Article

The Culture of White Space: On The Racialized Production of Meaning

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Abstract

This article focuses on processes of meaning making in White spaces as the glue that holds their social structures together. Understanding White spaces and how they operate necessitates theoretical development from a cultural perspective. The authors' research empirically engages with a wide range of White spaces—neighborhoods, subcultural scenes, craft breweries, online digital platforms, and academia, to name a few—and do so from a theoretical space where the two areas of sociology meet: race and culture. We engage with three key questions to theorize the culture of White space: (a) How do these White spaces work? (b) How are these White spaces challenged? (c) How do these White spaces change and/or reproduce themselves? From these engagements, this article develops a general approach to understanding White spaces through understanding their racialized processes of meaning making.

Keywords

White space, culture, subculture, digital space, academia

Making Sense Out Of/In White Spaces

The concept of space is typically understood as a physical location. Space becomes a "social space" or "place" once social meanings are attached to it (Tuan, 1977). In

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recent decades social scientists have used the concepts of social space and place to guide research on how social settings are instilled with racial meanings; from this work, the term "White space" was derived. A White space can be understood as a social space where Whiteness goes unquestioned (Anderson, 2015). Works that have used this concept have not only uncovered many ways that people of color are excluded from social settings but also the vast amount of *active cultural work* that is done within social settings to centralize and normalize Whiteness. In other words, White spaces are not always characterized by the absence of people of color, rather they are spaces where culture is deployed in ways that secure White racial interests and subordinate non-Whites.

Research on White space has traversed many cultural arenas. Places such as cities (Hargrove, 2009), gated neighborhoods (Low, 2004), country clubs (Sherwood, 2010), tourist destinations (Carter, 2008), elite law schools (Moore, 2008), the airline industry (Evans, 2013), ski resorts (Harrison, 2013), and shopping districts (Austin, 1994; Lee, 2000) have all been interrogated as sites where Whiteness is woven through the fabrics of people's everyday cultural lives. Works on White space have generated evidence that culture—in the form of narratives, ideologies, boundary work, aesthetics, and norms—imbues physical environments which fosters an atmosphere where Whiteness operates as the unquestioned norm (Withers, 2017).

White spaces are reinforced institutionally. For instance, Chou et al. (2015) found that policies at U.S. colleges allow for White peers to racially stereotype Asian students, allow the use of color-blind discourses by staff and students, and normalize racist expressions of romantic taste and interests. Dianne Harris (2013) uncovered how the postwar American architectural industry, design industry, tastemakers, and reformers all influenced the way houses were built in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Harris shows that houses in White suburban neighborhoods were built and marketed to offer a sense of privacy to the owners, which reproduces senses of purity, right to ownership, and control of private property for Whites in the United States—all of which are foundations of White privilege. Furthermore, in Moore's (2008) work on elite law schools she found that curricula are institutionally constructed that enforce a certain way that law must be learned and practiced. This leaves little to no room for challenges to hegemonic understandings of the law, and require neutral principles that serve to justify and reproduce racism in the law. Works such as these show how White space is reproduced at the institutional level.

White space is also maintained at the interactional level. Take Sarah Mayorga-Gallo's (2018) work on dog ownership, for example. Mayorga-Gallo found that in a multiethnic/multiracial neighborhood setting, dog ownership can lead to positive interactions among White residents, but can lead to negative interactions between White residents and residents of color. Her study uncovered how Black and Latinx dog owners were often classified as deficient and subsequently surveilled and disciplined by White residents. In her work on Black shoppers in White neighborhoods, Jennifer Lee (2000) uncovered how Black customers of White owned retail establishments are often times followed by store employees, and in some cases falsely accused of theft. This leads to a general discomfort and reluctance for many Black customers to shop in

White retail spaces. And last, Meghan Burke's (2011) work on diverse neighborhoods shows how White residents often times move to multiethnic areas to increase their ability to consume diversity in the form of food and entertainment rather than forge mutually beneficial relationships with their non-White neighbors. Whether cognizant of it or not, White people in White spaces interact in ways that bolster their positions and normalize their White racial identity. This growing body of work offers much evidence in how racial meanings are attached to spaces at both the institutional level and the interactional level.

