

THE QUEERING OF LATIN AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES

Amy Kaminsky
University of Minnesota

BODIES AND BIASES: SEXUALITIES IN HISPANIC CULTURES AND LITERATURES. Edited by David William Foster and Roberto Reis. Hispanic Issues no. 13. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. Pp. 440. \$54.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

SEXUAL TEXTUALITIES: ESSAYS ON QUEER/JING LATIN AMERICAN WRITING. By David William Foster. Texas Pan American Series. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997. Pp. 180. \$28.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.)

HISPANISMS AND HOMOSEXUALITIES. Edited by Sylvia Molloy and Robert McKee Irwin. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998. Pp. 319. \$49.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.)

Among Latin Americanists, queer theory and criticism have bloomed like spring in far northern climates—late but with great intensity. The three books under review here have all been published since 1995, as have the collections *¿Entiendes? Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings and Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*; Jaime Manrique's *Eminent Maricones: Arenas, Lorca, Puig, and Me*; and Daniel Balderston's *El deseo, enorme cicatriz luminosa*. They will be followed by *LusoSex*, edited by Fernando Arenas and Susan Quinlan, and *Reading and Writing the Ambiente: Queer Sexualities in Latino, Latin American, and Spanish Culture*, edited by Susana Chávez-Silverman and Librada Hernández. Scholars are even beginning to see queer theory used beyond the humanities. Cynthia Weber pushes metaphors of sexuality and gender well over the cutting edge to make her case about power relations between the United States and the Caribbean in her new book, *Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a "Post-Phallic" Era* (1999).

I have deliberately chosen to use the word *queer* in the title of this review rather than *gay*, or *lesbian*, or *homosexual*. The reason is in part that although not all the scholarship included in these collections is about gay sexuality, their focus on sexuality per se is itself a departure from the norm. And the queer is what is not straight, not normative. Gay and lesbian sexualities are two forms of queerness, but there are others. Years ago Gayle Rubin wrote about outlaw sexualities from adultery to sadomasochism to pederasty, and more recent writers have focused on gender transgression

that may or may not include sexual behavior but always implies sexual possibilities. In Anglophone literary and cultural studies, where criticism around issues of transgressive sexuality developed over a longer period of time, the idea of the queer began to seem far more disruptive and ultimately more fruitful than “gay” and “lesbian,” which tended to reinforce conventional gender norms. With transgender, intersex, and bisexuality added to its categories, the queer undoes familiar binaries built around gender, sex, and sexuality—masculine-feminine, male-female, gay-straight.

To queer the center by centering the queer, as feminist philosopher Naomi Scheman has expressed it in another context (1997), is to destabilize and denaturalize notions of sex and gender but also to unsettle notions of the normal. Using *queer* as a verb stands for that unbalancing act, the disturbance of the status quo that requires a re-visioning, in Adrienne Rich’s words, of all our categories. By taking sexuality and transgression as their focal point, the books under review dislodge familiar disciplinary divides as well as the theoretical and methodological categories attending them. History, anthropology, and the study of popular culture have found their way into *Bodies and Biases*, *Sexual Textualities*, and *Hispanisms and Homosexualities* as they did in *¿Entiendes?* and *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*. Moreover, the editors and sometimes the writers themselves breach the conventional distinction within the field of literary criticism between Latin Americanists and Peninsularists.

The shift from gay and lesbian studies to queer studies has been marked by a move away from studying an already available body of work by homosexual writers toward producing theory in an open field; away from questions of identity (coming out, claiming a voice) to questions of subjectivity (what is the queer subject, and how is such a subject constituted?); away from community, in, for example, a perhaps idealized notion of a lesbian-centered women’s culture and a lesbian-separatist politics, to the relation of the queer subject to the body politic and to the nation; from representation of preexisting and retrievable gay themes to the performance of transgressive behavior as constitutive of categories like sexuality and gender.

In Latin American studies, and in spite of individual articles that appeared earlier in more adventurous academic journals and some collections of feminist criticism, these two stages have been telescoped. The lag time between the unfolding of both the social movement and the academic practices attending it in the United States and what has begun to emerge in Latin America has had an impact on the development of scholarship concerning sexuality and culture in the region. Perhaps most important is the ability of Latin Americanists to evade the strict distinction that queer scholarship once claimed as a radical departure from gay and lesbian work, which is just now being questioned among U.S. practitioners.

