, p. 120). I began to write only when a metaphor for this dearth of "experience" finally surfaced. The text, however, did not have a cogent point. Van Manen (1990) claims that "without this point an anecdote is merely loose sand in a hand that disperses upon gathering it" (p. 69). In light of this statement, my choice of metaphor is ironic indeed.

*"What we cannot remember is that which we never experienced, never had the possibility of experiencing, since it was never present as such. It is the deadlock of language's conflict with itself that produces this experience of the inexperiencable (which can neither be remembered nor spoken); it is this deadlock which thus necessitates repetition."*<sup>1</sup>

*it was this deadlock  
which necessitated  
my body don an  
educational habit*

*it was this deadlock  
which necessitated  
my educational habit  
dawn on me*

*My school experience was "a complex of habits" (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 182) resulting from my continuous interaction in the social reality of a convent school.*

Every human endeavor, every discipline, every ritual and practice calls for a particular, habitual use of language, a *discourse* with its own conventions for the reporting of experience. The conventions of expression embody and express power structures and social interests at work

within the given field of social action, but when these conventions are acquired and used unquestioningly, the workings of authority and power may be taken for granted; they may be, in a sense, invisible. This is what a poststructuralist means when she or he claims that discourse remains “foundational” and “transparent.”

One way of exposing the foundations of experience within a particular discourse is to question the textual habits we use in representing experience. Laurel Richardson (1994) called for social science writers “to experiment with a literary kind of writing so as to expose the underlying labor of sociological production and its rhetoric” (p. 521). James Clifford (1986) and other ethnographers recognized that the representation of a subject or a culture using any specific type of discourse gives the reader a partial truth. They have attempted to break the monological authority of the ethnographer by experimenting with representations of their subjects using different discourses within a single ethnographic text. Postmodern theorists who practice deconstruction are attempting to reveal the institutional and ideological standpoints from which representations of experience are written and interpreted; they wish to expose both “the necessity and the limits of a science of writing” (Silverman, 1994, p. 62). Feminists endeavor to practice a type of theoretical writing which includes “the knowledge of the body in the language of the mind” (Shapiro, 1999, p. 63), thus transgressing a Cartesian discourse in which the body is ignored so that the representation of experience might be “objective.”

By playing with different types of discourse, interrupting texts, changing fonts, allowing signifiers to slip and introducing some Lacanian analysis, I began the process of interpreting this non-anecdote which was already an interpretation of my experiences. I was drawn back again and again to play with the text, transgressing representational conventions, following associative chains, and playing with sounds and words. Every refinement I made modified my understanding of this aspect of my personal history. Upon returning to the analysis, for instance, I became aware of anger underlying the text, and particularly some of the words in quotation marks. When I began to explore the experience using poetry, I found the discourse to be that of both a conscious and an unconscious subject. The poetical play led me to understand how the oppressors were also victims, trapped in the same historical and social framework as I was. It also brought me a sense of resolution and solace. I understand now how transformations in writing are possible because “descriptions of experience are always revisable” (Griffiths, 1995, p. 14).

*“Experience is a subject’s history. Language is the site of history’s enactment.”<sup>2</sup>*

*Is this why it has been so difficult to reconstruct herstory?*

<i>x</i>	<i>x</i>	
<i>xxxxxx</i>		<i>x</i>
<i>x</i>	<i>x</i>	
<i>x</i>	<i>x</i>	
<i>x</i>		<i>x</i>
<i>x</i>		<i>x</i>
		<i>x</i>
		<i>x</i>
	<i>x</i>	
		<i>x</i>

**OASIS IN THE DESERT OF THE UNSPOKEN WORD****A Student's story**

Silence. A sigh, an unobtrusive shuffling of feet, the turning of a page or two, or the scratching of a pencil on a scribbler sheet. Silence on all sides, in the corridors, the classrooms next door and those below us. A desert of silence, barren pauses creeping insidiously forward through the years, winning ever wider tracts of life.

There was lively sound beyond the confines of the class, sound that had its season: feet crunching on sidewalk snow; car wheels hissing on wet pavement; sea gulls mewling and boat horns blaring; the foghorn warning sailors with a steady, deep-throated note, and the cathedral bell cheerfully chiming a call for the Angelus, and lunch.