In this article, we detail the social and cultural structures of five types of White spaces that we have been working in, writing about, and researching for years. Looking at the White spaces of neighborhoods, subcultural scenes, craft breweries, online digital platforms, and academia, we wrestle with a common set of questions regarding these spaces: (a) How do these White spaces work? (b) How are these White spaces challenged? (c) How do these White spaces change and/or reproduce themselves? We then combine these reflexive experiences of sociologically studying these White spaces to theorize how White spaces work culturally, providing some thoughts for what kinds of questions scholars should ask when thinking through the cultures of White spaces and the racialized production of meaning within their boundaries.

Neighborhoods as White Spaces

White efforts to create residentially segregated neighborhoods began in earnest in the early 1900s in response to the mass migration of southern Blacks moving to northern cities to escape the brutal racism and poverty of the Jim Crow south. Threatened by the growing presence of African Americans, Whites mobilized to protect "their" neighborhoods and communities from integration. They pursued racial zoning laws, enacted restrictive housing covenants, and endorsed racist lending policies that denied people of color access to home mortgages. When these efforts failed to preserve the White status of a neighborhood, Whites fled to segregated suburbs or pursued violent "White fight" tactics. From these acts of exclusion, opportunity hoarding and violence, White residential spaces were born.

Though the United States remains residentially segregated today, Black/White segregation has declined due to the passage of federal laws such as the 1968 Fair Housing Act prohibiting racial discrimination in the rental, purchase, and financing of homes (Iceland & Sharp, 2013). Attitudinal shifts among Whites have also occurred; Whites are now more amenable to living in neighborhoods with people of color than their predecessors (Farley, 2011). In fact, a number of qualitative studies indicate that a growing constituency of liberal Whites express enthusiasm about living in a neighborhood with racial diversity, viewing it as an opportunity to racially complicate and enrich their White life (Burke, 2012; Underhill, 2019).

While these results sound optimistic as it relates to the demise of residential "White spaces," researchers caution that residential proximity does not necessarily foster a racially integrated community where power and resources are equitably distributed (Berrey, 2015; Mayorga-Gallo, 2014). For example, Whites who establish residence in

gentrifying neighborhoods often assert economic and cultural dominance within their new communities, opening businesses that cater to their tastes and budgets and that culturally and financially alienate residents of color (Tissot, 2015). Neighborhood gentrification also threatens the viability of Black and Brown businesses as rising property values and a declining customer base make it difficult for business owners of color to maintain a foothold in their rapidly changing neighborhood (Zukin et al., 2009).

In many cases, White residents of multiracial neighborhoods also assume control of their neighborhood's civic organizations—their neighborhood association and community school—hoarding leadership opportunities and creating an exclusionary space that feels unwelcoming, and at times hostile to community members of color. In several studies, Whites rationalized their control of neighborhood organizations by characterizing residents of color as less invested in their community; few reflected on how the Whiteness of their organization deterred participation (Mayorga-Gallo, 2014; Tissot, 2015)

Neighborhood "White spaces" are also maintained via contemporary "White fight" tactics—namely, racialized surveillance. We saw this evidenced during the summer of 2018 when stories of Whites calling the police on Black people for checking into an Airbnb, mowing their lawn or selling water in front of their home dominated the news cycle (see Underhill, 2018). In every instance, the caller justified their actions by explaining how the Black person appeared "suspicious" or "out of place" within the context of "their" neighborhood. White calls to the police send people of color the message that their presence within a particular space is contingent on the comfort and goodwill of White residents.

Subcultural Scenes as White Spaces

Subcultural scenes, from art museums (Embrick et al., 2019), skiing (Harrison, 2013), Lindy Hop revival (Hancock, 2013), jambands (Brunsma et al., 2019), to electronic dance music (Brunsma et al., 2016), often situate Whiteness as normality. Critical analyses of subcultural scenes reveal an exclusionary mechanism to maintain its Whiteness—the interrelations between culture and Whiteness (Brunsma et al., 2019; Embrick et al., 2019; Withers, 2017). Subcultural scenes that normalize Whiteness identify Blackness as unfit (Anderson, 2015; Brunsma et al., 2019). At the same time, such scenes adopt the strategy of emphasizing leisurely pursuit as a reason to evade discussions of race (Hancock, 2013; Harrison, 2013), diffusing them with an emphasis on fun and leisure. By obscuring racial matters and normalizing Whiteness, subcultural scenes maintain and reproduce colorblindness through White ignorance (Mueller, 2017).

