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Neil Bissoondath's Imaginary Homeland: The Search for Possible Places and Space in *A Casual Brutality*

Abstract

Neil Bissoondath's novel *A Casual Brutality* (1988), later translated into French as *Retour à Casaquemada* (1992), focuses on a return journey to an imaginary homeland. My aim is to show how the main character tries to define his transformed identity on an island through his relationship with the places and the space that he used to know but lost contact with. Casaquemada means "a house burnt down"; it suggests that the narrator goes through a process in which his sense of belonging is seriously threatened. The article is a systematic analysis of the main protagonist's relationship to various locations: houses, rooms, landscapes, cityscapes. My intention is to demonstrate that the ambiguous relation between here (Canada) and there (an island in the Caribbean) results in a strong sense of unquestionable dislocation.

Résumé

Le roman de Neil Bissoondath, *A Casual Brutality* (1988), traduit en français sous le titre de *Retour à Casaquemada* (1992), présente un voyage de retour dans une patrie imaginaire. Je me propose de montrer comment le protagoniste essaie de définir son identité transformée, lors d'un séjour dans une île, à travers son rapport avec les lieux et les espaces qu'il avait connus, mais avec lesquels il a perdu tout contact. "Casaquemada" signifie "la maison complètement brûlée", suggérant que le narrateur-personnage est sujet à un processus de transformation dans lequel son sentiment d'appartenance à un lieu est fortement ébranlé. Mon étude donne une analyse systématique des rapports d'aliénation entre le protagoniste et divers types de lieux: maison, chambres, paysages campagnards et urbains. Mon objectif est de démontrer que le rapport ambigu entre « ici » (le Canada) et « là-bas » (une île des Caraïbes) produit dans ce roman un sentiment très fort d'incontestable de dépaysement.

Spatiality has always been part and parcel of Canadian literature; however, it has gained new dimensions in recent years. According to David Staines, "The earlier obsession with the question [asked by Canadian authors] 'Where is here?' has faded into memory, a question, no longer necessary, valid, or even appropriate. And 'What is there?' is the question so many of our writers are now raising" (40). With Staines's seminal observation in mind, I intend to provide an enlightened comprehension of Neil Bissoondath's novel *A Casual Brutality* (CB) on the basis of its idiosyncratic spatial structuration.

Bissoondath's *A Casual Brutality* is an attempt to come to terms with one's native land. This is clearly reflected in the French translation of the novel's title *Retour à Casaquemada* (Jean-Pierre Ricard, 1992). Bissoondath's island, where the narrative unfolds, is conspicuously a fictional one. Bissoondath himself, a native of Trinidad, an ethnic Indian from an African-Caribbean community, left for Canada at the age of 18. He is the nephew of the well-known writers V.S. Naipaul and Shiva Naipaul. He recounts that he was encouraged to leave Trinidad: "When I arrived in Toronto, I got a letter from my uncle who told me to remember it was a big world. It's an adventure, he said. Discover" ("Hungering", 7). In the end, he never returned to his native land, with the solitary exception of when he attended his mother's funeral. On the face of it, his attachment to his birthplace remains surprisingly distant. He says, "It [Trinidad] is another country in the world. I've never had a single regret about leaving, or the slightest desire to return" ("Hungering", 7). He emphasizes: "There was simply the idea that you *would* leave Trinidad, you *would* move to another country to live, and there was a good chance you would never return" ("Building", 127).

A Casual Brutality begins by introducing the main character, Bissoondath's alter ego, Dr. Raj Ramsingh, at the airport, a *transit place*, saying good-bye to his relatives with a *one-way ticket* in his pocket suggesting no wish to return. Raj is leaving the island of Casaquemada, which means "house burnt" in Spanish. The origins of this enigmatic name are shrouded in the legend of a "malcontent" (37) sailor, Lopez – "a man of disputatious character" (37) who was left behind by his Spanish captain back in the 15th century. He built his own cabin, which he later put on fire, and killed himself. When he was found, "In his log, the captain penned a brief entry 'Casaquemada'. House burnt. 'Lopez Muerto'. *Lopez dead*" (37; emphasis original). Through naming it, it became part of the land possessed by the Spanish: "Space is claimed for man by naming it" (Relph 16).

