

## BREAKING THE SILENCE AND THE SHACKLES: THE INCARCERATED FINDING EMANCIPATION THROUGH THE WRITTEN WORD

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### **ABSTRACT**

The incarcerated are arguably the most neglected population in the United States. Buried behind concrete walls and barbed wire, they are subjected to myriad dehumanizing practices that inhibit any chance of growth. Carceral facilities, such as jails and prisons, therefore, do not operate as spaces of rehabilitation or means of promoting community safety; instead, penal institutions merely function to perpetuate the white supremacist, classist, and sexist ideologies that plague American society at large. Despite the dehumanization that people caged behind bars endure, however, literacy often empowers the incarcerated and thus propels them onto journeys towards healing. Through the texts that they read, particularly works that discuss systemic disenfranchisement, people in prison obtain knowledge that enables them to posit their incarceration within a larger socio-historical narrative of institutional oppression, which consequently catalyzes their cognitive liberation. Likewise, writing often becomes a space where the imprisoned seek reconciliation with themselves and the free world, which ultimately breaks the silence and shackles of carceral confinement.

### **INTRODUCTION**

"Jamie Parker #945862C." I held the long white envelope in my hands and eagerly tore open the seal, careful enough not to rip the letter cradled within it-- my first tangible connection to the inside of a maximum-security women's prison. I initially encountered Jamie's story when my English professor invited me to work on a book project with her, aspiring to assist incarcerated women in publishing their memoirs and liberating their silenced, forgotten voices. We began by sifting through the several long manuscripts that Jamie had written over the past twenty years during her imprisonment. I read about Jamie's childhood in Georgia, where she loved to play in the meadows, climb trees, chase animals, and get muddy; I also read about how she became homeless, preferring to sleep behind newspaper stands when she could no longer live in her abusive household. I read about Jamie's attendance in night classes, where she worked hard to ensure that she would graduate high school; I also read about how, just turning eighteen years old, she saw the stars bead the night sky for the last time, as she was sentenced to life in prison with forty years without the possibility of parole for a crime she did not even commit.

Jamie's experience with the legal system, both prior to her conviction and in her current state of penal confinement, is just one of millions of stories nationwide that illustrate how dehumanization is foundational to the ways in which mass incarceration operates in the United States. Beneath the facade of rehabilitation lies extensive periods of isolation, invasive strip searches, and a severe lack of personal autonomy. The pervasiveness of these inhumane practices within the legal system suggests that penal facilities are not sites of healing, nor do they keep communities safe; instead, carceral institutions primarily function to perpetuate hegemony by criminalizing the most vulnerable populations who live on the margins of society. Without access to resources that would otherwise be beneficial to their healing and survival, the incarcerated are left to find their own means of rehabilitation despite the racist-classist-sexist legal system's tenacious attempts to disempower them. Literacy, namely reading and writing, for example, often becomes a subversive way that the incarcerated engage in radical acts of resistance in order to combat their institutional oppression. Although *physically* confined, books grant people behind

bars knowledge about their historical subjugation, which, in turn *cognitively* sets them free; this liberation consequently empowers the incarcerated to find reconciliation through writing, ultimately breaking the silence and shackles that have bound them.

