Sung Solecisms
Hip Hop as Non-Prescriptive Pedagogy

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Abstract

Does the music idiom commonly known as rap music have educational merit? With its harshest critics lambasting it with connotations that equate it with stupidity, gun culture, jail culture, or non-intellectual culture, could there be a pedagogical link after all? Dr. Marc Lamont Hill, Associate Professor of English Education and Anthropology at Teacher's College, Columbia University, believes there is, and affirms this in his recently published book *Beats, Rhymes and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*. Irrefutably, over the last three decades, hip-hop has emerged as an underground phenomenon and has successfully defended its status as one of the world's most popular music genres. The objective of this essay is to offer a critical analysis of the argument presented in support of hip hop as a legitimate learning strategy as espoused by Hill, who happens to be a member and product of the hip-hop generation.

> Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that which all things aim.
>
> —Boss, 1999, p. 43

The chief aim of this paper is to contribute to the debate on hip-hop based pedagogy by addressing the timely issue of culturally relevant educational provisions for 'minority' students in our nation's inner-city schools. It purposes

to examine what such a non-prescriptive pedagogy means for them in connection to the greater national and international landscapes. Additionally, this essay takes into account considerations of educational praxis and theory, and is mainly centered on whether non-prescriptive pedagogies could effectively be a part of the school curriculum.

Dr. Marc Lamont Hill (2009), Associate Professor of English Education and Anthropology at Teachers College, Columbia University, authored the book *Beats, Rhymes and Classroom Life,* where he challenges educators to think beyond the narrow constructions of pedagogy, calling for a "total transformation of teacher thinking" (p. ix). He noted that the afflatus for his book stemmed from his own experience, witnessing firsthand how the "knowledge, values, and social practices" of his childhood community were "explicitly or tacitly rejected" (Hill, 2009, p. xvii). It may be that this is the direct result of society's inability to overcome divisions deriving from wealth, birth, social location, and religion (Brighouse, 2007). Consequently, Hill saw many of his peers, who at the outset were eager, enthusiastic, and astute learners, become disengaged, estranged, and disaffected in the process. These were the same lamentable circumstances that actuated Hill's transfer from his local community school to one in a more affluent neighborhood. There he, perhaps perforce, embraced the requisites of a better quality education. Today Hill is recognized as one of the youngest members of the growing body of public intellectuals from the Philadelphia and surrounding areas.

What are the pedagogical merits of hip hop?

Efforts continue in search of appropriate, culturally relevant pedagogical practices to provide urban-center Africano and Latino school-age youth with literacy development and instruction that advances critical thought and inquiry. It takes visionary thinking, tremendous creativity, and a healthy understanding of cultural dynamics (Paul, 2000). Urban-center teachers are faced with the daunting task of finding educationally sound, yet, innovative approaches that take into account the cultural and social capital students bring to the classroom, while making education at once meaningful, relevant, and purposeful. In other words, these teaching practices must be more than "pedagogical lures or come-ons" (Paul, 2000, p. 246) to entice students who may be reluctant to embrace the canonical curriculum.

There is ample scholarly support that curriculum is, in fact, aesthetic text (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2002). Historical accounts, however, note that the aesthetic qualities of curriculum tend to be sidelined and de-prioritized. During the 19th century, for example, when music—other than the singing of hymns—was introduced to schools, it was met with contention. At the heart of the opposition was the concern that music would take time away from the core subjects of reading, writing, and arithmetic. This position of marginal importance for the arts has not changed over time, despite its confirmed significance (Pinar et al., 2002). Hill has, essentially, joined the academic initiative to bring

the arts from the peripheries to more preferred positioning among the suite of educational disciplines.

