Wes Jamison

"You Are Absent": The Pronoun of Address in Nonfiction

Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. —Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

In reality, I don't know you, I've never seen you. —Octavio Paz, "Before Sleep"

You are the entire world. —Marguerite Duras, The Atlantic Man

When Walt Whitman writes, "If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (52.10), it's easy to intuit that he spoke through the pages and words and ink to every person who opens and reads any one of countless copies of his book. But I am also able to intuit that he meant exactly *my* boot-soles, whether I wore boots or not. His was not the first text I read that used second-person point of view, but it was the first in which my subjectivity was suddenly in relation to an author—or an author's persona. It was my first love affair with a celebrity and the first time I was in dialogue with the dead.

Such is the power of *you*: to contract us into an act of communication. In nonfiction, we frequently interpret, and subsequently dismiss, second-person, or, more properly *you,* as the recipient of an epistolary. This is completely justified and anticipated: some of us are avid letter writers, and it is not unlikely that most of us have read posthumously published letters or transcripts of speeches. But consider how much we occlude when we stop ourselves from analyzing or interpreting beyond finding the name or antecedent of the *you* and their relationship to the speaker or use that as a means of discrediting other interpretations. Despite this power and its hold on a reader's actual person, there is little work that does more than mention the presence of *you*. Those who do analyze it admit the difficulty: Evgenia Iliopoulou is a pioneer

in her narratological approach to second person in *Because of You: Understanding Second-Person Storytelling*. Rather than approaching it as simply a point of view, a genre, or a convention or aberration, she approaches the point of view as a technique (224) that reflects liminal narrative circumstances (7) with various "poetic and rhetorical connotations" (14). Iliopoulou observes a virtual dearth of theory on the phenomenon (224, 247) and so has no choice but to pull from disparate disciplines to explore how it functions. And that is part of the difficulty in discussing *you*: developing a language for a theory at the interstices of many others. The first problem, she argues, is how to define what we even mean when we say *second person*.

Cognitively, person "exists in a language if it is possible to make a distinction between at least two of the basic principles/participants in a speech act" (35). For a linguistic take, Iliopoulou follows Émile Benveniste's claim in "Subjectivity in Language" that person is the "condition of dialogue" by which "reciprocally *I* becomes *you*" (224). That is, person is a deictic category that "encodes" the participants: second person is relative to the speaker, that first person (Iliopoulou 34). But deictic references shift: "the grammatical role of the (second) person is concrete in the utterance [but] shifts with the input-output system of the utterance" (34). That makes these pronouns only indices, "placeholders in the text that may apply to different people at different times" (42). Like the apostrophe, letters are written in second person precisely because the addressees are not present. In *I'm Really Into You,* Kathy Acker highlights this in an aside: "Strange, trying to translate an understanding of communication premised on your presence into one premised on yr absence—writing" (21). Iliopoulou explains that apostrophe addresses the inaccessible or absent (58, 230), and its *you* always implies a "double audience" of the text: the audience of the primary text and a separate audience as an addressee of the apostrophe (60).

But while a cognitive approach suggests that person creates a distinction based on *inclusion* and *exclusion* by changing "the degree of remoteness of the non-participant" (36), Benveniste claims that the reciprocal nature of the second person refuses any notion of otherness (235). Meanwhile, some, like Anna

Kilbort, take a more spatial approach, defining person as "the degree of remoteness relative to a speech act participant according to which the person reflects the meeting of these two poles in a more generalized concept" (Iliopoulou 37), which we are more likely to call psychic distance.

The analysis of the phenomenon, however, remains incomplete. Even after cobbling together disparate discourses, Iliopoulou only provides close readings of this technique in four French and German texts: Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*, Butor's *La Modification*, Perec's *Un homme qui dort*, and Alchinger's *Spiegelgeschichte*. She is aware of the limitations in her study and calls for further analysis of the phenomenon in English, where the "ludic possibilities" (225) are greater because of the embedded or inherent general (read as singular or plural and ungendered) form of *you*.

