

***“Negra and Beautiful”*: Identity Making in Post-Discourse Utopian Society**

Synopsis:

This project uses post-racial, post-feminist critiques, in addition to Latina/o studies, technology studies and cultural studies methodology, as an interdisciplinary approach to today’s identity making production in virtual spaces like Tumblr. Looking specifically at Post-Obama’s 2008 election, this project deconstructs the rise of post-racial and post-feminist rhetoric in popular culture productions like *Latina* magazine who engages semi-utopian narratives of racial and gender equality in order to reaffirm the valorization of racial difference and female achievements. Similarly, this project also engages the rise of technology and deconstructs the contradictory ways social media has reshaped how people relate to one another. Virtual spaces like Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, to name a few, employ semi-utopian narratives of democracy by marketing individuality in social media as the “authentic” model of how identity self-expression looks like today. Through these two semi-utopian narratives of individual “freedom”, this project will critically examine Tumblr as both a virtual site and a key actor in post-feminist and post-race identity productions. However, to adequately understand identity making in today’s post-discourse society, this project engages the structural discourse of neoliberalism as a fundamental actor of identity-making virtual spaces like Tumblr. Therefore, micro-sites of activity in this project will be effective illustrations of the larger structural productions of identity in today’s “utopian” society.

Statement of Significance:

Using Sarah Banet-Weiser’s discussion on contemporary branding, which she explains is reliant on social and cultural relations since culture itself is a commodity that is constantly reimagined; this project will extend her analysis on brand culture in order to unpack the contradictory ways semi-utopian narratives of identity-making encouraged a commodified processes of branding. Virtual spaces like Tumblr exploit “authentic” narratives of self-expression, creativity and individuality and conflate these discourses with neoliberal political and cultural practices. This project will draw from David Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism, which he defines as

a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (9).

As Harvey explains, it is not just economic practices that are practicing individual freedom; social institutions themselves are encouraging and valorizing entrepreneur rhetoric as a marker of prosperity and success. The individual is socially and culturally expected to participate in this free market free trade philosophy to assert consumer citizenship. Tumblr bloggers and their blogs are useful sources that allow a critical discussion on how these larger neoliberal discourses of identity entrepreneurship look like. Looking specifically at the micro-sites of activity, where nostalgia, self-policing, and individuality are reflective of these larger political discourses. With that in mind, this project is significant because we can begin to tell understand the more complicated and often contradictory process that shape contemporary constructions of identity. This project does not aim to argue that Tumblr bloggers *only* produce counter-narratives of resistance as a direct response to neoliberal ideologies. Although counter-narratives are manifested in virtual spaces like social media, to understand identity making in today's post-discourse utopian society, this project aims to provide a more critical examination of identity in order to unveil the diverse landscapes of identity production that interweave in complex ways neoliberal ideology, cultural "authenticity", and political subjectivity. Therefore, this project is politically invested in challenging binary thinking in order to offer a more complex understanding of identity at work in a post-discourse utopian society.

Background:

In popular culture the Latina body is often commodified as a consumable hypersexual body that is strategically homogenized in order to produce Eurocentric ideals of beauty, while simultaneously representing an exotic foreignness. Post-racial and post-feminist discourses in media spaces like television, magazines, and advertising produce cultural representations of the Latina body as one that is not white, but engages in traditional attractive femininity. Traditional ideals of beauty and femininity, at least within popular culture, are understood to be white, upper-class, and slim. Kimberly Springer argues that black women "are incorporated into institutional enactments of discrimination, including racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist social policies" (250). Yet, I would argue that women of color in general, are often incorporated in racist and sexist practices of social stratification though the fetishization of their bodies, especially in popular culture discourses.