"Silence! Enough! You, young lady, will speak only when spoken to! Not one peep out of any of you, do you hear?" An iron-fisted control in God's name was the foundation of the education I received in an elementary Catholic school for girls run by Irish-blooded nuns—war brides of Christ whose duties seemed to include the eradication of all natural states of being. Silence—and anything else considered necessary to the purging of our impure souls—was enforced with the threat of the strap. Every teacher seemed to have the worn end of a man's leather belt in her drawer, and the principal had a thick, emerald green strap, probably cut from some sea-monster's hide. It was reported to be six inches thick by tale-bearing victims with no sense of proportion.

There were a number of times during my school life that I was strapped on the hand along with every other individual in my class, simply because a few people had been whispering after the teacher had stepped out for a few minutes. The guilty ones would not admit their sin, and so we would all be punished. When this happened to me yet again in grade four, I put my head down on my desk and wept, not so much from the stinging of my palm as from my inability to understand this contortion of justice, for I was a good little girl, taking all of these learnings too well to heart. I kept their precious silence, rarely asking questions and never publicly sharing my true thoughts and feelings. I was intent on simply surviving this desert of the unspoken word.

I stumbled upon an oasis in my grade five classroom. I had never been in such a class before. There were girls much taller than I was (and much older, I was to later learn). There were quite a number who were repeating grade five, and some were doing it for the third time. The average age of the class was probably close on to twelve. I only knew a handful of these individuals by sight; my friends were all in another class.

Our teacher was a petite, soft-spoken sister, with thick round glasses and the same cumbersome black serge habit and headdress as the other nuns, but she had an open face and serene smile; she was without a trace of sternness or righteousness. She asked us to introduce ourselves, and this we hesitatingly did.

A couple of weeks later, the principal stopped me in the corridor as I was on the way to the washroom. "Betty, you were put in the wrong class this year. If you like, you can change now. Wouldn't you like to be with your friends?" I thought, but did not say, that I could see my friends after school, as I had been doing. What I did say was this: "Thank you sister, but I'm very happy in Sister Marie's class, and I don't want to change." She made sure that I was certain and let me go on.

Why did I not want to change? Because I was allowed to speak. Sister Marie was a very good listener and always welcomed our stories and tales of things happening in our lives. In this class there was no need to write notes to one another, for we were free to quietly speak to one another as we worked. I remember chatting, and occasionally helping, the girl who sat ahead of me with her work.

We did a lot of choral speaking, and I experienced for the first time the music that is present in poetry. It was also the first year I was given a role in a play. I was given the role of Amy in a scene taken from *Little Women*, which inspired me to go to the public library and get the book so I could find out the whole story of their family.

I spontaneously began to write little sketches and playlets, experimenting with discourse between people. One day I showed one of these creations to Sister Marie. It was a story of a little girl who suspected that her parents were playing the part of Santa and wanted to catch them at it, since they would not admit to her that Santa did not exist.

Sister Marie said that she liked it and suggested that I do it with a couple of my classmates. She left me in complete charge of the whole production, so Elizabeth, Georgina, and I performed it for the class on Friday afternoon. I continued to write, and we continued having shows on Friday.

Do you know what an oasis sounds like? I remember the rather deep voice of Georgina. She was fourteen years old. I remember the sound of our shoes on the hardwood floor, the rustle of sister's long floor-length habit, and the clicking of the rosary beads that swung from her belt. I remember hearing the feet in the corridor above our heads; it was easy to tell the teachers' steps from those of the students. But I don't recall anyone in this class ever saying "Sssshhhh! Here comes the teacher." Our oasis was full of the sound of Sister Marie's gentle voice and people breathing with ease and the peculiar echo it all would make when the vinyl partition was drawn back and we invited the

auditorium into our class. We filled it with our young voices in choral speech, in prayer, in laughter, or in the random chatter before class would begin.