I would characterize our attitude in creative nonfiction toward second person as dismissive—not necessarily negative, but lacking critical engagement. A generous explanation would be that, as in everyday communication, we take the phenomenon for granted. The exception is Kim Dana Kupperman's You: An Anthology of Essays Devoted to the Second Person, which gives the phenomenon the attention it deserves. Kupperman determines there to be only three specific uses of you: disguising and/or distancing first person; the epistolary, including what Joan Connor calls "a postmodern breaking of frame," (9) as in how Whitman communicates with his current and future readers; and the how-to, directed at a presumed actual audience (9-10). This characterization of the phenomenon suffers the same limitations that we encounter in, say, workshop, where we discuss it in the same way we would fiction: "as a means of reflecting apostrophe and multiple addressees; as a way to adopt a middle distance in special narrative circumstances; [or] as a mode to convey an ambiguous figure that invites multiple interpretations and readings" (228-9), and we neglect several of its effects which are specific to our genre.

Kupperman's and our own more colloquial interpretations of *you* assume and prioritize a referential literature. We have been accustomed to interpreting *truth* as *veracity* or *actuality*, and so that is what we demand of language. But it is not the only option—not even in nonfiction. In fact, the difference between

exophorically and endophorically referential texts neatly aligns with Barthes' distinction between texts of pleasure, the readerly texts where our relationship to language is stable and "comfortable" (14), and of jouissance (bliss), the writerly texts characterized by a conflict in our relation to language.

These texts of bliss that discomfit and challenge the reader and her expectations of language are more technically designated autotelic, writerly, or literary texts. These, according to Brian Richardson, the Scholar in Residence at the University of Bologna, "have the greatest share of direct address to the actual reader and superimpose this onto a fictional character designated by 'you' that tends to be treated from an external perspective as if in the third person." These are texts that, when they include the second person, bring its "features" and effects into relief, such as *you* being "alternately opposed to and fused with the reader—both the contracted and the actual reader" (qtd. in Iliopoulou 31). While such texts are given scholarly attention in fiction and poetry, when discussed in or as nonfiction, we again avoid analysis because we may categorize them as "lyric essays." This means that even in these texts, the pronoun of address is dismissed, in this case, as adherence to some generic convention of the lyric essay.

In "Is Genre Ever New? Theorizing the Lyric Essay in its Historical Context," Joanna Eleftheriou claims that John D'Agata (via Deborah Tall)'s coining the term *lyric essay*[1] "gave writers" greater license to disorient and make their readers unstable by "push[ing] the boundary between the essay and prose poem"

[1] My use of the term here is only so that its effect on analysis of elements of writing such as the pronoun of address may be readily seen. As D'Agata tells it, the first mention of the lyric essay was actually referring to "the lyric" and what Tall described as "the lyric form of the essay" (D'Agata 10), which Eleftheriou rightly points out as being practically identical to our conceptions of literariness. The term lyric essay, though, has "fallen out of favor with a lot of the writers" who are known to champion the form and the editors of We Might As Well Call It the Lyric Essay (which, importantly, was published by Seneca Review) (6), because "everything…loved about 'lyric essays' was already represented in much of the essay's past" (7). That is, as strange as it seems to point out, lyric essays are essays. Or, as David Lazar explains in "Queering the Essay," "[c]alling the essay 'lyrical' or even 'personal' puts a generic leash on it, domesticates it under the guise of setting the essay onto to new territory" and that the irony of creating "'new' forms like the lyric essay" make them "seem more taxonomically like other forms of literature, and therefore less queer," which is also to say less literary than other forms of the essay. The term itself, then, seems to belie the very elements that make these texts writerly, literary, of bliss, and especially worth scholarly attention and theorization.

and that with it "readers were better equipped and likely to do the work of collaborating in meaning-making." Unfortunately, it seems that the term has also given scholars the opportunity to avoid critical analysis. As was observed by Colin Rafferty, Chelsea Biondolillo, Brian Oliu, Christopher Cokinos, and Joni Tevis during AWP's 2015 panel "Everyday Oddities: Natural Facts and the Lyric Essay": "the lyric essay is deeply under theorized" (*Assay Journal*). The reason, Eleftheriou suggests, is the "you-know-it-when-you-see-it idea" of the lyric essay which "has diverted focus away from questions of form" or in this case elements such as the pronoun of address.