Subcultural scenes are polysemous (Hebdige, 1979). The polysemic tendency of subcultural scenes provides the potential to rearrange hegemonic signifiers, such as the normalization of Whiteness. Through counterhegemonic practices, possibilities open up for fostering antiracist practices in the subcultural scene. By disrupting the normalization of Whiteness and adopting antiracist values, subcultural scenes can

resist the White space. The Vermont jamband "Phish" and their following—dubbed "Phans"—exemplifies how antiracist practices can be organized to disrupt colorblind racism and White ignorance. In 2018, Phans of color and antiracist White Phans came together to form Phans for Racial Equity, a nonprofit organization dedicated to addressing White complicity, colorblindness, and racial inequality in the Phish scene.

Fueled by sincere fiction (Feagin & O'Brien, 2003) and White narcissism (Matias, 2016), Whites see themselves as the arbiter of cultural taste. For example, the challenges that antiracist organizations such as Phans for Racial Equity face in disrupting White ignorance (Mueller, 2017) will be an uphill battle. Even with meticulous organizational efforts, any challenges to Whites' faux civility will be difficult *because* it challenges their possessive investment in Whiteness (Lipsitz, 1998). Such challenges will elicit emotionally hostile responses from Whites (Matias, 2016). This emotional response is a mechanism that Whites in the subcultural scene deploy, as a collective, in gatekeeping cultural memberships from people of color. In this way, Whites' racialized emotions are deployed as a mechanism of racial control (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018). This is one of the primary ways that White subcultural scenes structure racial dominance by "muzzling" any challenges to Whiteness. Through these processes of racial domination, Whites in subcultural scenes inhabit and reproduce White spaces. By ambiguously highlighting the ethos of the scene while downplaying racial matters, Whites continue to reproduce the normalization of Whiteness in subcultural scenes.

Craft Breweries as White Spaces

In addition to subcultural spaces and music scenes, other arenas of cultural consumption are also dominated by Whites. One such arena is the craft beer industry and its attendant culture. Craft beer consumption has been on the rise overall, however, consumption by Blacks and other minorities has not increased at a similar rate, even as the drinking age population becomes more diverse (Brewers Association, 2018b). This leads us to the question, "what is it about craft beer that is seemingly unappealing to Blacks and other minorities?"

Currently, there are over 8,000 small and independent craft breweries operating in the United States (Brewers Association, 2018a). If we, as Anderson (2015) argues, conceive of breweries as White spaces, this leads us to several possible avenues of inquiry. First, how do breweries become White spaces? One answer is found in where breweries exist. As Ocejo (2015), Paulsen and Tuller (2017), and Barajas et al. (2017) contend, craft breweries and craft beer bars operate as both catalysts for gentrification, and signposts to consumers that gentrification is taking place. Gentrification involves the displacement of lower income individuals—minorities in particular—and an influx of new, typically middle-class and affluent residents. By displacing minority residents and "revitalizing" a neighborhood, new residents effectively leave displaced residents without a sense of place. White business owners and consumers then create a new sense of place by injecting middle-class values into these spaces.

This manifests in the form of a "vibe," or atmosphere that reflects these values and consumption patterns, as well as reminds displaced residents that their places have been stripped of their meanings and replaced with those of Whites. Indeed as Anderson (2015) suggests, the construction of new White meanings and values, and their attachment to a space "constitutes a cultural and economic manifestation of [an] ongoing, major shift from a Black space to a White space" (p. 19). To the displaced minority, the brewery then "represents the vanguard of a White invasion," and operates as a "significant racial symbol" (Anderson, 2015, p. 18). Given the perception of breweries by displaced Black and minority residents, it follows that these individuals would not want to enter into their previously inhabited spaces. The vibe of craft breweries attracts a predominantly White male clientele, which in turn detracts potential Black consumers.

Breweries, therefore, operate as sites of social and symbolic exclusion that reinforce the displacement and further subjugation of minority residents in gentrified areas.