We were very sad on the last day of school. Just before the final dismissal, one girl started to cry, and then another, and another, until every last one of us was sobbing her heart out. None of us wanted to leave her. She did not cry, but she did not tell us not to cry. She was serene on that day as she had been all year, and her face was full of love. She told us that we would find good things in the years ahead and not to give up trying our best.

The following September, the sands of silence stormed over my grade six classroom, robbing me of breath to speak and interring my individuality yet again. Our desires, needs, hurts, frustrations and cries for love, the tacit tides in this desert, were just so much grit in one's eyes.

At the beginning of the text, I contrast the inner soundscape of the school is to the outer soundscape of my culture. I felt at the time I wrote this that the outer sounds had the promise of freedom; I talked about the cheerful chiming of the bell, when it was in fact a tolling of the hour. I did not see that I was as much a prisoner of the macro-culture as I was of the micro-culture. I was still blinded by the structure of the frames.

If there was any freedom signalled by the tolling of the bell, it was the freedom of movement; many of us walked home for lunch, and of course, there would be time for skipping and running in the playground before classes started in the afternoon. We were also free to speak to our peers, our "fellow prisoners." Yet we often translated our freedom into physical and verbal violence against one another. We perpetuated the very cycles of domination and oppression in which we were trapped.

The two opening paragraphs also contain contrasting movements of focus: the first slides from outside particulars to an abstract inner world that threatens existence, while the second carries the reader back to external happenings that are reassuring in their concreteness and predictability. While it seems as if the speaking subject of the story was daydreaming to escape the oppression of school, the writing subject was focusing on particulars "beyond the confines of the class" in a bid to feel safe from

**an irruption of the Real  
that long ago**

**threatened my reality**

However, the speaking subject remains a disembodied consciousness for the duration of the narrative because

**it still sometimes corners me  
speaker writer student teacher  
and undoes my response  
so "I" leaves**

If writing is to be truly phenomenological, it “must survey the field in terms of motility, spaciality, gesture, expression” (Silverman, 1992, p. 10).<sup>3</sup> In the story, however, the focus is entirely on sound, with the exception of the teacher’s appearance. The fact that I do not refer to students’ movement or stillness in the “oasis” is further evidence for the repression of the body in this text. I have been told that when one lies in a coma, experiences shock, or is close to death, the very last bodily sense one loses is hearing. My concentrated focus on sound confirms just how much of a living death school was to me. Ironically the desert metaphor was in fact the “oasis” that allowed me to safely imagine and represent a dissociative state—a place of no feeling, no sensation, no words.

The wisdom that I have not learned  
Is buried in the body deep  
A ghost-vein of Sophia stone  
The soul of matter is asleep

The movement that I cannot feel  
Is kneaded into daily bread  
This prayer appeases brittle bone  
Keeps flesh well watered and well fed

The message that I cannot hear  
Is muffled by the pulse of blood  
Proclaiming in a ruddy tone  
That life is sterile, earth is mud

My prospective map has blurred  
The unsung eye is swimming blind  
A miner’s lamp adrift in loam  
What sense or senses shall I find?

In this story I refer to the sisters as “war brides.” War brides are usually women who marry soldiers not from their own country and end up leaving their country of origin to start a new life with their husbands in a foreign land. The order of sisters who were responsible for my schooling originated in Ireland. These “brides of Christ” immigrated with the intention of continuing to educate the poor and lead them to God. Because they chose thus to wage war against sin, they and other similar service orders became a special division in the Church’s corps of canonical fodder. But whose war was it? Who was hammering ploughshares into swords? The priests and bishops, the men of the Church, the ones who held the authority to wield God’s Word like a mace, imposing their interpretations on the “children” of the world—they are absent from this text.

“The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of logos is joined with the advent of desire. [It is] first defined as an Imaginary object ... in the father's possession”

(Wright, 1992, p. 316). The strap was such a privileged signifier, and its imaginary nature is evident in my description of the principal's emerald green strap. The nuns wore thick leather black belts as part of their "habit." It was probably from these that they fashioned their straps, rather than from scraps of actual man-belt. This aberration of "truth," however, points to the power of the phallus behind the corporal punishment to which we were subjected.