According to Hill (2009), hip-hop culture has been the object of critical analysis within the academy for over a decade, and academic investigation into its use in the classroom has been "undergirded by theory that lies at the intersection of the critical pedagogy and cultural studies traditions" (p. 5). *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life* addresses the concern that current scholarship has failed to extend conversations regarding Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE) "beyond the parochial considerations of contemporary educational policy" (Hill, 2009, p. 2). The focus has been on what Hill describes as narrow conceptions of educational success such as accountability and other technocratic demands of the No Child Left Behind Act. He set out to show how student identities are negotiated when hip-hop culture becomes a part of the official classroom curriculum. Hill elucidates his publication's intents and purposes as follows:

> Drawing from 18 months of ethnographic field work (1 year of teaching and 6 months of curriculum design) conducted in Hip-Hop Lit, a hip-hop-centered English literature class that I co-taught in an alternative high school, I examine the complex relationships that the students and teachers forged with hip-hop course texts and one another inside and outside of the classroom, as well as how these relationships created a space in which members of the Hip-Hop Lit community performed, contested, and reinscribed a variety of individual and collective identities that informed classroom pedagogy in deeply beneficial and highly challenging ways. (Hill, 2009, pp. 2–3)

For the Hip Hop Lit project Dr. Hill brought in rap songs once a week and engaged students in various forms of interpretation and discussion. The success of the project prompted him to propose a yearlong, full-fledged study with the Twilight Program, a program typically designed to prepare students between the ages of 14 and 21 for the future, assigning them to evening classes to fulfill graduation requirements. This type of program is also an educational alternative for at-risk students who need extra attention and direction in the development of skills and attitudes in order to effectively participate in the labor market and/or continue their schooling.

In developing a theoretical framework for the course Hill (2009) wanted an approach to literacy that would "allow the experiences of the students and the authors to be the centerpiece of the course" (p. 18). With that in mind, the course was officially named Hip-Hop Lit, and its description as it appeared in the syllabus read as follows:

> This course will examine various elements of literary interpretation and criticism through the lens of hip-hop culture. Students will encounter, learn, and demonstrate traditional and nontraditional methods of literary analysis and critique using hip-hop texts as the primary sources. (Hill, 2009, p. 19)

The course was then divided into six thematic units: Roots of Hip-Hop and Literature, Love, Family, The Hood, Politics, and Despair. The break down of the units, as expounded by Hill, was necessary to better focus on the selection of the texts. Each unit had a minimum of eight texts, of which Hill selected four to five. The balance was chosen by students, but was subject to Hill's approval. In his search for songs that matched the six thematic units Hill looked for texts that structurally allowed for close and engaged reading as printed text. He immediately eliminated texts that were primarily racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and heterosexist, and was careful not to use raps that used overly scatological language and those perceived to be violent in nature. He was concerned that the administration might, in response to the offensiveness of such texts, shift the class focus from literary interpretation to critical media literacy (Hill, 2009).

Many of the texts were oppositional narratives, or stories in which the characters resisted, often successfully, dominant authority and norms. Such texts, according to hip-hop scholars, are part of a broader tradition of oppositional figures within African American culture. Two prominent figures are the "trickster" and the "badman" of pre-colonial African folk tradition (Hill, 2009). As explicated by Hill, the trickster skirts the dangers of the world by hoodwinking and skillful manipulation of the law, while the badman shows blatant disregard for societal rules and moral standards (Roberts, 1989). The students' affinity for oppositional figures was apparent in their written work and classroom discussions.

Jay-Z: The Undisputed 'Proust' of the Projects

Among the most popular narratives for students in the Hip-Hop Lit course were those by rap superstars Jay-Z, Tupac Shakur, and 50 Cent. While the students were receptive to the pre-selected texts by Hill, all of which were sociopolitical in nature, they preferred other texts in which Jay-Z bloviates about his lyrical talents (*What They Gonna Do*), wealth (*I Love the Dough*), and prior success as a drug dealer (*Friend or Foe*). The attraction to these texts was linked to Jay-Z's ability to daringly sidestep the law, as expressed by one of Hill's male students named Jay:

> I like the fact that Jay-Z talk that ish for real. ["ish" is a euphemism for "shit"] Like, he always come out on top. He moved weight [sold drugs] and didn't get locked up. He flipped it and got his own label, clothes, everything. Plus, he brag about it and can't nobody do nothing. They can't get 'em. That ish is real. (Hill, 2009, p. 45)

Barry Michael Cooper, noted writer/filmmaker, said the following about Jay-Z during a feature appearance in the rap star's classic documentary, *The Making of Reasonable Doubt*:

> . . . He gave a very lurid depiction to what was going on in the street like
> no one before it. He was the voice of the crack generation. He gave it a very
> intelligent, precise voice and in doing so he became the articulate voice of
> this guy that we looked at as the "bad guy" and it became very cinematic.
> (Shand, Kempin, Rugge-Price, & Marre, 2007)

According to Cooper, Jay-Z was the first to be bare naked and honest with the realities and consequences of the street. It was ultimately Cooper who dubbed him the 'Proust of the Projects.'