The encounter between a more traditional literary-critical approach, characteristic of gay and lesbian criticism interested in thematics and the

connection between the life experience of authors and readers, and a theory-driven approach typical of queer readings of larger cultural texts is featured in *Bodies and Biases: Sexualities in Hispanic Cultures and Literatures*, co-edited by David William Foster and the late Brazilian critic Roberto Reis. The collection combines close readings of texts with essays using what the editors call a cultural studies approach that starts with theory and canvasses a series of texts, often representing several genres, for corroboration.

The introduction, written by Reis and his former student Dário Borim, manifests some diffidence toward the central topic, as if to say, "We are not going to go so far as to introduce this book. We will merely point you in the right direction and you can take it from there." After cataloguing a range of themes that the contributors consider, Reis and Borim light on two that underlie nearly every essay: gender identity and homosexuality.¹

In its interrogation of gay and lesbian issues (gay themes, gay cultures, gay writers and readers) in exploring issues around the sorts of questions of heterosexuality and power and gender hierarchy that feminist criticism has been dealing with over the past twenty-five years, *Bodies and Biases* covers four centuries (from the seventeenth to the twentieth) and a wide swath of space: all of Iberia, Latin America, and the Hispanic and Latino United States. Reis and Borim maintain that the word *Hispanic* covers Brazilian and Portuguese writing and culture as well, an argument I had not heard before, but as they are themselves Brazilian, I will not question that the term resonates for them.

In the "Afterword," a kind of critical synopsis of the book chapter by chapter, Naomi Lindstrom notes that this is the first in its series that allowed its contributors "virtually complete freedom to select their text," to choose from the entire range of Iberian and Ibero-American literature (and other forms of cultural production as well), given that sexuality can be inscribed anywhere and certainly in any time. What Lindstrom observes here is less a problem of an overly sprawling theme than the opportunity offered by a new cut on culture, a new category of analysis that allows readers to view a familiar landscape from a new perspective.

Homosexuality is implicit rather than explicit in the "biases" in Foster and Reis's title, and the "sexuality" of the subtitle is a less fraught term without its disquieting prefix. At least one of their contributors, writing on sexuality, manages to evade discussion of homosexuality altogether. Eduardo Jaramillo Zuluaga spends thirty pages on the voyage from "modest decorum" to a more open language of eroticism in the twentieth-century Colombian novel vis-à-vis what he calls "the threatened society," with only two fleeting references to women-authored texts and totally unsullied by the

1. Although gender remains a rather stable category of analysis in the essays that Foster and Reis collected, I very much enjoyed the typographical transgendering of Nelly Richard, who is referred to as "he" in the introduction.

notion of homoeroticism.² Such oversights notwithstanding, the queer is the irritant in the oyster that produces what pearls this volume contains. Some its best essays are Claudia Schaeffer's meaty analysis of Sara Levi Calderón's successful novel *Dos mujeres*, richly saturated in theories of modernity and modernization. Schaeffer scrutinizes the free market's incorporation and domestication of oppositional discourse and behavior, taking the novel and its popular success as a symptom of these processes as she formulates her critique. Schaeffer argues convincingly that lesbianism is both despised and conscripted in the enactment (or what she calls "the masquerade") of modernity. Unlike Salvador Oropesa, who simply celebrates women's (hetero)sexual freedom in his own rosy reading of another recent popular Mexican novel, Angeles Mastretta's *Arráncame la vida*, Schaeffer shows how purported freedoms can simply help shore up a sham modernity.

Mary Gossy contributes a sharply written, concise essay arguing that Cristina Peri Rossi's 1988 novel, *Solitario de amor*, represents a butch-femme rather than a heterosexual relationship. Beginning with a clear enunciation of the centrality of desire in lesbian reading, Gossy crystallizes complicated theory relating to the uneasy connection between "penis" and "phallus" to demonstrate what I sensed on first reading the novel—that I was reading about lesbian sex. Gossy demonstrates that although the phallus is everywhere in the text, the penis never shows up. Her discussion of the "*débil liana*" (weak liana) as a feminine phallic symbol is particularly apt: the liana is phallic in shape but entwines and engulfs its symbiotic partner in botany. Gustavo Geirola weighs in with his discussion, "Eroticism and Homoeroticism in *Martín Fierro*," an exhilarating psychosexual analysis of nation in this emblematic text.