### **THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX**

Before discussing the emancipatory nature of literacy for the incarcerated, it is imperative to first examine the ways in which the prison industrial complex operates as a tool for white supremacy, capitalism, and sexism in the United States. The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution palpably illustrates this function, as it reads, “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction” (emphasis mine). The exception clause of this amendment cogently suggests that mass incarceration is essentially modified slavery, as it exploits individuals with criminal records in order to perpetuate social control. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander examines this relationship between slavery, the Jim Crow era, and contemporary mass incarceration. When discussing the centrality of race in America and its legal system, for instance, she asserts that “the structure and content of the original Constitution was based largely on the effort to preserve a racial caste system--slavery” (35). The demographics of prisons and the exception clause of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, then, suggest that carceral institutions function as an instrument that preserves racial caste. This ubiquitous nature of white supremacy in the legal system underlines why, as of 2019, Black males were 5.7 times more likely to be incarcerated than white males, or why the incarceration rate for Black males ages 18-19 was 12 times the rate of white males (Carson). Further, of the 2,553 incarcerated people confined to Death Row as of October 2020, 41% are Black, despite making up only 13% of the U.S. population (NAACP). Black women specifically experience the depths of mass incarceration, as the intersection of their race, gender, and socio-economic status result in compounding oppressions (Crenshaw). As of 2019, for instance, Black women were incarcerated at 1.7 times the rate of white women (Carson). They additionally receive harsher sentences and more severe treatment overall, such as sexual abuse, when compared to their white female counterparts (Davis). It is also important to note that once someone is branded a felon, historical forms of oppression suddenly become legal, including housing, education, employment, and welfare discrimination, and even being stripped of voting rights (Alexander 2). These institutionalized collateral consequences of mass incarceration therefore underline the ways in which the legal system is inherently designed to perpetuate the disenfranchisement of marginalized communities. Despite this evident racism, classism, and sexism that undergirds the penal system, however, the majority of people in the free world choose to abandon the incarcerated and ignore the abuse they experience behind bars-- making them arguably the most silenced population in America.

The concealed nature of carceral institutions only augments society’s neglect of the imprisoned, as the concrete walls and barbed wire erect a literal and figurative barrier between the incarcerated and people on the outside. Once someone is convicted of crime, irrespective if they are guilty or not, many people in the free world dismiss them as merely “dangerous,” “criminals,” or “evil,” without considering the circumstances that resulted in their imprisonment. Eric Toso, a prison writing instructor, discusses this ostracism, as he asserts, “prison reflects what Carl Jung calls the shadow, that aspect of the psyche to reject and disown the unpleasant aspects of a whole human” (20). Instead of addressing the ways in which “unpleasant aspects,” such as “addictions, poverty, mental illness, [and] violence” are consequences of racist-classist-sexist societal institutions, carceral facilities merely operate as warehouses that store the bodies of people who live under the thumb of these oppressive systems (Toso 20). This social expulsion of the incarcerated, then, absolves non-system impacted people of the responsibility to engage with the institutional failures that so often lead to imprisonment in the first place (Davis). Consequently, mainstream society disposes the incarcerated into the depths of a collective imagination that suffocates them with degrading labels and considers them inherently “different than those of us on the outside, [as] they do not possess the same moral, and often intellectual, capacity” (Smith 88). Rather than recognizing the incarcerated as people who lack choices and equitable opportunities for success while living in a white supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist society, prisons instead perpetuate their subjugation and in turn reinforce these systems of oppression. Without access to sufficient resources

necessary for growth, people behind bars are trapped in a perennial revolving door of neglect, imprisonment, and silencing.

### **READING AND RESISTANCE**

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Despite the legalized forms of disempowerment that the incarcerated endure, reading often becomes a site of radical resistance for people behind bars, as books enable them to examine the systems that actively perpetuate their oppression. Because of the ways in which prisons rely on the “the silence, paralysis, confusion, and cooperation of those it seeks to eliminate or control,” reading empowers the incarcerated to disrupt this institutional deceit, as it provides access to the knowledge that they were never intended to have (Michelle Alexander xii). Peter Alexander, who teaches at the Orange Correctional Center, notes that African American literature specifically “provide[s] a critical lens for understanding one’s own subjugation,” for themes such as “freedom, bondage, legal bias, racial injustice, social protest, self-determination, and communal uplift” are prominent within the texts (88-96). Reading works by James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Malcolm X, and other Black authors helps the incarcerated draw parallels between those themes and their personal lives, and thus understand the ways in which their lived experiences are situated within larger systems of oppression. In his memoir, *Writing My Wrongs*, Shaka Senghor writes that he “was growing dangerously intelligent” when he began to read African American literature while incarcerated, as he “was learning a lot about white supremacy and the role it played in filling America’s prisons with young Black males,” which led him to “understand why the majority of the prison population looked like [him]” (101). The way in which Senghor describes his newfound intelligence as “dangerous” is significant, as it emphasizes the power inherent in knowledge; by reading about the larger implications of his incarceration, Senghor consequently understood the ways in which his imprisonment was a byproduct of a society, and thus legal system, rooted in racism and classism that historically subjugates marginalized communities (Foucault).