Men who took the vow of chastity were required to discipline their bodies and control their desire. The power of the phallus was sublimated and they moved into positions of strength within the patriarchal institution of the Catholic Church. Women who took the same vow were already starting from a position of submission in the Symbolic Order; they were now required to erase their bodies which could so easily become the objects of desire and the cause of sin. Taking the veil seemed to demand a second order "castration," in the form of a disembodiment. If the castration did not "take," if their power was not successfully repressed, it would appear in the overt form of corporal punishment of their students.

The convent has held for many years a treasured piece of art: It is a bust of a veiled virgin, sculpted in marble by an Italian artist. The Mother of God has been given a serene expression; her eyes are downturned, her head is slightly tilted—and she wears a diaphanous veil over her face, a veil without substance—until you touch it. It is cold and immovable, being sculpted in marble.

one way to veil a virgin is to disown the virgin vale,  
 to refrain, abstain  
 and think of Heaven,  
 cutting off one's head  
 to spite the body  
 and celebrate this  
 paradox in song  
 "My soul doth magnify the Lord..."  
 I am but his lens  
 his glory passes through me  
 when I am burned away

The disappearance of the phallic signifier, the strap, occurs at the point in the story where serenity shows her face. The grade five teacher is the first visible person in the story. Even then her individual features were all but erased by the black serge habit. Only her face and her hands were exposed. Her hair was hidden by the wimple and veil, and her breasts were effectively disguised by a white cellulose bib. I describe her outstanding characteristic as being "serenity." The word implies an economy of both physical and emotional movement. Perhaps the serenity I observed was the result of the "castration" she suffered in taking the veil. She filled our desire for love, and because of this, we wanted to be good girls for her. She responded to us, and provided us with an identification through which we as females could find a socially acceptable place in the Symbolic Order. We students were mostly among the poor; we were being initiated into an ignorant chastity as our



bodies grew to womanhood; and here, in this grade five classroom, we were seduced into obedience by the face of serenity and love.

That year marked my “baptism” into the Symbolic Order, and my true “confirmation”<sup>4</sup> into the Law of the Father. In this story I extol the freedom I had to write, to talk, to participate in the Symbolic Order. However, the forms of choral speech and prayer, the pre-set dialogue of plays and sketches imposed their order, denied my body the freedom of play, and created the illusion that I could gain power by using words. The sketches I wrote for performance were a bid for power, but I did not recognize the limitations of the power allowed me. Our tears at the end of the year were the sign of our recognition of our Lack. In the final sentence, the tears are transformed into grit, or grains of sand. “Little women” were expected to cry; such a show of emotion was acceptable. Anger, however, had to be repressed; it remained buried in the desert because it was not an appropriate affect for a female. Only many years later can I admit to feeling anger at the “education” to which we were subjected.

the desert is a lonely place  
the ascetic knows it well  
she withdraws to  
mortify the flesh and  
kill desire

unmediated by the  
presence of an other, it is a  
place of hallucination and illusion,  
where the Imaginary Order can run wild

Jesus went there  
forty days and forty  
nights was tempted by the devil  
to be god

an oasis is an exotic flush  
a spring of salvation on a wavering horizon  
a baptismal font of logos

*The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,  
She is His new creation of water and the Word,  
From Heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride,  
With His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died.*<sup>5</sup>

but the oasis coexists with the  
desert, conditioned by  
the laws of the sand

maybe it is merely a mirage

initially, I thought  
the desert represented  
absented, banished speech,  
the song of silence  
taught in the  
Name of the Father and of the Son

initially, I thought  
the oasis represented  
a salutary speech,  
the recantation that sustained  
a blooming subjectivity

What is buried in the desert?

**Water.**

What is lacking in the oasis?

**Grit.**

***In song we hail thee, cherished alma mater  
To thee we pledge our loyalty and our love  
Our ensign shows white crest on emerald sea  
So white our lives on faith raised above  
We lift it on high, this ensign so dear  
Its emblem our glory through life to revere.<sup>6</sup>***

island in transparency  
white crest on emerald sea  
white caps and wedding dresses  
for the promised brides of Christ  
white lives unsoiled and furled  
for the brides of Christ promised  
who has given them away?