Second, how do breweries maintain their Whiteness? Craft beer consumption, like other forms of craft consumption (see Campbell, 2005; Ocejo, 2017) reflects the cultural tastes of the consumer. As such, craft drinkers are afforded cultural capital through their consumption practices. This cultural capital is then exchanged through interactions in breweries and other ritualistic settings (e.g., beer festival, taproom, beer bar, etc.) in the form of discussing tasting notes and drawing distinctions between various beers. The brewery becomes a site for these ritualistic exchanges, and as such symbolically exclude Blacks and other minorities from participation. As Anderson (2015) asserts, when Blacks and other minorities enter into White spaces they must perform a "dance" to gain acceptance in the space and to appear as if they "belong." In the context of craft breweries, the dance becomes the exchange of cultural capital with other craft drinkers. In order to diversify craft beer spaces, breweries must recognize their position as White spaces, and must actively seek to change the perceptions and social barriers of Black and minority drinkers.

Digital Spaces as White Spaces

Reddit (stylized "reddit") is difficult to classify—it is at once a social media platform, a news/media aggregator, a system of forums, a repository for user-generated content, and so on. According to Alexa.com (2019), reddit ranks sixth in total U.S. internet engagement. At the close of 2018, there were roughly 1.4 million forums/communities on reddit (aka subreddits) wherein each community is dedicated to specific topics such as world news, interests/hobbies, professional sports teams, film, television, video gaming, and so forth (redditmetrics.com, 2019). reddit is characterized by an overwhelming presence of non-Hispanic Whites (70% of users) and a relative absence of non-Hispanic Black users (7%; Barthel et al., 2019). While reddit itself and the myriad ways that users engage with the platform is difficult to categorize, reddit is, undoubtedly, a digital White space. But what does it mean for interaction when people do not have the visual cues to classify one another? In many digital spaces, skin

color and phenotypic traits, which are typically used as visual racial identifiers, are largely absent.

On the one hand, the diversity and breadth of communities that exist on reddit provide unique avenues for people from nondominant social positions to perform racial identity, socialize, find/provide support, strengthen group identity, and so on (Chayko, 2017; Nakamura, 2002). However, on the other hand, a culture that reifies the implicit racial order, an order that situates Whiteness at the center, undergirds discourse and interaction across all mainstream communities on reddit. This culture is mutually reinforced by technological features (e.g., content visibility algorithms, and voting mechanisms), haphazard platform governance (i.e., contradictory and sitewide rule enforcement), and economic (i.e., profit-motivated) decision making. Just as in other digital platforms, such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, racial hierarchies are systematically reproduced on reddit and these platforms often serve to amplify racism (Daniels, 2009; McIlwain, 2016).

Anonymity and physical disembodiment allow individuals to "play" with their identities online wherein people feel more comfortable freely expressing themselves. Anonymity also provides a situation in which people are "safe" to express unabashed vitriolic, bigoted hate speech. One result of this is that people with marginalized positionalities are not equally empowered to communicate their identities in digital White spaces. Just as in "offline" White spaces, non-Whites face heightened visibility, increased surveillance, and harassment in digital White spaces (Anderson, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2017). At the core is the question of "belonging"—the idea that one may "do the dance," but will never be fully included as an equal member. The underlying assumption is almost always that the disembodied person on the other side of the comment is White (and male, and young, and heterosexual)—the Eurocentric supposition that Whiteness is normal, everything else is an exception which reinforces a racial order that prioritizes and centralizes the experiences of Whites. Conversations about race and racial inequality are often minimalized, marginalized, and rendered invisible or "controversial" on reddit. Given the social origins of internet technology and culture, ongoing issues of access (i.e., the digital divide), as well as the persistence of platformed and algorithmic racism, it is not surprising that non-Whites are actively excluded from engagement or may simply be opting out of participation.