By reading texts that pertain to their lived experiences, the incarcerated are able to situate their imprisonment within a larger socio-historical narrative of enslavement and oppression, and thus challenge demeaning labels. In his memoir, *A Question of Freedom*, Dwayne Betts considers the ways in which reading poetry allowed him to contextualize his eight-year incarceration. As he read *The Black Poets* by Dudley Randal, a collection of poems composed of Black writers such as Nikki Giovanni, Robert Hayden, and Sonia Sanchez, Betts understood that his imprisonment was more than a matter of personal responsibility, for his story of confinement started generations before. He writes, “there was a history I was trapped in that I’d just begun to realize was buried in books... Solitary confinement gave me...the opportunity to start looking for the sense behind the words” (165). Betts’s intentional diction here, such as “trapped” and “buried,” underlines his state of penal confinement, which is juxtaposed with the liberation he experienced through reading. Betts’s imagery of the information as “buried” is particularly important, as it illustrates the legal system’s unrelenting efforts to perpetuate hegemony by suppressing knowledge. Through the poetry anthology, however, Betts posited his lived experiences as a young incarcerated Black man within a collective narrative of Black subjugation in America, which consequently freed him from the system’s attempt to mark him as a dangerous, violent individual. The knowledge that Betts obtained through reading, therefore, enabled him to preserve his humanity and reclaim a sense of power over his identity.

Reading, then, becomes liberating for the incarcerated, as books empower them to recognize their full humanity within a system that relies on their dehumanization. Elizer Eugne Darris illustrates this cognitive freedom within “A Chance to Fly,” a poem he wrote during his seventeen years behind bars. Throughout the piece, a “creature” that “resembled a bird’s wings” invites the narrator on a journey towards knowledge and truth, or “light.” The speaker responds:

‘So the more light I seek/the more I will take in./And the more I take in/the more I will understand./And the more I understand/the more I can command./And the more I command/the more I can contain./And the more I can contain/the freer my brain./And the freer my brain/the more I can conceive. And the more I can conceive/the freer I will be.’ (83)

Darris's metaphor of knowledge as light illustrates the transformative nature of reading within a carceral setting; amidst the bleak and dismal environment of prison, books are sources of light that lift the system's dark cloak of concealed truth. The parallelism within this stanza, specifically the anaphora, highlights the substantial impact of reading, as the repetition of "and" demonstrates the ever-increasing degree of power that the incarcerated experience through books. Further, the reiteration of "I" suggests that people behind bars reclaim a sense of agency with the knowledge they acquire through reading; this is particularly significant considering this poem emerges from a penal setting-- a setting that fundamentally intends to strip the imprisoned of every layer of their humanity. The emphasis of the pronoun, therefore, is a staunch affirmation of autonomy, and thus an act of resistance against the system. The creature explicitly reveals his identity in the last stanza of the poem, which reads "'You see, I am every book, but I am also every key./If you wield me properly/ [...] I/can/set/the/Whole/World/free'" (Darris 83). This conclusion of the piece solidifies the liberating power of reading, as the free-standing words mimic the freedom that books grant the incarcerated.

The emancipation that the incarcerated experience through reading consequently propels them onto ontological journeys where they engage in radical acts of resistance through self-definition, which ultimately sets them free. Senghor, for instance, reflects on the ways in which his books empowered him to reconstruct his identity during his time behind bars; he writes, "[the texts] gave me a sense of pride and dignity that I didn't have prior to coming to prison... I could feel myself becoming a leader, a deep thinker, and a man of self-control-- the kind of man that my readings of African history had inspired me to become" (19-77). Through the texts that he read during his confinement, Senghor freed himself from the disparaging labels of "inmate," and "felon," and thus recognized that he is a full, complex human being who is not defined by the circumstances that led to his imprisonment. His newfound ontological understanding quintessentially demonstrates the freedom Senghor experienced through reading, as he maintained his sense of dignity within a carceral space that functions to rob him of just that.