The "burnt down house" is the central trope around which the narrative unfolds. Bissoondath follows the tradition of attaching importance to distinctive place names in postcolonial literature. Bissoondath's native Trinidad (La Trinidad) stands for the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Given its name, this is what he says about Trinidad: "It seemed, in the face of our own conception of insolence, violence, fear and despair, an attractive, hopeful beginning" (37). In fact, Casaquemada, which M. Nourbese Philip reads as "a thinly disguised Trinidad" (191), is a fictional amalgam of various places. Bissoondath explains:

Casaquemada is not simply Trinidad. It's a mixture of Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Grenada. What I've tried to do in creating Casaquemada is to create an island that will remind people of many places. The reason I didn't use a real island in the West Indies was to get away from any particular identification with one island and its particular problems, to try to internationalize it. ("Building", 130)

Though Casquemada transcends the particularities of any single Caribbean island as they are rooted in geography and history, the novel conjures up a distinct sense of place that moors the narrative throughout. Before visiting these places, Raj, the main protagonist, thinks that it is important to mark their location on maps; in short, the imaginary narrative is located cartographically. The maps operate as guiding metaphors; Raj's study, for instance, is filled with three maps, all of which convey significance, and in his own terms offer him "respite" (34).



The largest, in the centre, was a relief map of North America and the Caribbean with Canada, and lower down, Casaquemada, highlighted in red. To its left, slightly smaller was a map of Toronto, with Mississauga, in the lower left corner, hidden by a glued-on maple leaf. (34)

On his return to Casaquemada, Raj needs to reorientate himself, and ends up mapping out his alternatives. In his need to stabilize himself as a family unit with his Canadian wife and son, Raj runs into difficulties and to some extent loses his sense of belonging. The maps again signify something of this crisis when his wife, Jan, preoccupied with her Canadian identity, but now inhabiting a foreign environment, interprets the maps for their son:

She [Jan] took a red felt marker from my desk, drew a thick line around Canada. "Your home, Rohie," she said to him. "Canada. Say it. Canada." [Rohie] began to cry. [...] The island, a dot, was lost in red splotch. Casaquemada. It was, even in its own map, small shaped, vaguely like an inverted *teardrop*. (36)

The teardrop almost certainly signifies the poverty and the misery of the island. In describing the map Raj does not go into topographical details, with the exception of mentioning Lopez City, the capital, and the smallness of the island: "There was no 'country,' as opposed to 'city'. The island was too small, too meagre, to accommodate the concept as it existed in other larger places" (36). These maps are anxiety-ridden, with their uncertainty expressed cartographically. The "cartographic discourse" is critical to the novel; the double perspective is confusing both for Raj and Jan, and it is intensified for their young child. There is no idealized or imagined version of a sense of belonging offered anywhere here.

Even the rich landscape is deprived of beauty on Casaquemada. Nevertheless, "Bissoon-dath's treatment of landscape, though limited, is significant" (Philip 195). Raj and his cousin do not admire the natural beauty of the place, but rather, they are frightened by the unwelcoming beach:

The point away from the river, along a narrow beach strewn with stones and pebbles, whitish red at first, black and moss-covered later on where the beach grew even narrower, past expansive clusters of smooth, soft graphite overhung by towering trees with exposed roots, to the outcrop of rock and boulder, which in its isolation, in its ruggedness, gave the illusion of the untouched. (103)

When nature becomes part of human habitation in this island, for example in the cases of gardens, they are in a "pitiable state" (Genetsch, 80). Raj is saddened by what he saw as a child, as is clear from words such as "untended" and "depression" in this following passage:

The back yard (sic) before me, hidden from my prying eyes, has been left untended. The lawn patchy, broken by occasional mud puddles – the depression in which the house was set levelled off here, the ground, undrained, remaining permanently moist – was shadowed, crowded by a couple of orange trees, a spindly lime tree with mildewed branches, and at the back where it ended at a concrete wall growing mossy at the base [...] (70).

When he returns as an adult the scene is even more desolate; the image he has stored in his memory turns out to be accurate: “I paused just inside the garden. I hadn’t seen it in years [...] the little plot of land in which he [his grandfather] had laboured so long and so intensely, showed no sign of ever having been cultivated. Its weeds were thick, its flowers clustered with an almost deliberate disorder” (116). According to Patricia Harkins, “The garden becomes a symbol of the neglect the entire land is suffering” (2).