Such unscrupulous attractions accompany other art forms as well. You may recall that Euripides's Pentheus represents an obsession with sexual libertinism in the play *The Bacchae*. Pentheus's eventual erotic abstention serves as a metaphor for further liberation of human nature from the artificial tyranny of sexual, social, and political restraint. In this instance, intemperate indulgence in a life of unbridled amative desire is contrasted auspiciously with the oppressive and capricious nature of authority and convention (Carr & Davis, 2007).

Another example is Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, which is "offered as a vision of the will to power" where pernicious, cold-blooded disrespect for others touts a new convention of heroic authenticity (Carr & Davis, 2007, p. 101). Today's youth are wildly and widely drawn to this amoral and celebrity worship now ingrained in most forms of popular culture. Perhaps this is a throwback to the 17th century moral energy of the Reformation. Historically, profanity-laden vituperations and blasphemy, for example, have been interwoven with rebellion and sedition, and have often advanced artistic cultural productions that seek to challenge prevailing attitudes and norms (Carr & Davis, 2007).

Hill further observed that there was also an expressed preference for texts that emphasized geographic specificity and local knowledge. For example, texts from rap artists like Nas and Jay-Z provided information about their respective lives in the Queensbridge and Marcy Housing Projects in Queens and Brooklyn, New York. According to Hill (2009), another male student, who is normally the taciturn type, had this to say:

> The stuff we be readin' get us talking 'cause it's more real than other
> stuff. . . . Like, I can tell that it really happened to [the authors] because
> they tell us where they from and stuff about they 'hood. Plus the [stuff] they
> be goin' through is the same as we go through. (p. 40)

The Pedagogics of Hill's Hip Hop Lit Course

In constructing the curriculum, Hill decided to remove the music from the rap songs to focus attention on hip-hop texts as literature. Additionally, to underscore the literary value of the readings, the artists were referenced as authors

and the lyrics as texts. In this sense, Hill's Hip-Hop Lit course can be viewed as an exercise in content analysis, "a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases within that material" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 108). These analyses are typically performed on certain forms of human communication like art and music.

One of the stated goals of the Hip-Hop Lit course was to demonstrate the legitimacy of hip-hop texts and artists as sources of "official knowledge." Although students regarded the course as a unique and unconventional learning space, many students still saw it as a place for advancing the traditional imperatives of schooling. And while Hill (2009) "viewed the course as a site for challenging the political and epistemological underpinnings of formal schooling," (p. 117) he had to concede that this was not fully conveyed through the course. It may have been due in large part because the Twilight Program is often considered a "last chance" program for imperiled youth. Hence, many students felt Hill's efforts, "which were contradicted by the course texts, curriculum, and broader media landscape, was an attempt to make them feel better about themselves rather than countervailing the dominant anti-youth discourse" (Hill, 2009, pp. 117–118). This may be attributed to the fact that urban-center students tend to view rappers as respected cultural workers in their community, which often "requires moral action and political praxis" (James, 1993, p. 36). These communities also value one's ability to speak the truth and disseminate wisdom orally, something more commonly known as *dropping science* or simply *dropping knowledge*.

From Consciousness to Language

However, much of the concern for the discourse of today's youth stems from what has been deemed the significance of postmodernism for contemporary thought (Antonaccio, 2000). As set forth by Seyla Benhabib in Maria Antonaccio's (2000) *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*, "the paradigm of language has replaced the paradigm of consciousness" in contemporary philosophical reflection (p. 3). This shift from consciousness to language is said to alter the very character of ethical inquiry in this era. Ultimately, it calls into question the human origin and the end of thinking in favor of linguistic and other systems that seemingly reduce human subjects to a mere "discursive effect" of the system.