Internet culture is one of constant flux—but often reconfigures itself in ways that consistently uphold an implicit racial order and prevent non-Whites from full participation. The hegemonic centrality of Whiteness is challenged on reddit specifically by communities like reddit.com/r/fragilewhiteredditor (2019) whose *raison d'être* is " . . . mocking reddit's large, vocal, and hypocritical fragile White population." However, communities centered around online hatred seem to eclipse the efforts of such antiracist efforts. reddit's controversial history in enforcing its site-wide rules has meant that some far right, racist, Islamaphobic, and homophobic communities persist even as their users and subreddits blatantly break site-wide rules by posting vitriolic, call-to-violence messages particularly in the aftermaths of mass shootings and other acts of far-right domestic terrorism. Until reddit recognizes the severity of its problems, it will

continue to lose its battle with online hate and continue to be a digital White space that, among other antisocial effects, provides a platform that reinscribes racial inequality.

Academia as White Space

Utilizing a sociology of knowledge approach, and analyzing sociology as a case study, allows for an analysis of how Whiteness functions in academia. Historically, Whiteness functioned to privilege White scholars and their ideas within academia, while excluding scholars of color and their ideas; a "process of institutionalized racism" that Rabaka (2010, p. 24) conceptualized as "epistemic apartheid." Epistemic apartheid created a context in which two paradigmatic approaches to the study of sociology developed; White sociology and Black sociology (Ladner, 1973). By privileging and giving authority to White scholars and their ideas, White sociology rooted understanding of the social world in a Eurocentric worldview that is, in practice, ethnocentric (Stanfield, 2011; Steinberg, 2007).

Today, the discipline of sociology normalizes "White sociology" as "mainstream American sociology;" a reality evident in the discipline's theory and methods (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008; Sica, 2007). In practice, Whiteness functions to invisibly promote White logic or "a context in which White supremacy defines the techniques and processes of reasoning about social facts" (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008). Knowing White scholars theoretical ideas becomes a form of cultural capital, whereas scholars of color and their ideas are forgotten. This is most evidenced in who and what ideas are represented in the disciplinary canon and historical memory. For example, the exclusion of W. E. B Du Bois from the canon and Oliver C. Cox from historical memory, as well as the collective forgetting of their theoretical work related to race (Rabaka, 2010). By excluding the standpoint of scholars of color and privileging the standpoint of White scholars, sociology promotes an "epistemology of ignorance" (Steinberg, 2007). For example, the exclusion of Black women scholars and their collective standpoint of intersectionality from sociology lessened the discipline's understanding of the complicated way social inequality and social justice are enacted (Collins, 2007).

Even further, sociology reproduces White methods or "tools to manufacture empirical data and analysis to . . . [create] racial[ized] knowledge" (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008). For example, employing race as an "independent causal variable," without theoretical or historical context, that risks making race a "fixed characteristic rooted in biology" (James, 2008). Interviews with graduate students in prestigious sociology programs indicated that graduate students were most likely to learn about race theoretically as a social construction, with most learning occurring in research methods classes where race was discussed as a control variable. As a result, for example, in significant papers, including dissertations, graduate students were not expected to theorize race when using it as a control variable. Together, the normalization of, and socialization into, epistemological Whiteness is what Margolis and Romero (1998) identified as the "hidden curriculum."

How is Whiteness resisted in institutionalized knowledge of academia? Within the discipline of sociology, in the 1960s and 1970s scholars of color conceptualized Black

sociology as a means to liberate sociology from Whiteness (Ladner, 1973). Scholars are reappropriating the collective memory of institutionalized knowledges to include scholars of color, as well as incorporating scholars of color works into the curricula (MacLean & Williams, 2008; Wright, 2002; Wright, 2012).

The Cultures of White Space and the Racialized Production of Meaning

In this article, we have thought through the workings, structures, and challenges to several White spaces in order to gain insight into the meaning-making processes in such spaces. The authors have spent years investigating the racial dynamics of several White spaces, including the ones we focus on here—neighborhoods, subcultural scenes, craft breweries, online digital platforms, and academia—asking how these White spaces work, how they are challenged, and how they are (re)produced, with specific attention to such processes as cultural phenomena. While White spaces are not only recognizable by the racial identities of those who populate the space, they are clearly governed by several cultural logics that produce and maintain them *as* White spaces, while deflecting and containing challenges in important cultural ways. Looking across these reflexive engagements with our scholarship and the extant scholarship, we find five basic processes that those studying White spaces should analytically engage with to culturally understand White space and the potential for changing such spaces and places.