There is an attempt to make an audacious order out of the above-mentioned “disorder” outside the domestic space by constructing roads on the island, many of which are the legacy of the Americans in this multi-colonial island – the Spanish, the French, the English, the Americans were among the colonizers. There is no geographical reality attached to Casaquemada; nevertheless, to provide empirical accuracy the often mentioned highways connecting remote places “by island standards” assume special significance: “Manoeuvring the car carefully around the holes in the road – gouges permanent and expanding that revealed the underlying grid of rusted reinforcing wire – I drove out to the highway. Its double lanes, still fresh with legacy of oil money, swarmed with the rush of vehicles into Lopez City” (175).

Genetsch calls our attention to other functions of the roads on the island: “Emblematic of the process of taming nature is also the construction of roads. [...] A road is part of an infrastructure that attempts to shape the amorphous; as such it is a cultural manifestation demonstrating man’s inventiveness in making nature subject to his needs” (80). On the one hand, roads enable easier access to be close to nature: “Just beyond the top railing was the narrow asphalt road that seemed to me the only line of defense from the forest that sat, dense and sullen” (62). On the other hand, “The asphalt road Raj has in mind becomes symbolic of human civilization” (Genetsch, 80). The streetscape relates to the highway system on Casaquemada; it has changed but with some modification.

We drove slowly down the main street, past the old Shell gas station now nationalized into the Casaquemada Petroleum Company [...] the stores and shops were shuttered and barred [...] The street, much changed in its particulars, was little changed in its character. It had retained, over the years, and despite the good garnish of glitz, the feel of the small market town, the weekday mecca of the fruit and vegetable farmers from the surrounding countryside. (134-5)

Kensington Market is pointed out by Kayso as the most important location in Toronto to Raj when he first arrives there. His own mapping of Toronto, then, is one which returns him to his island home, a kind of Casaquemada-in-Toronto that is “real”:

“You have to go to Kensington Market,” he declared with a sudden enthusiasm. [...] When it cold-cold and you feelin’ the need for some dashen or some goat meat or some good West Indian pepper sauce, that is the place to go. Things not too clean, and some o’ the smells could almost knock you out cold, but that what it does make it real. When I down there, is almost as if I back in Central Market in Lopez City. (157)

Kayso refers to Casaquemada as “homesweet’ome” (155). Later, back on Casaquemada, he becomes a political activist, yet his rootlessness and permanent state of in-betweenness mani-



feels itself in his nostalgia for Kensington Market. He asks Raj to send him pictures taken *there*, confirming his deeply divided self between the *here* and the *there*.

“I want you,” he wrote with the slightly offensive directness of an order, “to send me photographs of Kensington. Take thirty six. Mail the negatives. Keep the prints.” Into a separate sheet of paper he had folded a Canadian twenty-dollar bill, and on yet another, he had listed the various shots he wanted: the stores, the corners, the angles of vision. (220)

Kayso’s cultural sensitivity shows also in the fact that he wants particular shots. Raj’s first impression of Kensington Market translates into his initial difficulties about cultural assimilation: “Kensington Market [...] was a disappointment, an expansive version of the Salmonella market, where every Saturday morning, my grandmother did her shopping” (216).

A Casual Brutality is based on an oppositional discourse in terms of space; some of it is located in Toronto and most of it on Casquemada. The first place of civilization Raj has to familiarize himself with on Casquemada is his workplace, consisting of his office – “an almost hermetic *cave*” (22) – and the examination room, which was equipped with “burglar-proofing [...] and had a presence that was as sharp and solid as the metal itself” (31). This place gives shape to the reality of the island itself, characterized by political instability, moral corruption, racial antagonism and economic crisis after it gained independence in 1968. His professional place becomes the microcosm of the oppressive reality of Casquemada. Added to this is the fact that Raj is “the” medical doctor and is therefore supposed to heal people; his first patient is a victim of the unruly and unjustified behaviour paramount in the island. Genetsch asserts, “On a metaphorical level, *CB* alludes to the political, social and cultural crisis on Casquemada in terms of illness and disease” (86). The cityscape has indeed changed in Lopez City because of the island’s bloody, destructive and strenuous turmoil. Raj ponders those buildings that are politically coded spaces.