As I suggested earlier, contact with work on Spain and Portugal is an important benefit of the thematic, as opposed to the purely geographical, approach that discussions of sexuality in culture allow. Most of the contributions to *Bodies and Biases* focus on Latin American subjects. Of those that do not, two stand out as particularly useful for Latin Americanists. Lou Charnon Deutsch's discussion of the Bécquer brothers' politico-pornographic watercolors offers a way to think about similar visual representations in the Latin American context. She argues that the social criticism of the monarchy in paintings depicting the inappropriate sexual behavior of a queen who acts on her own sexual desire (appropriating the phallus, as it were), however radical in intent, is undercut by the ultimately conservative view of traditional gender arrangements, particularly women's sexuality. This insight remains crucial in a political and cultural climate in which the ramifications of greater freedom for women on women's own terms is hindered by both the Right and the Left, as is the case in Latin America.

2. Readers interested in the former topic—and, to a lesser extent the latter—are advised to look into the two-volume anthology, *Literatura y diferencia: Escritoras colombianas del siglo XX*.

Finally, Bradley Epps's dazzling essay, "The Ecstasy of Disease: Mysticism, Metaphor, and AIDS in *Las virtudes del pájaro solitario*," insists on grounding Juan Goytisolo's text in historical reality without minimizing the power of the mystical and postmodern resonances in the text that have focused the attention of other critical analyses of this work. Epps's essay is a model of masterful style, theoretical rigor, and readerly compassion. His insistence on reading references to reality in this vertiginous text brings a specifically Latin American aspect to bear: Goytisolo's allegorizing of the Cuban Revolution's dismal response to homosexuality. Epps touches as well on Carlos Fuentes's reading of *Las virtudes*, in which the central motif of male homoeroticism disappears into a universal (heterosexual) amorousness that eliminates its critical edge. Epps returns to Goytisolo in *Hispanisms and Homosexualities* to raise troublesome questions concerning self-identification and even self-delusion regarding homosexuality, gay politics, and AIDS in *Paisajes después de la batalla*. Epps, like his subject, refuses easy answers, questioning the perfectly liberatory possibilities of parody, fragmentation, and the homo-text. He ventures beyond the sheer pleasure of Goytisolo's writing to interrogate its dangers, particularly of reinscribing repression. Epps deftly takes readers through Goytisolo's critique of political action in favor of dispersal, fragmentation, and what Epps (following Pierre Bordieu) calls "the oracle effect." Here "the ego abolishes itself in favor of a transcendent moral person" (p. 219), leaving one startled to find transcendence in Goytisolo's frantic fragmentations and disavowals.

The year after *Bodies and Biases* was published, Foster brought out *Sexual Textualities: Essays on Queer/ing Latin American Writing*. As the subtitle indicates, this volume is less a sustained argument of "queer theory" concerning Latin American writing than a collection of essays that explore varieties of queer texts and queer responses to Latin American literature and culture. Foster's readings are embedded not only in queer analysis but in feminist criticism, exemplifying the close connection between the two modes and their concerns. His analysis of the crisis of masculinity in texts by Argentine writers David Viñas and Silvina Bullrich is perhaps the most obvious example in this connection. Foster's breadth of knowledge is remarkable. The essays gravitate toward Argentina, Foster's area of regional interest and expertise, but it also reaches outward to Mexico, the Caribbean, and the United States with readings of literary and cultural texts. His introductory chapter is mildly apologetic about the fact that gay male writers, themes, and readings dominate his study. It is true that with chapters on Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's film *Doña Herlinda y su hijo*, Cuban writer Matas Montes Huidobro's novel *Exilio*, Eva Perón as a gay icon, and the crisis of (heterosexual) masculinity in Argentine narrative on the Perón era, gay male questions take up most of the space in this study. Still, Foster dedicates some space to lesbian textual production, including a chapter on Alejandra Pizarnik and a section on Cherrié Moraga in his chapter on Chicano homoerotic writing. He even

makes a foray into the relationship between cultural transgression writ large and transgressive heterosexuality in an essay that appeared earlier in *Bodies and Biases*. Analyzing what he calls “the case for feminine pornography,” Foster looks at the writings of Hilda Hist (Brazil), Mayra Montero (Cuba and Puerto Rico), Diana Raznovich (Argentina), and Alicia Steimberg (Argentina).