It is within this context that postmodern thought has sometimes been characterized as "antihumanist" in its affirmation of the primacy of impersonal systems over individual subjects and users of language (Antonaccio, 2000, p. 3). Beyond this turn to language, philosopher Iris Murdoch rediscovers the uniqueness and density of individual consciousness. In her estimation, the individual "remains an autonomous speaker and user of language, as well as a being with inward depths and experiences that cannot be reduced to a system of public or collective meanings" (Antonaccio, 2000, p. 4).

Breaches and Blunders

A concern for English teachers, especially, may be the solecism that often characterizes the lyricism of rap music. Solecism is commonly defined as non-conventional or ungrammatical language usage. It is a kind of breach of Standard English construction, not to be confused with *Ebonics*. Ebonics has come to be known as the language of West African, Caribbean, and U.S. slave descendants of Niger-Congo African origin (Smith, 1998), and is considered as much a part of American culture as rock and roll and jazz. Hence, some in academia may dismiss the linguistic solecism of rap music as blatant blunders in speech, and therefore, lacking in gravitas. However, there are proponents of this expressive art form who, like Hill, support it as a valid conduit for learning. University of California, Berkeley professor and author Jabari Mahiri (2000) acknowledges that rap artists like Mos Def, KRS-One, D'Knowledge, and Lauryn Hill are products of pop culture pedagogy—panjandrums, if only by their own making—positioning themselves as public pedagogues. As such, he submits, they can be regarded as educators with symbolic degrees in street knowledge and a lyrical curriculum for raising the level of social awareness.

The question is, Do students in urban schools that are already disadvantaged in educational resources receive a better quality education through Hip-Hop based instruction that great scholars like Dr. Hill himself received through more traditional programs of study? Few will argue that, like Hill, students will need to learn the language of the larger society. They still need to know, for example, that pronouns like *me*, *him*, *her*, and *them* are the objects of the preposition in a prepositional phrase (as opposed to *I*, *he*, *she*, and *they*). Students must comprehend that a sentence is not complete without a subject and a verb. Rules like "*i*" before "*e*" except after "*c*" or when sounding like "*a*" as in "*neighbor*" and "*weigh*" may lend itself to hip-hop based instruction because of the rhyming couplets. However, will this rhyme come more readily to mind when students are negotiating how to spell words like '*receive*' or '*field*'? Will students know that there are also exceptions to this rule as in the case of the word '*weird*'? Additionally, students should be made aware of commonly mispronounced words like '*with*'. Many not diagnosed with speech impediments pronounce it as '*wif.*' Equally problematic are multiple negations, the proper use of the verb '*to be*', etc.

It is important to note, however, that some of these disparities in speech and oral communications can be attributed to cultural origins and differences. For the indigenous people and those that followed during the slave trade, for example, English was an acquired language—a process of acclimation and adaptation as a result of dispossession, colonization, and other acts of imperialism. Teacher, writer, and seditious African American scholar bell hooks (1994) writes about this transition from the native languages in her book, *Teaching to Transgress*:

> We have so little knowledge of how displaced, enslaved, or free Africans felt about the loss of language, about learning English. Only as a woman did I begin to think about these black people in relation to language, to think about their trauma as they were compelled to witness their language rendered meaningless with a colonizing European culture, where voices deemed foreign could not be spoken, were outlawed tongues, renegade speech. When I realize how long it has taken for white Americans to acknowledge diverse languages of Native Americans, to accept that the speech their ancestral colonizers declared was merely grunts or gibberish was indeed language, it is difficult not to hear in standard English always the sound of slaughter and conquest. (pp. 168–169)

Yet, hooks (1994) claims, it is not the English language that hurts her; it is how it is shaped into a territory that limits and defines. Her thoughts become focused on "the loss of so many tongues, all the sounds of diverse, native communities we will never hear, the speech of the Gullah, Yiddish, and so many other unremembered tongues" (p. 168).She further submits that while it has become common practice in contemporary culture to analyze the older messages that emerged in the music of slaves, not much has been said about the grammatical construction of the sentences in these songs. The broken English was often reflective of the broken, incoherent world of the slave. When the slaves sang threnodies like "nobody knows de trouble I see," their use of the word *nobody* gave greater meaning than *no one*. It was, after all, the 'body' of the slave that represented "the concrete site of suffering" (hooks, 1994, p. 170). Even beyond emancipation, the language and sentence structure of such spirituals did not change.