Many of these texts demand that readers "collaborate in meaning-making" by destabilizing our relation to language (like Barthes' text of bliss) and so make their readers unstable and uncertain as subjects. These self-referential and destabilizing texts warrant further exploration, because they exploit the inherent deictic shift of our numberless and genderless pronoun, the ability to shift antecedents, to discomfit us, and the use of the implied *you* of the imperative mood to present readers with exophoric (real-world) impossibilities.

A particularly illustrative extended apostrophe is Octavio Paz's collection "Before Sleep," which is addressed to a *you* that presumably refers to a personified sleep. Paz's writing in this essay allows us to easily imagine no referent behind the *you* at all but instead imagine that the persona is equally speaking to and about the pronoun itself—writing *to* sleep but also *about* writing and the second person. If sleep is a state of consciousness that we may contract into being with the word *you*, then perhaps *you*, second person, as a concept, may be similarly contracted; or, better yet, maybe we learn here that *you* is also a state of consciousness. It is a liberal approach, I know, but consider this passage:

> [T]o whom, if not to him, can I tell my stories? In effect—I'm not ashamed to say it and you shouldn't blush—I have only you. You. Don't think I want to arouse your compassion; I have merely uttered a truth, confirmed a fact and nothing more. And you, whom do you have? Are

> you to someone the way I am to you? Or, if you prefer, do you have someone the way I have you? (Paz 484)

The first question suggests both the need to talk, to "tell our stories," but also the need to have an addressee: if not him, that is, then no one. To suggest that we "have only you" *may* be taken to indicate solitude, but this is not the case: in fact, no matter how many people we talk to, no matter who we talk to, they are always only *you*. The inverse, then, is also true, but Paz's questions also hint at a certain instability of the addressee: particularly, if that object (opposite my subject) will necessarily become a subject. "But do you," the persona asks, "tell the same things I tell you to a silent third, who in turn…? No, if you were an other, then who would I be? I repeat: who do you have?" (484-5). Paz seems to settle on a deictic inference that *you* refers only ever in context, and so, if the object becomes subject, a placeholder *you* still remains opposite my subject, even when no one is there. And in the case of apostrophe and, to an extent, the epistle, the very premise is, indeed, that no one is.

A common (Kupperman 10) and often unfavorable instance of you appears as intrapsychic witnessing, that which Stanzel calls the "dramatized I" (qtd. in Iliopoulou 25), or standard second-person in a first-person perspective. That is, a *you* as a distanced self for a "narrator writing to a self that no longer exists" (Šukys). Kacandes describes this as "a form of self-talk where the character acts as witness to his or her own experience" and associates it with trauma narratives (qtd. in Iliopoulou 29). It is phenomenon in which language can move fluidly between first- and third-person perspectives and "repeatedly if briefly seems to include the reader as the object of the discourse" (Richardson qtd. in Iliopoulou 31), which seems to be the difference between being spoken to and having yourself described to you. While this "allows one to stand at a remove from painful events," as Kupperman suggests, and thus from pain itself, the complaints reject subjectivity and agency in the action from the speaker and creates a distance that makes *essaying* in earnest more difficult.

Iliopoulou finds, however, that "[t]he second person [also] serves as a voice of objectivity and authenticity and reflects the aspiration to improve and amplify self-awareness" precisely because the subject is "disguised" and "the self [is] in hiding" (10). She explains that this may be accomplished when "a persona is made out of the authorial *I* that can be better analysed and observed from a distance" (49). Something Iliopoulou does *not* account for, though, is that when we write, we always have already created a persona available to analyze. So then perhaps a distance from the interrogated self or persona is expected in some regard, but that distance cannot be too great. Outright rejection of this doubly-removed version of self, then, is tempting, because it may protect us from the exploration and reflection necessary for quality essaying. I suspect, though, that the more we learn and theorize about trauma, or the more we acquaint ourselves with current theories, the more accepting of this we may become.

Perhaps the most common approach to you, both in reading and writing it, is as an imagined or hypothetical person or a person in a hypothetical or imagined space. This "fuse[s] a heterodiegetic depiction of an ever more specific individual with an imagined future of the reader, thus merging a third person perspective with a hypothetical 'you' that is the virtual equivalent of 'one'" (Richardson qtd. in Iliopoulou 31). That is, this is a second person that doesn't need to be, because it is *effectively* third person. This may sound like an act of careless or unconscious writing we'd correct in workshop, but in fact we see it often enough in quality essays by writers we would not describe as lazy at all.