[...] on the other side rose the intimidating walls of Lopez City *Prison*. Immense and solid, of stone painted cream, it *dominated* this part of the street with sheer massiveness. No sign indicated its function, yet everyone knew what it was. [...] Save for the *madhouse*, *the prison*, more than the *law courts*, more than the *morgue*, was the most feared building in the island. (255-6; emphasis added)

Politics figures centrally on Casquemada; therefore, spaces of politics, in this case prisons, become place-making forces. Foucault’s theory of heterotopias can be applied here; he considers prisons and psychiatric hospitals (both of which are mentioned in the quotation above) examples of “heterotopia of deviation”, and “heterotopia of crisis” (24-5). Prisons on Casquemada, however, are not places for deviation but places for the vindication of justice, bespeaking the overall crisis situation in the island; the inmates are victims of questionable verdicts.

Very little is known about Raj and his family’s *personal* place, the newly inhabited house, which could be indicative of the fact that they have probably never thought of it as a permanent residence in the midst of their new and frightening social setting. As Genetsch puts it: “[t]he signs of material culture (e.g. a house) merit no investment because they are likely to be destroyed anyway” (82). Jan casually mentions:

We finally found our house in a middle-class development halfway between Salmonella and Lopez City. There was a sense of openness to it, even with the burglar-proofing on the doors and windows. The porch, at least, had not been barred. (346).

I agree with Genetsch when he says that “[b]oth Jan and Raj [...] develop claustrophobia” (86). When Raj watches his wife he thinks: “She [Jan] looked out again at the passing fences, the neat lawns, the shuttered houses, and her chest rose and fell as she fought the touch of claustrophobia she had acquired not long after our arrival in Casaquemada” (81). The porch – because of its openness – plays a very important role for Jan in particular; it is a means to fight claustrophobia to some extent. For Jan, it provides space for socializing; it is a place for gathering but also a demarcation line that separates the familiar interior of the house from the outside world. Gaston Bachelard asserts that “the house is a privileged entity [with] the intimate values of inside space” (3). Jan claims the space inside their house as her own and is disturbed by unexpected visitors who think that they have easy access to the interior of the house; this would be unheard of in Canada. The diverse attitudes towards spatial reality cause problems in Raj and Jan’s interracial marriage, and these problems cannot be smoothed away. Jan has a different sense of space from the islanders; this is one of the apparent reasons for her failure to integrate. The porch, in contrast with the inside of the house, is a communal place, a possible locale for cultural interchange, but Jan has a critical perception of her temporary home in the island. Raj has uncertain feelings at the end of the novel because he sees nobody on the porch: “The first thing I noticed as I drove past the front gate, still chained, was that the doors to the porch were open, but that there was – curiously – no one on the porch” (361). This was a bad omen only to become true; soon he learns about his wife’s and son’s death. The burglar-proof houses remind Jan of a friend of hers in Toronto, an immigrant from “[P]eru or Chile or wherever the hell she was from. There, the windows all had bars on them, burglar-proofing. No way could anybody break in” (109). Leda, the friend, did not feel secure in her house in Toronto with no bars, and therefore, she asked her school to move her someplace else. Places for Leda and Raj are viewed from different perspectives. It is only through her cross-cultural experience that Jan is beginning to understand Leda; the enclosed and open spaces assume functional significance. The change in the island is expressed in the manner the houses change as well; because of growing skepticism and fear of crime, Grappler, Raj’s uncle, is compelled to protect his house:

[...] its isolation, once so desirable, now counted against it: here, *crime* could be leisurely. So they had *bricked it up*. [...] the door of wood was now sheathed in *metal*, its single bolt and lock triple, a *bar* of thick, flat *iron* across it like a stiff belt. Only the *porch*, its iron railing rusting [...] remained *free* [...] the house had become a box of captured *darkness*. (108-9; emphasis added)

Gappler’s house was important for Raj in his childhood, and it has stayed with him as a mental image of his original country, which accompanies the image of his grandparents’ house, where he was actually brought up after losing his parents at an early age. The importance of houses is emphasized by Genetsch, too: “Containment [...] presupposes a will to order as much as human endeavour. A case in point for such endeavour can consist in the building



of houses, which become representative of culture” (79). Raj revisits the house in Salmonella he was so closely connected to. Salmonella is also a telling name, reminding us of the sickness that reigns over the island. As Genetsch puts it: “The advanced state of national degeneration calls for cure; as the name of the city of Salmonella indicates, the body politic in Bissoondath’s novel is sick and in need of treatment” (86). However, Raj’s grandfather’s prayer room in his house in Salmonella remains a source for healing for him.