*My father went to sea, sea, sea,  
To see what he could see, see, see...<sup>7</sup>*

famine follows wedding feast  
wine turns to water

bodies wane until  
they earn the right to  
don the dress and veil of non-ness  
inhabiting the black

*And all that he could see, see, see, was...*

nun-ness  
a reflection of the new moon  
below the ensign  
at the bottom of the deep green sea

***Then join our song and let the echoes ring  
Down through the years her children to rejoice  
Ideals high, to these we'll e'er be true  
...Though years roll by, we'll ever gladly voice  
Our pride as we stand 'neath this ensign so dear,  
Its emblem our glory through life to revere.<sup>8</sup>***

Hallowed be thy voice.  
Hallowed be thy vice.  
Hollowed be thy voice.  
DINNG!  
Grade one soldiers  
march onward to the cloakroom.  
DINNG!  
stand silently by coats.  
DINNG!  
remove coats from hooks.  
DINNG!  
put right arms through right sleeves.  
(Please God, if you love me  
teach me right from left...)  
DINNG!  
DINNG!  
DONG  
DONG DONG DONG  
DONG DONG DONG  
DONG  
DONG  
DONG  
DONG  
DONG

When dressed, the cohort  
proceeds in double file  
down the stairs  
out the door  
silent in formation  
until they round the corner.  
Only when the stone cathedral  
veils the tyrant's eye  
do they break rank  
**DONG**  
**DONG DONG DONG**  
**DONG DONG DONG**  
**DONG**  
**DONG**  
**DONG**  
**DONG**  
**DONG**

At noon, the cathedral bell would toll twelve times. This was the signal for all classes in our school to recite the Angelus. This prayer tells the story of the Virgin Mary's submission to the destiny God had planned for her. The angel Gabriel tells her that she will conceive and bring to birth God's son, even though she will have no husband at that time. She answers Gabriel, saying, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to Thy word" (Luke 1:38). The words declare the submission of her will, her desire, her body, to God through his proxy.

Sister, why sing your surrender  
with sweet resonating tone  
in the hollow vessel of an unwombed body  
don't shroud your voice  
don't let it be entombed in convent walls

*but the bell buries her  
oh, my sister*

*And the Word faded flesh  
to dwell among us*

this is the toll the Angelus took  
the light of the Son  
seared flesh from bone  
reduced us

dust unto  
dust  
the bell tolled as we were  
buried  
in the sand  
and nobody cried for us

**Certain disciples of the new school, much occupying themselves with the measured dividing of the *tempora*, display their prolation in notes which are new to us, preferring to devise methods of their own rather than to continue singing in the old way; the music therefore of the divine offices is performed with semibreves and minims, and with these notes of small value every composition is pestered. Moreover, they truncate the melodies with hoquets, they deprave them with discants, sometimes even they stuff them with upper parts (*triplus et motetis*) made out of secular songs. So that often they must be losing sight of the fundamental sources of our melodies in the Antiphoner and Gradual, and may thus forget what that is upon which their superstructure is raised....<sup>9</sup>**

There is no ultimate interpretant  
in my unveiling  
I am at sea, seeking reconciliation  
attempting to give words flesh  
sifting sands of past and future  
in a present that unfurls  
with the full breath  
of a wombed body  
the breath needed to sing  
to peopled shores  
and meaningful horizons

## After Words

In this deconstructive analysis, different fonts were used to represent texts dating from different periods, with the original Courier font representing the oldest layer in the “fossil record.” For the layer of interpretation closest to the original anecdote, I playfully chose the font called “Book Antiqua.” The “justified” alignment in this section gave the pages a boxy feel, reminding me that this too was a text with its own structure and limitations. Twice I interrupted the analysis with other fragments. The poem with an almost hymn-like meter expresses the lack of feeling in the adult that she was beginning to recognize as being connected to the child’s experiences. The reference to the bust of the veiled virgin provides an image expressive of the body-mind split that this particular practice of religion seemed to encourage.