The Latina body in popular culture is commodified as racially consumable for capitalist demands. She is, more often than not, light-skinned, has long straight or wavy brown hair, brown eyes and a curvaceous body that accentuates her hips and buttocks. Take for example the commodification of Jennifer Lopez's buttocks and hair. Lopez has been able to sell products for companies like L'Oreal Paris, Revlon, Khol's, and Macy's because she has been able to market herself as a post-identity subject and a racialized Boricua. Many of the products she sells are branded to mark her continuous transformation of *Latinidad*. I will use Isabel Molina-Gúzman and Angharad N. Valdivia's definition of *Latinidad* in their article "Brain, Brow, and Booty: Latina Iconicity in U.S. Popular Culture" in my project, which they define as:

We frame *Latinidad* as a social construct informed by the mediated circulation of ethnic-specific community discourses and practices as well as mainstream economic and political imperatives through the cultural mainstream. Thus *Latinidad* is a category constructed from the outside with marketing and political homogenizing implications as well as from within with assertions to difference and specificity. (208).

Latinidad must be therefore be defined as a complex construct that operates in multifaceted ways since it is always simultaneously informed by outside and internal forces.

In addition, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that today's advanced capitalism is redefining authenticity as "a relationship between individuals and commodity culture that is constructed as "authentic"" (14). If authenticity is therefore a brand itself, Lopez's relationship to capitalist demands is both a production of marketing and culture (14). Individuals who consume Lopez's *Latinidad* are not just consuming material products; they are also consuming racialized, gendered, and classed ideas of beauty, more specifically ideas of Latina beauty. The power of authenticity in brand culture is reliant on the discourse surrounding traditional attractive femininity, especially in post-feminist and post-race discourses. Celebrity women of color find themselves negotiating the ways their race and gender is interpellated into the dominant social imaginary of colorblind rhetoric.

Take for instance *Latina* magazine, a popular mainstream magazine in the United States. During Barack Obama's 2008 presidential nomination for the Democratic Party; popular magazines like *Latina* began to celebrate Afro-Latinas by dedicating monthly issues to Afro-Latina/o cultures. The new visibility of black Latina bodies in U.S. popular culture was a direct reflection of Obama's presence in American politics. Janell Hobson argues, "...so satisfied are some of us by the mere representation of blackness as the "sign" of progress" that we have forgotten to complicate or question how black political leadership would operate in a historically white democracy (6). In other words, the nation's desire for change due to the devastating economic recession saw Obama as the platform of hope for the nation. For magazines like *Latina*, he symbolized a new beginning, where post-racial and post-feminist ideologies can be re-centered and cemented.

A specific example of that post-race rhetoric was the 2009 February online Colum that aimed to celebrate Black History Month. Prior to Obama, *Latina* Magazine had never celebrated blackness, and yet here they were discussing black *Latinidad* for the first time. The Colum was titled, "Black is Beautiful: A Celebration of Afro-Latinas." Along with two-three paragraphs that defined Afro-*Latinidad* as "someone whose roots are primarily of African descent", they focused more on a PowerPoint of 19 slides. The slides consist of 19 Afro-Latina celebrities that "fit" the vague definition what an Afro-Latina is based on *Latina* magazine's definition. The first slide is of Celia Cruz, the Afro-Cuban salsa singer, who passed away 2003. The Colum at the end writes:

We've noticed, in our efforts to make the magazine and website as diverse and representative of the whole Latina experience as possible, how truly difficult it is to find prominent Afro-Latina actresses and models to grace our covers and fashion shoots. In that spirit, we gathered a group of notable Afro-Latinas who have made inspiring contributions to our community. (Latina.com).

However, the magazine fails to address the structural systems of oppression that have made it difficult for Afro-Latina actresses and models to market themselves as Latinos in Hollywood. Hollywood has branded and commodified *Latinidad* to be a palatable consumption of brown bodies. Blackness as an ethnic marker of *Latinidad* threatens mainstreams constructions of *Latinidad* because the brown body is suppose to be racially flexible and ethnically ambiguous in order to be marketed as a globally consumable production of palatable foreignness. As such, *Latina* magazine opens a space to discuss *Afro-Latinidad*, but fails to complicate why they had a difficult time finding representation of Afro-Latinas in the first place. Rejecting a critical analysis of the lack representation of Afro-Latinas/os in the media reinforces the post-race rhetoric because it fails to shine light to the structural political economy of racial stratification in U.S. society.