In *A Casual Brutality* we have parallel and complementary stories taking place in Toronto and on Casaquemada, and the “nonlinear, discontinuous bildungsroman oscillates between two layers of time” (Genetsch 95) as well. In fact the novel shifts both in space and time; the temporal shifts are formally delivered as memory flashbacks. Raj remarks: “I understood now my sense of the present shifting swiftly to the past” (214). We move between present, near-past and past. As David Richards puts it: “[t]he texts [...] are *morcele*, disjunctive, abridged, mutilated in imitation of the dislocated” (58). Bissoondath says: “That book [CB] began in different pieces. Different scenes came to me, and I simply wrote them down. [...] The story jumped back and forth of its own accord, and I followed” (“Up-And-Coming”, 5).

What Raj knows with certainty is stated plainly in the novel: “I was born thirty-five years ago in my grandparents’ house, in the bedroom at the front that, for years, has been my grandfather’s prayer room” (38). He tells us that it was also possibly the room in which he was conceived (38). This same prayer room recurs in the narrative, providing the central character with a much needed space for escape. For example: “I fled with my book to the little prayer room” (149). Of all the places mentioned in the novel this is the one that he has the most intimate relationship with and it explains why it is described in such loving detail. It is like a sanctuary that can be approached only silently and in a secretive manner: “I would ease myself out of bed and tiptoe through the darkened house to my grandfather’s prayer room” (63). His grandfather’s altar is a hotchpotch of signifiers only dimly understood:

A two-level stand draped in a thick green brocade busy with vines and leaves with silver thread, it was, to my eyes, a confusion of brass plates and brass vases; brass gods, multiarmed, and pictures of gods, monkey-faced; wilted flowers and tapering mango leaves; and *deeyas*; the small earthenware lamps, cottonwood wicks burnt halfway down, from which rose the smell of burnt oil. (63)

Despite the apparent and puzzling disorder of this room, it is here that Raj finds peace, escaping the chaos surrounding him as a child. The history of his childhood and his adulthood leak into each other. In turn, it is this particular prayer room that offers solace to him when he loses his beloved grandfather.

I stood up, shook myself, walked slowly into the adjoining room, to the smells of burnt oil and cheap perfume, of my grandfather’s prayer room. [...] I turned away, switched on the light. Stood before his altar, this confusion of brass plates and vases, of gods physically deformed, of *deeyas* and wilted flowers, and thought that here, in this spot so quintessentially him, I could smell something of my grandfather. I took a match from a box lying beside a brass plate, struck it, held the flame to the burnt cotton wick of a *deeya*. But it would not catch. The oil had burnt off. (359-60)

The fact that something is “burnt” in his grandfather’s treasured and holy room is not left unnoticed by Raj either when he is a child or when he is an adult. This connects up, in turn, with the place name of Casaquemada, itself, with its “burning” as its very myth of origins. Although Raj’s grandfather’s house does not burn down, the family store run by him does because of the irrational violence raging in the island. In the course of the simultaneous narration Raj recalls the store, which has evoked ambivalent feelings in him. His grandfather could not cope with the new reality. Raj was “examining the frozen past” (114). He remarks: “[the Union Jack] leaning in the corner furled around its pole, my grandfather never able to throw it out, never to replace it at his store with the new and unfamiliar” (114). On the one hand, he was fond of the store because it belonged to his dear grandfather, but on the other hand, it jeopardized his future: “I was being used to assure the continuation of my grandfather’s success, the store as a *shrine*, I as a caretaker. And my opinion had never been sought” (143; emphasis added). He shares his longing to escape with his uncle when he says, “I want to go far away, Grappler” (151).