Establishing the White Space: You Build It They Will Come (and Understand)

To understand White spaces and the ways they operate culturally, scholars should pay close attention the historical establishment of such spaces and the associated origin stories. Paying attention to the initial impeti and the symbolic and cultural underpinnings has the potential to illuminate contemporary functions as well as their likely White, settler colonial cognitive mappings. Look at the early structures of power, positions, and socially constructed rules and norms that allow its central constituents, Whites, and their space-supported sense-making activities to hoard opportunities, create order, and signify to others the kind of space it has been, is, and likely will continue to be. Thus, understanding the establishment of the White space under analysis will inform all other elements of its cultural functioning.

It All Makes Sense: The Ideological Terrain of White Space

It also appears, across the spaces we thought about, given our various research experiences and understanding of these White spaces, that it is crucial for scholars to interrogate the ideologies that animate these White spaces. Scholars would do well to grapple with the collective and possessive investment in Whiteness and White identities that underwrites and buttresses the economy of meaning in White spaces that serve

to normalize the frames through which the space is culturally maintained. Significant analytic payoff is there for those who dig deep into the cultural repertoires and logics of the space that develop cultures of anti-Blackness (which is pro-Whiteness by dialectical definition) and White epistemologies and logics. There is a colonization of the mind at work here that often operates through actively produced and supported White ignorance as well as colorblind racial ideology.

Decorating the Space: The Aesthetics of White Space

One of the important ways that culture works to maintain White spaces is through the development, expectation, and underwriting of the White habitus. Those interested in understanding White spaces qua White fields must contend with the various contours of this fundamental reality. These spaces thrive, insidiously, and collective-unconsciously, from the racist fertilizer that permeates their grounds. White spaces mobilize Whiteness through a variety of mechanisms of creating affective flows that keep the wheels of White sociability greased and turning. The aesthetic/affective fuels are derived from a cultural assemblage of White tastes, preferences, and experiences that creates an emotional economy of Whiteness, a White "vibe," that "makes sense" and "feels right" to those who have been socialized in the White habitus. These spaces socially and culturally craft "comfort" and safety for Whites, where the talk, the ideas, the current events discussed, and the heroes worshippped are of Whites, by Whites, and for Whites. An affective and epistemological apartheid is in evidence where all others are minimized, sequestered, delegitimized, or laughed at—"dude we're just having fun, chill out."

Guess Who Is(n't) Coming to Dinner: The White Space as Interaction Order

White spaces, therefore, are *established*, to *make sense*, and *feel right* for their primary constituents—Whites. The cultural order is the nameless, unspoken, ethereal glue that holds the cultural space together; however, there are material and social realities at play here too that work to ensure the culture is invoked in real time, in real sociability, in the social connection to embodied White cultural capital. Those who spend time examining the ways White spaces function are often able to point clearly to White interaction orders and exchange orders, where White cultural capital derived from the White habitus and culturally bolstered in these spaces, is constantly traded—whether the White space is online (where anonymity is often a variable) or offline (where visible symbols are often variables). These social orders of the White space are fundamentally dialectical belongings and alienation where people of color (and those without White habiti) must do the "dance," codeswitch, and show their "fitness" for the White space. Those who cannot are bodies out of place (Combs, 2016), reminded their place, and *still* will not be welcomed. Meanwhile, the White space and its beneficiaries consume such diversity, appropriate non-White cultures, and, often send the message, disingenuously, that "we want your culture, not you."

Sound the Alarm: The Protection of White Space

Often the glue that is the culture of White spaces cannot keep it all together through its lullaby that is comfortable for Whites and "softly kills" others in such spaces. Thus we see histories and contemporary practices of *active* efforts on the parts of those within White spaces to ensure they remain of, by, and for Whites and Whiteness. From protective strategies that are put in place before the arrival of people of color whether culturally (see all of the above) or through laws, regulations (e.g., "dress codes"), ordinances, conventions, and so on, to a wide variety of other strategies, the bodies within White spaces often collectively work to protect their space. Sometimes, these strategies are overt, like interpersonal violence, active policing, discrimination, gatekeeping, harassment, and displacement. Other times, they are more covert, like surveillance, stigmatization, assaults on worth/dignity (Lamont et al., 2016), invisibilization, and interpersonal ostracization.

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