Like *Latina* magazine, many celebrity women of color who gravitate towards colorblind rhetoric reinforce structural inequality when ideas of individualism are privileged in the dominant narrative. Ralina L. Joseph explains, “famous people of color in the media have also taken up [post-discourse] ideology to an incredibly powerful effect. Their post-assertions are used as the authentic voices, the true proof that racism and patriarchy are dead” (249). Joseph’s work specifically looks at famous women of color in popular culture, but magazines like *Latina* are also promoting post-discourses through their construction of post-racialized bodies. *Latina* magazine’s celebration of *Afro-Latinidad* was a response to Obama’s visibility; a post-racial moment that promised Americans a world of possibilities.

In addition to Obama’s post-race semi-utopian narrative, which is marking a post racial shift in American society, the rise of social media is seen as being endless with possibilities. Virtual spaces like Facebook, Myspace, Tumblr, and Instagram, to name a few, were seen as sites that permitted subjects to have more control over their identity and self-representation. Still, in the book *Coding Freedom*, E. Gabriella Coleman asserts that while digital media is perceived to be democratic, “no simple connection between democracy and social media can be sustained” because “when it comes to the politics of access, there are the best *and* worst of times” (64). In other words, even though social media serve as platforms for political and personal expression, the sites themselves are regulating in complicated and multi-faceted ways how expression gets framed and produced.

When thinking about social media one must also consider who has access to digital technology. Issues of race, class, gender play a key role in complicating who social media represents. By challenging this nostalgic notion of utopia that social media romanticizes

we can begin to critically examine how, as Hobson explains, "...old systems and social representations are merely "remixed..." (9). If we begin to understand post-racial narratives and media spaces narratives as nostalgic notions of utopian narratives we can begin to see identity at work. Take for instance, Rosemary J. Coombe's work on cultural representation, although she is speaking directly about culture and law, her work allows me to complicate cultural representations of Afro-*Latinidad* in virtual spaces. Take for instance Coombe's take on culture, which she explains, "becomes reconceptualized as activities of expressive struggle rather than symbolic context, involving conflictual signifying practices rather than integrated systems of meaning" (24). By looking at the micro-sites of activity within Tumblr, Coombe's analysis on expressive struggle will allow me to complicate the ways identity is at work in social media. Just like the law does not only serve to reinforce hegemony, social media also does not only serve to reinforce hegemony. Directly engaging with the blogger's micro-sites of activity will permit me to see how social media is both a legitimate and contested production of social hierarchies that is simultaneously culturally explored and lived. Social media servers like Tumblr must therefore be understood as both historically grounded, yet unstable sites of hegemonic productions where there is contestation and "expressive struggle" all the time. Therefore, in using *Latina* magazine as a point of entry to analyze virtual spaces like Tumblr, this paper aims to provide a more comprehensive and critical examination of identity making in today's "utopian" society.

Main Research Questions:

Today, our nation's multicultural and interracial explosion is undeniably influencing political discourses of race, but what are these new portrayals of *Latinidad*—specifically Afro-Latinas—telling us about how the African Diaspora is being represented in magazines such as *Latina*, or most important, how is *Latina* magazine defining Afro-*Latinidad*? How are *Latina* readers consuming and/or engaging *Latina* magazine's representation of Afro-Latina bodies? In this project I aim to complicate *Latina* magazine's relationship to Afro-Latina representation in order to address how the magazine itself produces a type of hegemony, while simultaneously anchors resistance. If the magazine itself is approached as a producer of both hegemony and resistance, one must then trace how consumers themselves are reading these dual productions of *Latinidad*. One way to trace how mainstream representation of Afro-*Latinidad* is read is to look at virtual spaces like Tumblr. If Tumblr is recognized as site of self-branding and community building for its subjects, how are mainstream representations of Afro-*Latinidad* negotiated, subverted, and/or resisted in these virtual spaces?

The Internet is often seen as a space of infinite possibilities since technology has "revolutionized" the ways individuals relate to the larger society, but there are regulations at stake here as well that are reflective of dominant ideology. Take for instance copyright law, which Coleman describes as controversial because "in granting creators significant control over the reproduction and circulation of their work, limits the deployment of copyrighted material in other expressive activity, and consequently censors the public use of certain forms of expressive content" (9). Similarly, Tumblr's copyright policy; if a

blogger post something racist, sexist, homophobic, classist, etc in their blog and another blogger reblogs the post or screenshots the blog in order to critic it or respond to it, even if the blogger is credited, the initial blogger can complain to the Tumblr server for copyright infringement. Tumblr administrators then threaten the bloggers who reblog these posts with a ban on Tumblr. In the copyright infringement section, Tumblr states six steps the blogger must take to report other bloggers.