The poetry, a web of divergent associations and images, was the most freeing of all the texts. Every time I sat down to ‘edit,’ something I did many, many times, I was aware of creating a change or refinement of understanding. I felt I was sculpting a form that helped me perceive the complexity of forces at work in my schooling. Following the thread of my emotional connection through the sensual word play, I *felt* my way towards a subjective positioning within the larger cultural and historical frames. When I reached this point in the paper, the writing took on a life of its own.

This paper was initially an assignment for a Cultural Studies course. As I finish this re-write, I now believe the piece traces the emergence of a conscientization. *Conscientization* is simply described by Wink (2000) as “a power we have when we recognize we *know* that we *know*” (p. 37). In my case I was becoming more and more aware of the oppressive effects of certain cultural and societal practices on my body and in my life, and I was gaining voice with this knowledge. The initial ‘dawning,’ however, occurred in class, at a point before we had started our final papers. We were discussing an “anecdote” that depicted the boredom of students sitting in a history class, being treated to a traditional lecture-and-notes style of presentation from a male teacher. The professor had asked us to think about what was missing from the text. I honestly do not remember what other prompts he may have given us; perhaps he mentioned the possibility of looking at binary pairs of concepts to see which terms of the pairs were and were not represented in the text. At the time I was a graduate student in Drama Education, and as part of my literature review I had read *Dorothy Heathcote: Collected Writings on Education and Drama* (Johnson & O’Neill, 1984). She describes the material of drama in terms of continua stretching between the following binaries:

1. sound—silence
2. movement—stillness
3. light—dark

It occurred to me that in this rather undramatic narrative, the teacher had the right to move, the right to speak, and figuratively held the ‘light’ of knowledge. The students were silent, still, and in the dark. This realization allowed me to cognitively—and viscerally—grasp the oppressive nature of my own schooling, which I later explored in the deconstruction of my own “anecdote.” It also led me to recognize that during my time teaching in schools, I was sometimes very unhappy because I felt obliged to engage in practices in which I did not actually believe.

Ideologies and institutional practices are inscribed on our bodies; as long as they remain unconscious and unknown, they create habitual ways of perceiving, acting, and being in the world. It is not easy to step outside our familiar framing of experience; furthermore, no one should be forced to do so. Resistances are not merely defensive; they can be protective measures

which signal that an individual does not yet feel safe enough to set sail on uncharted waters. However, educators can extend invitations to explore. A playful experimenting with representational conventions, a re-casting of an event into another type of discourse, or an expressive depiction using any art form may, by its sheer novelty, help us to notice frames of reference and foundations of experience that usually remain unquestioned in everyday life. I concur with Shapiro (1999) that “any serious attempt to construct theories for understanding the relationship between the individual and society must bridge the gap between theory and experience, mind and body, and the rational and the sensual” (p. 23). Perhaps both a reflective teaching practice and a critical pedagogy might intersect in the novel reframings of personal educational experiences. By breaking out of our habits of representation we may be more likely to recognize—and transform—our habits of interpretation.

## NOTES

1. From “Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason, by J. Copjec (1994), in *Read my Desire: Lacan and the Historicists* (p. 211). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Endnotes will be used not only for content notes, but also in certain parts of the text which I do not want to interrupt with a citation.
2. From “Experience,” by J. Scott (1992), in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by J. Butler and J. Scott (p. 34). New York: Routledge.
3. Merleau Ponty’s conception of embodied consciousness and its consequences for phenomenological writing as discussed by H. Silverman, (1994) in *Textualities: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (p. 10), New York: Routledge.
4. In the Catholic Church, baptism redeems the individual from the “Original Sin” of Adam and Eve; confirmation is the sacrament of “enlistment” in the Catholic faith. Those who are anointed in this sacrament become “soldiers” who dedicate themselves to living under the Law of the Father and to spreading the Word of God.
5. Lyrics of a hymn.
6. Lyrics from a Catholic convent school song.
7. Children’s chant.
8. Lyrics from a Catholic convent school song.
9. From a translation of the Bull of Pope John XXII, issued in the Year 1324–1325 at Avignon, in *Choral Music of the Church* by E. A. Wienandt (1965) (pp. 454–455). Toronto: Collier-Macmillan.

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