With today's generation history is simply repeating itself. The breach of Standard English in the past empowered and continues to endow insurrection and often opposition. hooks (1994) acknowledges that in contemporary black popular culture, rap music has become one of the platforms where black vernacular speech is used in a manner that invites the dominant, mainstream culture to listen, hear, and, to a certain extent, transmogrify.

Lisa Delpit (1995), in her book *Teaching Other People's Children*, openly ponders how many teachers realize the verbal creativity their students express every day on the playgrounds of America as they devise new insults, chants for jumping rope, and cheers. Even if they did hear them, would they relate them to language fluency? The general concern for culturally sensitive educational practitioners like Delpit is the minimal efforts made to utilize any vernacular not classified as Standard English in the academic arena, particularly in the teaching and writing domains.

Some teachers of different cultural persuasions may see rap as the voice of the illiterate, the dumbing down of the English language. Yet, much of rap is coded, which follows a tradition of taking bits and fragments of the dominant language to formulate one its cultural members can more comfortably communicate. Additionally, the absence of cultural continuity in classrooms has been

known to lead to cultural misunderstanding, student resistance, low expectation for student success on the part of the teacher, and self-fulfilling prophecies of failure among students (Paul, 2000). An anecdote would be cultural synchronization or harmony established between the diverse groups of learners, cultural systems of schools, and the communities that house their learners. It is further maintained that present-day cultural manifestations are most prevalent in lower socioeconomic-status communities where racial isolation persists and assimilation into the larger culture is minimal. This explains why teachers "who are often cultural outsiders in the communities where they work misunderstand or misinterpret the cultural nuances present" (Paul, 2000, p. 246).

Hill (2009) references the often sharp contrasts between urban teachers and their students as it relates to race, class, and gender. However, age has also been cited as a proven cultural barrier. Reportedly, statistics show that the teaching corps is largely middle-aged, meaning most have been classically educated. Hence, these teachers tend to favor Eurocentric epistemological models and have a preference for art forms classified as "high culture." In contrast, many of their urban-center students and their respective communities value knowledge that is experiential and lived, and they prefer the arts of popular culture (Giroux & Simon, 1989; hooks, 1989; James, 1993; Paul, 2000).

Current research also indicates that students are more likely to show resistance when the primary focus is placed on academic subject matter. In contrast, acceptance is more likely to occur when students' personal knowledge is incorporated into instruction in tandem with a responsive style of classroom discourse (Paul, 2000). Similarly, Marcy Driscoll (2005), in her book *Psychology of Learning for Instruction*, references a process called *selective learning.* She notes, "Left to their natural inclinations, humans will always try to make things meaningful, to fit some new experience into the fabric of what they already know" (p. 89).

Unjustified Derogation of the Arts

The question of the legitimacy of hip-hop education also comes at a time when there is an ongoing debate over the justification of arts education in general. Recent research derogates traditional raisons d'être for the inclusion of the arts in the school curriculum. In an age when shibboleths such as *minimum competencies* and *back to the basics* dictate the content of school programs, art has been dismissed as marginal study, better suited for learning in museums than in schools (Pinar et al., 2002). Budget committees looking to cut costs conveniently see instruction in music, painting, and other arts economically situated outside the classroom. A more extant rationale, which focuses on the centrality of the imagination to aesthetic experience, and the consequent relations among imagination, language, thoughts, and feelings, challenges such arguments.

According to Pinar et al. (2002), Harry Broudy, noted philosopher of education, suggests that the capacity to generate, analyze, and synthesize concepts

(cultivation of the intellect)—requires cultivation of the imagination. Language, for example, is considered a system of symbols that can also be imagistic in nature. Subsequently, it has been concluded that children without a copious store of images are less likely to decode concepts and convey perceptions. In this regard aesthetic literacies can be deemed essential to linguistic literacies and social intelligence alike (Pinar et al., 2002).