Robert Louis Stevenson's "Walking Tours" is a perfect example. He opens the essay didactically: "a walking tour should be gone upon alone. If you go in a company, or even in pairs, it is no longer a walking tour in anything but name" (99). This *you* could be a companion. Or an imagined companion, or an imagined reader who needs literal instruction on walking tours. Or it could be—. This *you* could be anyone, any general, unknown *you*. Except it cannot be the reader. We know this by contrast, because a *you* appears in direct relation to the *I* in a later aside: "And you would be astonished if I were to tell you all the grave

and learned heads who have confessed to me that, when on walking tours, they sang-and sand very ill—and had a pair of red ears when, as described above, the inauspicious peasant plumped into their arms from around the corner" (101). That this *you* has a different relationship to the speaker than the other announces that there are multiple *you*s. Tense signals that the other *you,* the primary *you*, is just *one*: "you sit to smoke a pipe" (102), in the present tense not as a current action but as an *any time* or *as a habit* action; "you may" (103) and "perhaps you are left" (105) are in a mood that render the referent of the pronoun of no consequence since meaning is possibility rather than actuality. And even casual phrases, like the verbal tick "you see" (102) which has nothing to do with anyone physically seeing anything, signals that there is no person on the other end of that pronoun.

This is likely explained by the constraint itself, because this type of non-person is also seen in Julio Cortázar's "Instruction Manual." Not only does the persona grammatically equate *you* with *one*, as in "You tackle a stairway face on…. To climb a staircase, one begins by lifting that part of the body located below and to the right" (529), but when that *you* appears alone, as the sole subject with no equivalent, it is without any kind of useful marker. For example, the *you* in "the only thing that will come is what you have already prepared and decided" (522) is attached to no information that helps us to determine a referent and, more importantly, teases us with an imagined past that we can only complete using our own antecedents. Which is to say, like Walt's *you*, there is never anyone behind Cortázar's or any other *you* except for when we attach ourselves to it.

It is easy to imagine how this type of *you* would not survive workshop: if *you* is equivalent to *one*, there's no reason not to choose the pronoun with the more precise, literal meaning. But *you* has that effect of the double-address which makes it impossible for the reader not to feel referred to (Iliopoulou 60), and a writer can exploit that for mood. And this is the fourth way we interpret the second person, which has less to do with any theorizing of the phenomenon and much more to do with genre. Intimacy is one of the core conventions of the essay, and to this end, we may choose the intimacy of the direct address, like

we find in the epistle. It can't be ignored that the combination of direct address, imperative, and deictic adverbs (such as *here, there,* or *now*) amplifies the contemporaneity and actuality both of and for the addressee (perceived to be the reader) as a form of *mise-en-scene* (Iliopoulou 62-3).

You only ever has a general meaning in context, in a speech act or utterance, and as readers, we are not necessarily aware of the writer's specific context in which those pronouns were first employed. Furthermore, we each encounter the pronouns in a different context, and so too when the same reader returns to the same text later. But what is always certain is that *you* is always in relation to an *I*—in fact *must* be. And embedded in the function of these pronouns is a reversibility, necessary so that any communication may continue (Benveniste 224-5, Iliopoulou 42).

This is most apparent when a narrative incorporates two bodies—when both the *I* and the *you* are physically present (and it is interesting how often the *I* is *not* physically present in these texts, despite it cognitively always being so). Richard Selzer's "The Knife" is one such essay, notable perhaps because of how visceral that reversal is. We begin in third person, encountering the surgeon, our *one*, who "holds the knife as one holds the bow of a cello" (708). This is not another example of *one* being equivalent to *you*, or vice versa. Here, the specific *one* (surgeon) has a different referent from the general (any) *one*, and the difference between the use of second and third person seems to be a question of agency: "one lies naked, blind; the other masked and gloved. One yields; the other does his will" (711). The first instance of second person refers to the surgeon: "You turn aside to wash your gloves," and an equivalence is made to the third person immediately after: "one enters this temple doubly washed" (709). But Selzer switches referents as quickly as he switches the pronouns themselves. *You* is suddenly also the patient: "And what of that other, the patient, you…. Parts of you will be cut" (713). But the interest lies less in that a *you* has multiple, shifting referents and more in that the same is true of *I*, which is meant to have only one referent when written by a single author. When *you* is the surgeon, *I* is not; when *you* is the patient, *I* is the surgeon. So, despite the impossibility, the author is simultaneously subject *and* object.