### READING AND COMMUNITY

While reading often becomes an outlet of individual, cognitive liberation for people caged behind bars, it also allows the incarcerated to cultivate a sense of community, which is another radical form of resistance against the isolating penal system. Anthony Ray Hinton, for instance, engaged in this subversive act of defiance when he formed a book club on Death Row during his thirty years of wrongful incarceration. Within his memoir, *The Sun Does Shine*, Hinton discusses the ways in which the book club became freeing, not only for himself, but also for the other men on Death Row with him, despite their perpetual physical confinement:

The point was to get them thinking about anything but the dark, grimy, hot hell of the row... that's all I wanted for these guys, an hour of freedom and escape... away from the rats and the roaches and the smell of death and decay. We were all slowly dying from our own fear-- our minds killing us quicker than the State of Alabama ever could... *Bring in the books*, I thought. *Let every man on the row have a week away, inside the world of a book.* (193)

Hinton's description of the prison's conditions quintessentially demonstrates the ways in which carceral settings strip the imprisoned of their humanity and thus obstruct their paths towards healing. The repetition of "and" emphasizes the inhumane environment that the incarcerated suffer behind bars; because of the way in which this polysyndeton decelerates the pace of the text, the line also mimics the extent of agony that the incarcerated experience, specifically on Death Row. Further, as Hinton mentions, the looming presence of death illustrates how contemporary punishment primarily attacks an individual's mind, as opposed to merely methods of physical torture (Foucault). This deliberate attack on the soul is particularly damaging for men like Hinton, who are sentenced to death for crimes they did not even commit. As Michelle Alexander notes in her work, "as long as you 'look like' or 'seem like' a criminal, you are treated with the same suspicion and contempt [by people] eager to catch you in the act of being the 'criminalblackman'--the archetypal figure who justifies the New Jim Crow" (202). Hinton's experience with the legal system palpably aligns with Alexander's assertion, as the state of Alabama

trapped Hinton into a persona of Black criminality, and subsequently robbed thirty years of his life. For Hinton, being a poor Black man in Alabama was a death sentence, and thus his case cogently demonstrates the ways in which incarceration is a legal tool that society employs in order to reinforce racist and classist ideologies. Despite the system's tenacious attempt to dehumanize men like Hinton, however, they escape the physical conditions to which they are confined through the books that they read, which consequently helps them remain cognitively alive. Hinton writes, "if I couldn't feel joy, that would be like giving them the rest of my life. The rest of my life is mine. Alabama took thirty years. That was enough" (301). Books by Maya Angelou and Harper Lee empowered the men to escape the realities of both their societal *and* penal condition and find a wider community of voices for support. It is important to emphasize that Hinton did not experience this joy in isolation, but rather amongst many other men who all felt the weight of penal confinement. This community that Hinton fostered while incarcerated, therefore, is a powerful act of resistance in itself, as, amidst the suffocating sense of impending death, he cultivated light and life for himself and others through the written word.

### CATHARTIC WRITING

Once the incarcerated understand their subjugation and begin to reconstruct their identities after reading, they often find the courage to pick up the pen, which enables them to engage in yet another act of defiance-- healing through cathartic writing. With a pen and paper, the incarcerated sift through their emotions and reconcile with their pasts, which subsequently aids in their cognitive liberation. In addition to discussing the ways in which reading was a transformative experience for him behind bars, Senghor extensively describes how writing helped him heal. He notes, for instance, "as I continued to write, I slowly began realizing that I had deep emotional issues that I had never addressed... Each time I filled a page of my journal, I felt as if a great weight had been lifted... I was learning a new way to get it out" (193-4). Through the process of self-referential writing, Senghor confronted his buried emotions and subsequently understood the ways in which his neglected childhood trauma affected his behavior as a teen and even an incarcerated adult. Because Senghor did not previously have the tools that books and writing gave him, these unaddressed feelings "[turned] into the source of violence that had possessed [him] for... years" (194). As he penned his repressed memories of abuse and adversity, however, Senghor "discovered layers upon layers of scars" that he began to unravel through his written word, and ultimately severed the ties that confined him to his past (194). He writes, "with the lined pages of my notepads I got in touch with a part of me that... was capable of feeling compassion for the men around me. For the first time I could remember, I began to recognize my true self" (192). By using writing as an emancipatory outlet, Senghor reconciled with his authentic self-- a part of him that was once suffocated by trauma, pain, and mistakes. His ability to genuinely feel compassion--perhaps the most salient marker of humanity--is also significant, as it demonstrates the ways in which Senghor engaged in a powerful act of resistance against an inherently dehumanizing system with merely his pen and paper. Writing, therefore, allowed Senghor to preserve his humanity and access a new ontological understanding despite being confined within a system that intends to deprive him of just that.