Sexual Textualities contains an important comparative caveat, cautioning against the wholesale transplantation of U.S. or even more broadly international notions of queerness into the multiplicity of Latin American contexts. As Foster and others point out, the meaning and content of queerness is culturally specific, precluding any simple application of queer theory to Latin American and Latino texts. In his discussion of Chicano homoerotic textuality, for example, Foster locates discussions of homosexuality as they relate to modernity and tradition within the Chicano community, searching for “depictions of homoerotic desire that transcend the hegemonic models of Anglo authors and the Anglo critical establishment” (p. 78). Using this approach, Foster reads the novels of John Rechy to gesture provocatively toward a theory linking linguistic competence (including bilingualism and code switching) to sexual preference.

Nonetheless, Foster uses the work of U.S. and European thinkers in formulating his analyses. For example, his reading of Eva Perón as a gay icon depends on notions of camp and operatic theatricality familiar to U.S. and international readers. Foster relies on U.S. poet Adrienne Rich’s lesbian continuum, from an early and much criticized essay that argues that genital contact is at one extreme of a continuum of homosocial behaviors among women, all of which might be called “lesbian.” Foster also relies on French theorist and novelist Monique Wittig, who argued that the category “lesbian” is that which escapes gender as decreed by patriarchy. Foster tends to de-eroticize lesbianism in his reading of Alejandra Pizarnik. His smart close readings of Pizarnik’s poems trace the path from the body of the poet to the body in the poem. He thus focuses less on the homoerotic than on the representation of the body per se. Foster is a little skittish about the sadistic form that lesbian desire takes in Pizarnik’s *The Bloody Countess*, yet tropes of pain and dismemberment, pleasure and danger are not unique to Pizarnik as a lesbian writer. Her aestheticizing of pain and pleasure needs to be read, rather, in the context of lesbian authors who write of experiences of bodily limits, including Wittig herself in *The Lesbian Body*, Sylvia Molloy in *Certificate of Absence*, and even the modernist British writer Djuna Barnes in *Nightwood*.³

Of the three volumes under review here, only Sylvia Molloy and Robert McKee Irwin’s *Hispanisms and Homosexualities* deals exclusively with gay and lesbian issues. At the same time, it is the most consistently theoretically engaged of the collections. The volume maintains the critical edge of the difference and challenge of homosexualities in the plural, not reducible

3. Molloy is Pizarnik’s contemporary, although Molloy began writing fiction much later.

to any single historical or cultural meaning and refusing as well a simple, singular notion of Hispanism.

Molloy and Irwin call into question the stability of the term *Hispanism* and unveil its ideological underpinnings as a site of desire for a kind of wholeness: “. . . the fierce act of commitment that Hispanism, as an ideological construct, would act on its practitioners, with its talk of love, group belonging, and communal loyalty, a loyalty to a mythical *patria* devoid of geographical boundaries that would bring together—unproblematically, of course—the cultures of a metropolis and those of its erstwhile colonies. Hispanism, this Hispanism, is more than a linguistic bond: it is a conviction, a passion, a temporal continuity, an imperial monument” (p. x). This stark description is perhaps overstated—Molloy and Irwin note that not all practitioners respond to this demand for allegiance. It serves nonetheless as the backdrop for a critical intention to diverge, reformulate, and unsettle—that is, to queer Hispanism: “To visit sexual dissidence on it at this point is not an impertinent gesture but a destabilizing move, a propitious fracture—in sum, an invitation to reread texts whose productive mobility has been deadened by sheer canonicity” (p. xi). Here Molloy and Irwin note the constraints they place on their collection. *Hispanisms and Homosexualities* is to be primarily a study of literary texts, many of them in fact canonical. The queering of Hispanism, however, also functions to destabilize disciplinary boundaries by asking impertinent questions not easily accommodated within the discursive boundaries of one traditional discipline or another, nor within those of “Hispanism,” that “imperial monument” one can so easily imagine defending its borders.