Amy Gutmann (1995) also supports the cultivation of the imagination as an important and politically relevant goal of education in her article *Civic Education and Social Diversity*. She offers, "By asking students to use their imagination and exercise critical judgment, for example, schools can help students distinguish between understanding, respecting, and accepting unfamiliar ways of life not their own" (Gutmann, 1995, p. 572). Pinar et al. (2002) further contend, "To understand the curriculum as aesthetic text questions the everyday, the conventional, and asks us to view knowledge, teaching, and learning from multiple perspectives, to climb out from submerged perceptions, and see as if for the first time" (p. 605).

Rap music is an aspect of urban culture. It is part of a rhetorical continuum, borrowing from and expanding this tradition in its originative use of language and aureate strategies and styles. It could be that the preponderance of rap and its connection to education, in general, lies within the role it plays as a site for engaging in the process of civic practice. Additionally, the departure from viewing literacy as primarily reading and writing to seeing it as the praxis of creating meaning in social contexts is now a widely chronicled example of educational theorizing (Cox & Webb, 1999).

Hill (2009) offers that in order to engage pedagogies with hip-hop, educators need to understand how hip-hop texts can be used to navigate traditional subject matter, traversing study areas such as mathematics, heath education, and social studies, for example. Peter Kalkavage (2006) seemingly concurs and makes a distinct connection between music and mathematics in his article "Why Music Is an Essential Liberal Art." According to Kalkavage, it was Pythagoras who discovered that the most commonly used musical intervals had lucid mathematical counterparts. Using the octave as an example, he explains that to the musician, notes that are one octave apart (eight notes above or below) sound alike—the only difference is one is higher or lower than the other. Modern science tells us that an octave is a musical interval in which one note has either double or half the frequency of another note. Hence, if one note has a frequency of 400 Hz (hertz or cycles per second), the note an octave, or eight notes above it, has a frequency of 800 Hz and the note an octave or eight notes below has a frequency of 200 Hz. Conclusively, the ratio for an octave is 2:1 (Kalkavage, 2006).

Kalkavage further expounds that Pythagoras discovered this connection without the knowledge of frequencies. He divided the string in half and heard that the division produced the octave. Similarly, Pythagoras discovered that when one string is two-thirds the length of another, it will produce a higher note that creates another musical interval, a perfect fifth, which is the first melodic interval

in the tune *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.* Notes that sound good together can be represented mathematically with ratios of small whole numbers, suggesting that great music was grounded in the very nature of the physical universe. This, says Kalkavage, would explain why humans respond to it so positively.

Conclusion: Hip Hop's Place in Education

Admittedly, I was at one time skeptical about hip hop's non-prescriptive approach to teaching and learning until a former ninth grade student asked me who is Cassius Clay. Out of curiosity, and before I offered a response, I asked what prompted the question. He said he heard the name in a rap song. I then conceded that if rap music can "spark the fires of intellectual exploration" (West, 2004, p. 186) by appealing to certain cultural sensibilities then perhaps we would be wise to seize these teachable moments.

Based on the submission that a poet, regardless of his or her culture, uses such elements as imagery, syntax, grammar, rhythm, and typography as the medium of the poem, rap music may be legitimately classified as poetry (Paul, 2000)—solecisms and all. And while Hill's *Beats, Rhymes and Classroom Life* may not guarantee that students will rataplan their way to the top of the English class (i.e., excel in English by converting the text of each lesson into a spoken rhythmic performance), Hip-Hop-Based Education is a method of engagement that tends to attract even the most academically estranged in the nation's urban center schools. Although generated out of the culture of the streets, hip hop is described by leading hip-hop scholar and Georgetown University Professor of Sociology Michael Eric Dyson as more brilliant and insightful than the industry that houses it. It is now heralded as a powerful space.

Educational underachievement still persists, as does wealth, health, and other disparities. However, what Hill and other hip-hop advocates like him recognize is education is the new global currency, and hip-hop is a natural conduit for "the necessary engagement with youth culture" (West, 2004, p. 173). Together the two can attain new heights in the pursuit of academic excellence by producing a new generation of scholars who can master the English language in its most widely accepted form. By this I mean English as communicated by the well-versed in formal and informal contexts—English that possesses universal prevalence that also subsumes regional and cultural differences.

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