Because of the ways in which writing is often a site of healing and agency for the incarcerated, it empowers them to reconcile with their sense of self and freely reconstruct their identities. In her text *Black Feminist Thought*, for instance, Patricia Hill Collins argues that during the process of self-definition, "Black women journey toward an understanding of how [their] personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class" (125). Writing often becomes the path for this journey, specifically for *incarcerated* Black women, as the legal system compounds the intersectional discrimination they already endure while living in a racist-classist-sexist society. Assata Shakur, a political prisoner and activist, employs writing as a means of resistance, as she engages in radical acts of self-preservation within a system and society deliberately designed to subjugate her (Lorde). She writes, for example, "My name is Assata Shakur (slave name joanne chesimard), and i am a... Black revolutionary... i have declared war on all forces... i am a victim of all... hatred... that amerika is capable of.... amerika is trying to lynch me" (50). Here, Shakur exhibits a strong sense of ontology, which suggests that she is cognitively free despite societal and institutional confinement. Her identity as a "victim" also suggests that she recognizes the way in which she is a political prisoner, incarcerated not

only within penal facilities, but within American society at large. Shakur's spelling of "amerika" perpetuates this notion, as it is the German spelling of the word; with this intentional detail, Shakur draws a parallel between the American society in which she lives and the Nazi regime, which underlines her recognition of the white supremacist and patriarchal state that literally and figuratively holds her captive. Further, Shakur's distinction between her names is particularly important to note, as she rejects the name that law enforcement uses. Her intentional capitalization of her chosen name, then, demonstrates her reclamation of power over her identity in defiance of the legal system. The way in which Shakur defines herself as a "Black revolutionary" who has "declared war" also palpably underlines the radical, activist identity that she constructs through writing her work, which consequently illustrates the way in which writing often becomes a site of activism for those trapped in the system of mass incarceration.

Similarly, Jasmine Hampton discusses the ways in which she found liberation despite her imprisonment within the racist-classist-sexist legal system through writing poetry. In her collection that she composed while behind bars in a New Jersey maximum facility, for instance, she writes that "the only source of freedom for a diva to exist within the confines of this modern-day plantation is through the pen" (7). Hampton's description of prison as a "modern-day plantation" reaffirms what Senghor, Betts, and myriad other incarcerated people learn by reading African American literature-- the prison industrial complex essentially operates as an extension of slavery and Jim Crow, especially considering the disproportionate rates of poor Black and brown people behind bars. Writing, however, became a source of emancipation and self-discovery for Hampton, as crafting her poems helped her heal and thus achieve cognitive liberation. She writes, "Liberation in the midst of incarceration/... As she sits and meditates/On all of the years she's been gone/Expressing herself/In the form of a poem/On the top bunk all alone/In a zone/Nine years in prison/And damn, she's grown" (148). Writing poetry helped Hampton translate her feelings into words, which consequently propelled her onto a rehabilitative journey. Being "alone/in a zone" of isolation gave Hampton the chance to reflect on and heal from her past, and thus reclaim a sense of agency over her life. She asserts, "You see, they may have my body but only I can give them my mind. Watching my words come to life on paper, I was free to... visit the past, alter the present and create the future... It's a beautiful thing y'all!" (7). Here, Hampton demonstrates the way in which writing grants her cognitive freedom amidst the system's captivity over her body. It is important to consider her use of second person pronouns, as it suggests that she is not only writing for herself, but also to an audience-- an audience that is likely to be on the outside. Through her words, therefore, Hampton becomes present in the free world, and thus asserts her existence to those beyond the metal bars and barbed wire (Appleman).