The editors apparently insisted on the high level of research and writing for their contributors that Sylvia Molloy consistently demands of herself. The scholarship in Molloy’s essay on the practice of posing in turn-of-the-century Latin America is splendid. Molloy brings contemporary queer theorists to bear on the writings of experts on turn-of-the-century sexuality, particularly in Argentina, to argue that posing, so dismissively dealt with both for its superficiality and for its association with gay male culture, is a form of narrative that presents a particular problem, the problem of simulation. The poseur is precisely not what he poses as. Posing then becomes a sort of instantiating performance, but one that requires both reading and repetition to have meaning.

The historical and geographical range of *Hispanisms and Homosexualities* is broad; its unifying thread is the queer stitch. Mary Gossy takes readers back to the early modern period, as does Israel Burstain in his fascinating account of a Elena/o, a sixteenth-century hermaphrodite. Gossy analyzes María de Zayas’s seventeenth-century *desengaño amoroso*, “Amar sólo por vencer,” a tale in which a man dresses as a woman in order enter the service of a woman he wants to seduce. Gossy shifts the focus of the tale from Esteban/Estefanía, the initially sympathetic lovesick man who is

far below the station of the object of his desire, to Laurela, the woman he wants. Because Esteban is successful in his transgender presentation, for Laurela and the other maids, he is Estefanía, a woman who loves women and whom Laurela loves in turn. The transgendered figure, then, makes the story of sexual desire between women a story that can be told, fulfilling the editors' goal "to bring out the 'disappeared' queerness of [the] text" (p. xvi).

Where a single time and place are dealt with in more than one essay, the essays more often illuminate than reiterate one another. Robert Irwin and Daniel Balderston both write on the critical reception of the poetry of the postrevolutionary period in Mexico. Irwin trains his eye on the poet Jorge Cuesta, correctly decrying the pathologizing of homosexuality in the critical reception of the poet but never coming to terms with Cuesta's self-mutilation and suicide. Balderston connects the refusal of recent critics to acknowledge the gay content in the poetry of the two more or less openly gay poets of the *Contemporáneos* group, Salvador Novo and Xavier Villaurutia, to the homophobic and panicky contemporaneous criticism of this generation of poets in general. Balderston treats readers to big chunks of poetry that amply illustrate how hard it must have been to ignore the homoerotic content of these texts.

In a twist on the overtly homophobic responses of readers to homoerotic writing or that of writers to the destabilizing threat of homoeroticism to a national or cultural project, Emilie Bergmann shows clearly how María Luisa Bemberg's ostensibly favorable representation of lesbian desire in her film, *Yo, la peor de todas*, is in fact incomplete. It ultimately becomes just another version of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and her writing, "framed and constricted by gender and political categories" (p. 244).

Agnes Lugo Ortiz picks up on the themes of homosexual panic and hypermasculinity, this time in reference to the Puerto Rican canon. She convincingly traces their connection to a nostalgic patrician agrarianism in Abelardo Díaz Alfaro's widely anthologized story, "El Josco," through the threat of castration (ultimately enacted) in René Marqués's "En la popa hay un cuerpo reclinado," to the reviling of the lesbian as the embodiment of barren, false modernity in Emilio Díaz Valcárcel's "El asedio."

The Caribbean is a key but troubled site in this collection. Rubén Ríos-Avila maintains that contrary to much writing linking nation and sexuality, Cuban authors Reinaldo Arenas and Manuel Ramos Otero write anti-generational, anti-progeny texts representing the gay writer in exile who really does not want to go home. Ríos-Avila argues that Arenas and Ramos Otero, caught between Edward Said's notion of exile as a middle ground and the impossibility of return as Cuban queers, manifest the "unmanageable body of difference" and are positioned as such by "a series of dislocations" that are both personal and political (p. 112). In the end, the focus of these texts is the abjected self, not the community or the nation. Paul Julian Smith reprimands leftist critics whose support for the Cuban Revolution

comes at the expense of ignoring the persecution of gays under Castro. He argues that such critics (mostly U.S. and British) use theories of representation derived from an oversimplified understanding of such thinkers as Louis Althusser and Roland Barthes to dismiss the critique of the repression of homosexuality in Cuba by Néstor Almendros and Reinaldo Arenas. Smith mounts a double-barreled assault that marshals the theories his opponents use but that allows for the intervention of respect for those affected by Cuba's anti-gay policies. Yet just as those he criticizes refuse to see Cuba's villainy in its treatment of gays, Smith is unable to acknowledge the good done by the revolution.