Interestingly enough, later on, he compares his workplace on Casaquemada to a cave, which echoes the claustrophobia of his grandfather’s shrine. Nevertheless, when the family store is put on “deliberate” (125) fire, he feels sympathetic towards his grandfather: “The store was not a place I had known intimately, but it was so inextricable from my grandfather, so central to the adventure of his life, that watching it burn was like watching him burn” (126). The physical *place* becomes almost synonymous with human spirit. Place as a context is most important for Bissoondath. He says:

What I’m interested in is the individuals in a context, and the context is as important to me as the individual. The context informs the individual, and so the description is important to understanding the character, because what you’re seeing is description not through Neil Bissoondath’s eyes but through the character’s eyes. (“Building”, 132-3)

We can claim that the “context” that Bissoondath emphasizes the importance of is often the spatial dimension on which he elaborates.

The “context” in which Ray’s wife and his son, innocent victims of the unintelligible socio-political chaos distressing Casaquemada, find their final destiny, is a place that is culturally rooted. Having been murdered, they are placed on their respective pyres; their bodies are burnt in a similar fashion as Raj’s parents’ bodies had been (whose ashes later were buried in Ray’s grandfather’s garden). The religious, customary, “appalling” ceremony is described at length.

I bend close to the wood, peer through into the growing flame, feel the heat on my face, my neck, my shoulders, my arms. [...] I realize that I am, with my own hands, burning my wife and son. [...] The pyre is all flame now, thick smoke billowing into the darkening sky. [...] Grappler catches up to me – I am walking more quickly than I know – and leads me through the crowd just as my grandfather’s pyre, too, begins to smoke. [...] But I want no part of it. (376)

Like many incidents in the novel this also has autobiographical elements in it. Bissoondath went back to Trinidad for his mother’s funeral, as has already been mentioned. He describes his experience there and its relation to the novel in the following way:



The funeral scene in *A Casual Brutality* was based on my own experience of a Hindu funeral. When my mother died in 1983, I went to Trinidad and found that I was expected to perform the funeral ceremony. I was appalled and overwhelmed at times and at other times, felt an incredible relief. The greatest relief, strangely enough, came when I actually lit the funeral pyre and knew that her body was being consumed. I went away from the cremation site feeling almost light and cheerful. It was really strange. (“Up-and-Coming”, 9)

We certainly cannot say that after the funeral on Casaquemada Raj is “cheerful”, but he is able to make a firm decision about going back to Canada. At the same time, when he is asked about his destination at the airport he is hesitant: “The words going home come to me, but I resist them” (6). So, where is home? Raj reminds us of Bissoondath:

It [Canada] was a kind of *liberation*. I grew up in Trinidad *never feeling quite at home there*. I grew up in a family that read – which was my mother [like Raj’s], and her sisters, her Naipaul family – but very few people in Trinidad enjoyed reading the things that concerned me. So it was a society from which I felt fairly alienated. (“Building” 129; emphasis added)

Raj left when he was 18 and returned at the age of 35, just like Bissoondath. He admits: “[T]here is an autobiographical connection in almost everything I write [...]” (“Building” 129). Genetsch’s summary is helpful here:

Journeying to the island of his [Raj’s] birth takes on the quality of a journey into the heart of darkness. [...] In this journey from innocence to experience, the lesson to be learned concerns the deities of time and place. Raj has to recognize that the past of the Caribbean as his place of origin can be crippling and that any kind of nostalgia (cf. Kayso) or exoticism (cf. Jan) is misplaced. (95)

In accordance with his unalterable determination Raj thinks: “It has been a long journey and not an easy one. Much has been jettisoned, much has been lost. But the important thing is to keep moving on” (377). Raj cannot identify himself with Casaquemada; he went there in search of better economic opportunities, cherishing hopes that the island would offer a better quality of life: “I came to seek a safety net” (214). But he is doomed to failure; he has become a cultural outsider in his native land, disclaiming his origin: “I go, like my forebears, to the future, to the challenge, that lies elsewhere of turning nothing into something, far from the casual brutality of collapse, far from the ruins of failure, across thousands of miles of ocean” (378).

What Otrisalová claims certainly holds true for Bissoondath: “The relationship of the Indo-Caribbean people to their home islands is, to say the least, ambivalent. Most of them grow up with the feeling that home is *elsewhere*” (224). Raj’s, and by implication Bissoondath’s, return to his/their place/s of origin resulted only in strengthening the feeling of being dislocated *there*.

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