Selzer introduces an intimacy that functions differently than does that of the epistle. Such a text suggests that intimacy has nothing to do with its connotations of friendship and affection; intimacy can just as often be discomfiting. While Iliopoulou does not explicitly discuss this effect, it is predicated by her explanation of gradation of subjectivity and identification. She claims that *you* "invites readers to engage more actively with the text as they are continuously accepting or rejecting identification with the narrative you and the role of addressee" (233) and follows Benveniste in claiming that the referent of *you* is inherently objectified (43-4). This would suggest that there is *always* an element of discomfort or unease in the English pronoun of address.

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* utilizes this aspect to its full potential, although there is an interesting additional challenge: Rankine uses the language of those whom she interviewed: "I asked people who I knew, friends, other colleagues, to just tell me moments where they were going along in their day. And, suddenly, somebody said or did something that reduced them to their race. And so, I collected these stories, rewrote them, got to the heart of what I was trying to portray." Sometimes, the lines were not rewritten, some "actually came from the person" she interviewed (Brown). *Citizen*'s persistent *you* ensures that a white reader perceives herself as present and responsible in racially motivated violence and microaggression. As Rankine explains in an interview with Meara Sharma, "the second person… disallowed the reader from knowing immediately how to position themselves…. And there are ways in which, if you say, 'Oh, this happened to me,' then the white body can say, 'Well, it happened to her and it has nothing to do with me.' But if it says 'you,' that you is an apparent part of the encounter." Rankine is obviously aware of how the second person interpolates in this way, despite a general lack of concrete referential markers of identity. Readers, she tells Sharma, assume the races and positions of participants based on context.

These assumptions are based on both cultural context and personal histories, of course, but also what Iliopoulou describes as "the continuous urge either to identify with the narrative *you*, or not" based

on reading preference (243). It is a compulsion, then, to position ourselves as *comfortably* as possible, perhaps in spite of the discomfort of *you*, in a race or referent that is like our own;[2] but it means in this text that we assume a role present and responsible in the violence. A particularly urgent example of this comes in Chapter VI, which is comprised of scripts for "situation videos" created with John Lucas:

Then the pickup is beating the black object to the ground and the tire marks the crushed organs. Then the audio, I ran that nigger over, is itself a record-breaking hot June day in the twenty-first century…. In the circulating photo you are looking down. Were you dreaming of this day all the days of your youth? In the daydream did the pickup take you home? Was it a pickup fueling the road to I ran that nigger over?... And was the pickup constructing or exploding whiteness out of you? You are so sorry. You are angry, an explosive anger, an effective one: I ran that nigger over. (Rankine 94)

Here, the person opposite the speaker is positioned as eighteen-year-old Daryl Dedman who robbed, beat, and ran over forty-seven-year-old James Craig Anderson. *You* first appears in a question, literally soliciting engagement from the reader, and even these questions discomfit; but what appears to be the most uncomfortable moment is when the persona tells us—me, you—how we feel and what we were documented as saying. In this moment as in almost all the rest, *you* not only contracts readers into a narrative they did not experience but more specifically into "a role that's not merely passive" (Iliopoulou 7).

Rankine also accomplishes this, although much less frequently, by using the imperative mood. In Chapter V, readers are told to, by any number of voices, "Stand where you are" (70), to "sit down. Sit here alongside" (71), to "Listen" (73). The reader is told to "Join me down here in nowhere" (72) which seems

[2] I wish to highlight that this is a generalized human compulsion explained by mirroring, empathy, and unconscious bias. Iliopoulou bases this on the understanding that everyone who participates in a speech act, including reading a book, necessarily has to position herself as either subject or as object. And this is what Rankine is relying upon for the effect of her text. But of course readers have agency, and we may choose to position ourselves however we wish; that is part of our compulsion toward "comfort": if we are discomfited by being contracted in one position, we choose to be contracted differently. More importantly, we use the shifting deictic of the pronoun to avoid discomfort.

like an act more difficult to agree to. And the reader is commanded to "Drag that first person out the social death of history" (72), which is uncomfortable not because of how we are positioned, necessarily, but because I don't think any one of us would know how to do that.