José Quiroga's essay on Virgilio Piñera is still another Cuban entry. It is an essay drenched in the metaphor of blood—bloodlines and bloodshed, with the specter of AIDS unmentioned but lurking beneath the surface—on the ethics and paradoxes of outing in relation to the openly gay Piñera, whose writing avoided gay themes, especially after the revolution. Quiroga argues that Piñera's call for "naked clarity" in writing, in contrast to the opulent prose of José Lezama Lima and others, functions to recloset him by means of a bareness that only alludes to homosexuality in its desire to avoid (re)marginalization. Following Quiroga's logic, it makes sense to note that the naked male body is not marked for homosexuality; dressing the male body is the means by which it is so marked.

Oscar Montero's autobiographical-critical essay is also ultimately grounded in Cuba. Montero's analysis of Latino and queer labels unearths the desire for a signifying space and the disruptive notion of the Cuban queer. He conscripts Henry Louis Gates's figure of the Signifying Monkey and transforms it into the Signifying Queen, calling into question along the way the persistent heterocentrism of Gates's reading of the African figure of Esu, the African deity both he and Gates claim. Montero absconds with Esu in the Yoruban deity's Cuban incarnation as Echu-Eleguá for his reading of the joys of the surface and the pleasures of drag in still another icon of queer Cuba, Severo Sarduy.

Almost all the contributors to *Hispanisms and Homosexualities* are deeply engaged with contemporary critical theory. José Esteban Muñoz, for example, deftly uses Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas to read and celebrate Pedro Zamora's self-creation and self-display as an HIV-positive Latino on MTV's *The Real World*. Ben Sifuentes Jáuregui, with the help of Judith Butler as well as Roberto González Echevarría, rereads *Lazarillo de Tormes* as a text that enacts the trauma of its own content. Sifuentes draws attention to the episode-that-is-not-one, in which the protagonist meets up with a Mercedarian friar, to point out the space in which homoeroticism is marked and skirted in this foundational text of Hispanic literature.

For some, this practice will raise the question of the usefulness of theory derived from a European tradition and context for understanding Latin American phenomena. Yet the insertion of a queer problematic complicates

the question of national difference considerably. Reis and Borim, for example, note the connection between the nation-building project and the exclusion of “inappropriate sexualities.” The often transnational displacement experienced by many gay men and lesbians, the creation of networks that transcend national or even continental borders, and the emergence of queer theory simultaneously with (if not often in conversation with) postcolonial theory all complicate the simple us-versus-them binary that devolves into the dispute over which theory (if any) is appropriate for which continent, and even of who counts as “us” and who counts as “them.”

When gay men and lesbians are ostracized and removed from sight, when migration and expatriation are commonplace among gays and lesbians who can raise money for the fare to get away from home, and in the context of transnational gay and lesbian social movements for political rights, social visibility, and attention to HIV-AIDS, claims for nationally or even regionally bounded theory are more than a little disingenuous. Latin American gay liberation movements, together with homophobic reactions to any manifestation of feminism and the emergence of a body of work that can be called gay and lesbian literature, the public exhibition of queer community around issues of art, culture, and health are all recognizable and analogous—not identical—to gay and lesbian experience in the United States. The works reviewed here challenge the limits of a purely Latin American notion of bodies, sexualities, and homosexualities even as they foreground cultural production originating in Latin American domains. In doing so, they demonstrate “the ways in which the boundaries (not just sexual but national, racial, and political) of Hispanism begin to break down when confronted by Hispanism’s own homosexualities” (*Hispanisms and Homosexualities*, p. xv). The constant push-pull among the local, the national, the regional, and the transnational as well as the rejection of the stasis of a singular homosexuality or a singular Hispanism are signs of the vitality of the queer critical project among Latin Americanists.

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