The blogger must identify the work that is being infringed; the blogger must also address the location in which the material is being infringed. In addition, the blogger must also provide their personal contact information and a statement in which they claim that they did not authorize the material to be reused. They must also make another statement under “penalty of perjury” that certifies that the earlier statement is accurate. And finally, the blogger is also expected to sign their name electronically (Tumblr.com). After the Tumblr administration receives this claim, they go ahead investigate the case and immediately notify the subscriber responsible for infringing the material. Often times, queer people of color and women of color who reblog racist, sexist, homophobic, and classist blogs in order to engage in a larger dialogue about structural inequality, are threatened by the Tumblr staff for copyright infringement because they are not following the copyright policies. Self-policing therefore becomes a key component in identity making in virtual spaces like Tumblr.

In addition, Tumblr as a server, has its own boundaries and regulations. For example, bloggers can only post 100 regular posts or 75 photos a day (tumblr.com). In Tumblr’s official privacy policy section, Tumblr also states, “when you use the Services, you are consenting to the collection, transfer, manipulation, storage, disclosure and other uses of your information...” (Tumblr.com). Tumblr extensively explains their privacy policy on the site; however, their word choice complicates the ways social media is understood by the public. It is not a site of complete individual agency and personal control because Tumblr has a right to “transfer” or “manipulate” (to name a few) information provided to their server. In other words, they cannot only share a blog with third parties that they are partnered with, but they can also manipulate a blog to fit whatever political agenda they may have because the blog belongs to their server. Bruno Latour in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, argues that objects must be interrogated as key actors in the construction of social ties. He explains,

Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) is not the empty claim that objects do things ‘instead’ of human actor: it simply says that no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates if the action is not thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of better term, we would call *non-humans*. (Latour 72).

Therefore, to situate Tumblr within the larger discussion of identity at work in virtual spaces, Tumblr must be treated as an actor itself. Since it has its own policies and regulations that set the boundaries of what the blogger can and cannot do to its blog, the blogger is constantly negotiating their identity within the boundaries that Tumblr has set. Therefore, how does Tumblr, as an actor itself, influence the self-making process of

Afro-Latinidad? Is Tumblr defining the notion of the public sphere? What are the politics of this space? Is the space Tumblr creating a nostalgic notion of utopia? What types of micro-activities exist within the realm of virtual spaces like Tumblr? Do micro-sites of activity only stay in virtual spaces or is Tumblr both a material and a discursive space? Is Tumblr used more through cell phones or computers? Who has access to Tumblr? Who has time for Tumblr? And how is Tumblr used alongside third party digital servers like Facebook and Instagram?

Since one cannot presume what consumers are doing in these media spaces, I will look at the micro-sites of activity in order to see identity at work in today's virtual spaces. These questions permit an analysis that complicates the often romanticized binary of hegemony and counter-hegemony in identity productions. By treating *Latina* magazine as a product of contradictory cultural productions, and addressing Tumblr as a virtual space that shapes how subjects construct their own self-making in response to these mainstream constructions of identity, my research project can begin to address the complicated and multi-faceted ways *Afro-Latinidad* looks in today's "post" racial society. I will look at the impact of post-racial discourse on identity and how it is embedded in social media. This is the moment we need to capture and explore because mainstream *Afro-Latinidad* in the United States grew out of this U.S. post-racial discourse where the assumption was that everyone is equal now, therefore have more agency to present the self in whatever way one may want.

Methodology:

Examining identity-making and cultural productions in virtual spaces like Tumblr will require an interdisciplinary framework. I must first engage a theoretical breakdown of the homogenized Latina body in relation to capitalist demands. Fields such as Latina/o Studies, Cultural Studies, Media Studies and American Studies allow me to situate the larger theoretical conversations regarding the Latina body within the parameters of my research. I will situate the Afro-Latina body within the Latina/o social imaginary that media outlets like *Latina* magazine have constructed post-Obama's 2008 presidential nomination. This will include an examination of *Latina* magazine's representation of Afro-Latinas starting from their 2008 to their 2012 editions, which will comprise an in depth analysis of both the online website and the hardcover archives.