The introspective healing and autonomy that writing provides the incarcerated enables them to reconstruct their identities and thus re-introduce themselves to the free world through their written words; therefore, writing becomes a method of reconciliation, not just with the self, but with the outside as well. In a foreword featured in *From the Inside Out*, an anthology of collected works written by young incarcerated men, Jimmy Santiago Baca discusses the transformative power that writing grants those behind bars: "They craft their own [futures] out of deep felt words careful set into sentences... that redefine their souls to the world beyond the walls of their confinement" (13). Writing, as Baca asserts, allows the incarcerated to explore their identities beyond the label that the system adheres to them, which consequently encourages their liberating ontological journeys that extend beyond the concrete walls. Considering the ways in which writing can take the shape of several forms-- such as fiction, memoir, and poetry-- the incarcerated engage in acts of agency every time they merely choose their content, style, and form of writing. Letters are a particularly popular medium for the incarcerated, as they are a suitable space to freely release thoughts and a form of connection to those on the outside. Senghor, for instance, reflects on writing an emotional letter in which he explained the story of his crime and conviction-- a response to mail that he received from his ten year old son who wrote that he knew Senghor committed murder:

When I finished [writing] the letter, I was emotionally drained and spiritually exhausted--but I felt better than I had at any other point in my life. Something in me had changed. I no longer

needed to rationalize having taken another person's life. The murder I committed was a senseless act of violence that had shattered people's lives and torn families apart, including mine. But I knew in my heart that we could begin to pick up the pieces. (199)

The emotional enervation that Senghor experienced upon completing his letter palpably illustrates the cathartic nature of writing; through the power of his pen, Senghor released remorse for his crime and assumed responsibility, which consequently severed the ties to his past that once hindered his ability to heal. Senghor's use of the pronoun "we" suggests that writing is not only a source of healing for himself, but also for his family and those on the outside. Through writing, then, Senghor was able to defy the debilitating label of "felon" and "murderer," and, in turn, reclaim his identity as a father. The process of writing this letter granted Senghor autonomy over his selfhood, which ultimately helped him reconcile with the free world in hopes of securing a better future for himself and his family.

Terelle Shaw, who is incarcerated at a Minnesota Correctional Facility, penned a similar letter to his nephews where he established his identity as a mentor for them:

I am starting to see a pattern in your behavior. It is the same pattern of behavior that mirrored mine's when I was your age. If you do not defer from this pattern of behavior you may find that a visit to prison may very well be in your future... I worry about you even more now because you have reached the age when young Black men enter into a world of social disenfranchisement and ... discrimination. This is a design of a political system diluted with historical, social, and economical intricacies that will lead you to the gates of prison. (55)

Like Senghor, Shaw retrospectively confronted his past and admitted to his wrongdoings through the advice he wrote to his nephews. He encouraged the boys to diverge from behaviors that were similar to the actions that led him to prison, which demonstrates the ways in which Shaw's mentorship enabled him to take responsibility for his actions while simultaneously granting his nephews the knowledge he acquired as a Black man caught within the racist-classist penal system. Through the insight that he embedded within his letter, Shaw gave his nephews the power to successfully configure their own lives and thus defy the racist social systems designed to destabilize and oppress them. By writing this letter, Shaw freed himself from his status as a "felon," and instead assumed a leadership role, attempting to break the cycle of incarceration that tears apart myriad families like his own. For Shaw, then, writing this letter was not only a way to assert his identity as an uncle and mentor, but it became a means by which he cultivated a lasting presence in the free world despite his physical confinement behind bars, as his letter intended to secure a promising future for younger generations.

Reading Jamie's letter was the defining moment when I truly recognized this power inherent in writing, especially for the incarcerated who are institutionally silenced, abandoned, and forgotten. "I'm buried alive screaming to the world of the living," she wrote to me, and this catalyzed my understanding of how imperative it is to amplify and help liberate the neglected voices of the imprisoned. Jamie's story became the vessel that carried her existence back into the free world, a world beyond her 5'x8' cell where she has been confined for decades, deprived of warmth, connection, and humanity. Jamie, Senghor, Betts, Hampton, and the millions of other writers caged behind bars demonstrate how literacy can resurrect their entombed bodies and souls, as the power of the pen releases their suppressed voices buried deep in the shadows of carceral confinement. Breaking the silence and the shackles, the incarcerated are longing to set their stories free, and we on the outside must be willing to listen.

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