More so than any other occurrence of second person in essaying, the imperative mood challenges our assumptions of exophoric referentiality. It is an interesting aside, then, that our earliest occurrence of writing, and of nonfiction, if we follow John D'Agata's claim (10-11), is written in the imperative. Zuisudra's list of commands, however, does not challenge us the way that Cortazar's "Instruction Manual" or Rankine's *Citizen* do. Certain texts offer a reality crafted through this mood in which we cannot participate, despite our being interpolated into it. They are texts that command us, in our present moment —the present, when we are each only holding a book—to perform the impossible.

Barry Lopez's essay, "The Raven," begins self-referentially with a *you* in direct relation to an "I" who is aware of the constructedness of the forthcoming text: "I am going to have to start at the other end by telling you this" (23). Here, the reader is contracted into a relationship in a reality of the speaker's own creation. That is to say, the rules we live by do not exist here. Because the text does not point at, does not refer to our reality. It refers only to itself.

A cursory glance will yield dozens of instances of being commanded to perform the impossible, but it comes to a head the moment when we "want to know more about the raven":

> [B]ury yourself in the desert so that you have a commanding view of the high basalt cliffs where he lives. Let only your eyes protrude. Do not blink—the movement will alert the raven to your continued presence. Wait until a generation of ravens has passed away. Of the new generation there will be at least one bird who will find you. He will see your eyes staring up out of the desert floor. The raven is cautious, but he is thorough. He will sense your peaceful intentions. Let him have the first word. Be careful: he will tell you he knows nothing. (Lopez 25)

Our failure to complete these tasks, to follow the persona's commands is certain. For a reader to be able to immediately, or presently, pursue any action would mean that that reader would be already in that text, or that text's reality. That means none of us. When an *I* tells a *you* to perform a task that cannot be done, who that *you* is doesn't matter, because everyone can equally fail at doing that task. The task itself, then, has little to no referential bearing, because it was constructed as aware of its own fabrication. This means that we read the text without considering whether we can or should perform these actions. This *you* is not technically hypothetical or imagined, but it simply is not us—a *you* that does not refer to the only other participant in a speech act.

The essaying, then, in "The Raven" has very little to do with traditional notions of truth as relating to veracity or actuality. Without re-opening the truth in nonfiction debate, which I'd gladly leave to be discussed by David Lazar, David Shields, and John D'Agata, I will quickly state that this observation opens our genre to a number of texts we might not otherwise consider. This is fortunate, because perhaps the most famous texts of personal address are done under the guise of fiction by Marguerite Duras, who in one moment denies that her texts are autobiographical (65) and in the next that "the heart" of them is herself (75).

Duras claims that "behind [a book] there is no one" (75), and this seems true for many of the above texts. Hers are all akin to Paz's in that we may always reinterpret the *you* not as a figure in the narrative but as the concept of the pronoun of address generally. But unlike the other texts here, hers seem to disavow the reader altogether, to deny that we could ever fill the shoes of this *you*. In *The Atlantic Man*, the persona tells us that "above all, you will forget this is you" (31), which, thanks to the dual deictic references and tense, could have any number of meanings; but, when she admits that *you* "will think about your own self" (35), she suggests that if this ever did or could refer to us, it does not any longer or perhaps never should.

Whether I will think about myself or am that future self who thinks about himself is unclear: "You are at once hidden and present…hidden from yourself, from all knowledge anyone could have of

you" (53). No matter how, when, or as whom we position ourselves in this text, in relation to this pronoun, it is clear that we are vague at best and, as she tells us more explicitly, "You are absent" (40). And if we wanted to be dismissive, we could be by pointing out that impossibility—that if there is a reader, there is a person to occupy that space.

However, Duras seems to anticipate this line of thinking, which could be applied equally to any text that possesses this pronoun of address. Duras informs us that it is not *just* that *you* is absent; it is also that "your," that is the possessive of *you*, not of the reader—"*your* absence has taken over, it has been photographed just as your presence was photographed" (40). For any one of these texts, then, despite the various effects of that pronoun, there is the additional understanding that *you* not only refers by positioning someone in that space; *you* also refers by simply pointing to that space, taken over by absence.

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