The next part of the project will examine Tumblr as an actor in the production of identity. However, to do so I will first make an explicit connection between *Latina* magazine and Tumblr in order to trace how U.S. Tumblr blogs narrate or respond to mainstream *Afro-Latinidad*. This will include using my personal Tumblr account to follow and connect to other bloggers, which will require IRB approval. In addition, I will contact, via message, the bloggers that I intend to follow and inform them of my research intentions and ask them if they are interested in participating. If the potential participants refuse to partake in my project for whatever reason they may have, I will not use their blogs even if the blogs are public. However, my intention is not to follow a larger amount of Afro-Latina bloggers; instead I am looking to see how self-making in relation to mainstream Afro-

Latinidad looks for Afro-Latina women in the United States. How blogs get chosen in my study will depend on their direct level of engagement with *Latina* magazine. This will allow me to see how consumers of the magazine are navigating mainstream ideas of cultural representation in their own negotiation of these same mainstream messages.

Even if virtual spaces like Tumblr create the illusion that users are in complete control of their identity presentation to other bloggers, Tumblr, as mentioned earlier, is very much regulating those spaces. More than 96 million blogs are operated by Tumblr, and users can access their blogs on their iPhones and BlackBerry smart phones, but Tumblr as a virtual space also has limitations for its users. Founded in 2007 by David Karp and Marco Arment, Tumblr must obey Intellectual Property laws and regulations, which as we know influences one's ability to publish certain videos, documents, images, etc if they do not meet the site's privacy rights. Having these important details in mind will allow for a more complex analysis of Afro-*Latinidad* self-making in Tumblr, especially since Tumblr itself is influencing how Afro-Latina bodies get produced and therefore read in these virtual and material spaces.

Argument:

My project must unpack how the post-racial narrative and rise of digital technologies narrative are both nostalgic notions of utopian narratives, which I argue are influencing the way identity is at work. One way we can begin to see these narratives is by looking at the ways *Latina* magazine has celebrated Afro-*Latinidad* and then link it to the ways Tumblr is engaging with these mainstream conceptions of post-race, post-feminism, and social media self expression. Bloggers that use these narratives in their own self-making process allow us to see why there is so much nostalgia on this notion of utopia that post-discourses are so fondly romanticizing and reproducing. Counter to other literature that has look at the racialization of the Latina body in popular culture in order to show the larger politics that surround constructions of *Latinidad* in relation to capitalist demands, this project pays close attention to the self-making processes of consumers who are engaging these larger messages of racialized and gendered productions of mainstream cultural representation. Therefore, I am centering technological studies of race, class, and gender in order to capture the micro-sites of activity that can begin to tell us how virtual spaces complicate subjectivity in relation to larger structural constructions of identity.

In using *Latina* magazine to illustrate mainstream productions of identity, one can begin to unpack the larger relationship identity and social media have within neoliberal discourses of individualization. Although Tumblr is the primary site of my critical investigation, *Latina* magazine, as a site of knowledge production, is always interpellated in bloggers micro-sites of activity. Not all bloggers are producing counterclaims, even though some do, but what a lot of bloggers are doing instead with *Latina* magazine's representations of Afro-*Latinidad*, is engaging in complex ways mainstream representations of identity. This is an essential trait of identity self-making in virtual spaces, especially if we see identity as a complex and contradictory process.

Identity self-making in virtual spaces like Tumblr are always participating within the larger neoliberal society. Coombe describes “it is no longer possible to maintain a Romantic opposition between culture as an authentic lifeworld and capitalist market relations as rational systems that alienate us from human meanings” (271). By complicating the relationship culture and capitalism have within the process of self-making we can begin to address the redefinition of the public sphere. Identity self-making in virtual spaces is intrinsically linked to the redefinition of the public. The rise of post-discourses is emblematic of the neoliberal rhetoric, yet virtual spaces like Tumblr are expressing nostalgia of these discourses. The public in today’s post-discourses is complicating the old traditional conceptualizations of the public/private domain. Coombe explains:

Perhaps we should stop trying to preserve the integrity of a mythic public domain untainted by the stigma of commercial speech and acknowledge the cultural conditions of postmodernity; a historical situation in which identity, tradition, and community are themselves constituted through, and in diverse relations to, commodification and its discourses and practices. (272).

Coombe’s analysis of culture and its interlocking relationship with capitalist discourses and practices challenges the private/public dichotomy, or what she calls the “mythic public domain.” Using Coombe’s disruption of the public/private binary, my work captures that complex relationship between social media and identity. Social media must be understood as redefining the public because there is active engagement of self-making. In addition, there are social networks in these virtual spaces that although they can and do celebrate individual expression they are at the same time reproducing post-discourses by celebrating difference without addressing the larger structural causes of racial, gender, class, sexuality inequality.

We see a similar process in the book, *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive: The Social World of Coffee from Papua New Guinea* by Paige West. West specifically looks at the fantasies about culture and nature that neoliberal discourses produce and the ways they get grafted onto coffee, which therefore produce a form commodity activism that complicates larger conceptions of the public domain. Similarly, fantasies about culture, race and gender get grafted onto the Latina body in virtual spaces like Tumblr. For instance, one of the most popular post in Tumblr right now is about an Afro-Latino documentary titled, “Afro-Latinos: La historia que nunca nos contaron” (Translated as: The Untaught Story). This project is a documentary series that aims to educate U.S. mainstream audiences about the lack of political and economic power Afro-Latinos in Latina America have. However, in addition to marketing the series, the blog also ask bloggers to sign a petition. The petition describes three important demands: 1) gain network attention, 2) get support from government and community agencies/ organizations, and 3) give back to the community by telling this story (lati-negros-blog). They urge bloggers to sign the petition and reblog the blog in order collect as many signatures that can then be sent out to several networks, who have rejected the series already, and prove to them that people are interested in the series.

Using Tumblr to address larger political agendas illustrates how bloggers interweave discursive discourses with material discourses. Using West, who speaks about the coffee production process in Papua New Guinea, her larger discussion of neoliberalization is applicable to the self-making process that occurs in Tumblr. West describes that the neoliberal coffee market, "...focuses on individual producers and consumers as the loci intervention and disallows regulation and intervention at other scales" (244). Alike, Tumblr's articulation of self-expression produces a fantasy of "democracy for all", which neoliberal marketing manipulates in its celebration of post-discourses. The Afro-Latino documentary blog and its constant reblogging illustrates how micro-sites of activity, although not monolithic, do participate in a process by which fantasies about post-race and post-feminism get linked to ideas of self-expression.

Another example is blogger Abisyjan, who discussed their joy of seeing Zoe Saldana, an Afro-Latina celebrity, in the cover of 2013 May cover. Saldana is interviewed by the magazine, who ask her a set of questions about her personal life. The blogger decides to reblog Saldana's response in order to show how supportive they are with her response. This exchange for bloggers is a public affirmation of identity at work because "mass consumer consumption is predicated on the creation of desires, and the development of exchange value by unrealistic hope that a given good will fill some need, as West explains (246). Saldana is talking about not needing a man, but wanting a man to make her better; the blogger responds to that same rhetoric in their assertion of that specific section of the entire interview with Latina magazine. The blogger chooses to focus on a specific part of the interview, rather than the interview in its entirety, which speaks to the neoliberalization of individuality as a form of entrepreneurship, in this case of racialized female empowerment.

Overall, this project provides a critical and complex analysis of identity making in today's "utopian" society in order to address how larger nostalgic utopian narratives are interwoven in contradictory ways, and therefore affecting identity-making processes. Virtual spaces like Tumblr allow us to see the diverse ways bloggers themselves negotiate these larger discourse, as we must always remember how Tumblr itself participates in that self-expression processes. While this project looks at identity making in the U.S., future research must engage a transnational analysis of *Afro-Latinidad*, especially when social media is globally exported and therefore consumed. For the purposes of this project and the specificity of U.S. discourses of post-race and post-feminist identity as semi-topian narratives, *Afro-Latinidad* in virtual spaces like Tumblr, allows for a critical analysis of identity making in U.S. "utopian" society.

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