
Silko's View of Landscapes in Almanac of the Dead

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ABSTRACT:-

Almanac of the Dead, Leslie Marmon Silko presents a text delineating a complex universe, with geographical, historical, moral, and spiritual dimensions so carefully worked out that it lends itself to linear mapping. Although the similarity at first may seem far-fetched, Silko's prophetic narrative bears striking parallels to Dante's great allegory, the Commedia. Indeed, the visionary aspect of her work is not unlike Dante's warning to a world gone wrong, emanating from a personal sense of loss, both of place in society and place in the moral order.

INTRODUCTION:-

Silko's intensely disconcerting novel is intended to shock her readers into full awareness of environmental and moral degradation. It is no coincidence that the only character intact and growing at the end of *Almanac of the Dead* is Sterling, a Laguna Indian who has been banished from his pueblo, yet eventually returns to a quiet life at his family sheep camp. Sterling understands the meaning of the great stone snake that had appeared at Laguna: "The snake didn't care if people were believers or not; the work of the spirits and prophecies went on regardless.... Burned and radioactive with all humans dead, the earth would still be sacred. Man was too insignificant to desecrate her" (762). As a Native American of the late twentieth century, Silko does not present a synchronic Christian cosmology but rather a diachronic one beginning with the arrival of Europeans in the New World at the end of the fifteenth century. Silko, in *Almanac of the Dead*, offers a "Five Hundred Year Map" with historical and prophetic elements embedded in a linear geographical map of the southwestern United States and northern Mexico. Encompassing five hundred years of contact between Native Americans and Europeans, the map celebrates indigenous American uprisings, as listed in the "lost texts," as well as contemporary attempts to speed the disappearance of *all things European*. With Tucson, Arizona, at the center, representing evil and corruption, the map has moral and spiritual dimensions as well.

Silko's map records the movements of people, including Sterling, who travels from Laguna to Tucson and back again, and an organized crime family that relocates from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, to Tucson. Twin Brothers, inspired by their spirit macaws, walk north with thousands of indigenous people to reclaim their homeland. Seese, a young mother, comes to Lecha, a visionary, for help in finding her missing child, and the Barefoot Hopi, Wilson Weaseltail, proselytizes about saving the earth. All converge on Tucson, which, like Dante's Firenze, is viewed as the blighted center of the earthly universe. The journeys recorded on Silko's map are multiple, unlike Dante's singular quest, but they are similarly allegorical, forcing readers to confront the evil in a world born of dual colonization, first by the Spanish and later by the Anglos. Like Dante, Silko asks whether that world has any moral reason to continue and constantly reiterates the message of the Mayan almanac: those Native American prophecies have

foretold both the arrival and disappearance of the white man. Her complex web of stories leaves no doubt that Eurocentric civilization has begun its downhill slide.

Tracking the movements of her characters from such far-flung places as Alaska, San Diego, and Tuxtla Gutierrez to Tucson, Silko constructs a linear map consisting of a series of signs moving in the dimension of time, both past and forward from the present. In addition, it is a geographical record of contemporary migrations paralleling the migrations that brought the Pueblo people from Sipap to the eighteen pueblos in New Mexico and the Hopi mesas in Arizona. In the visionary tradition so dear to Dante, the journey is a long, hard pilgrimage toward a defined goal, representing the intuitive soul of the traveler moving toward the divine. Yet Silko inverts this tradition as her characters move toward Tucson, "home to an assortment of speculators, confidence men, embezzlers, lawyers, judges, police and other criminals, as well as addicts and pushers, since the 1880s and the Apache Wars" (15). Yet at the same time the visionary tradition is upheld, for the vast majority of those moving toward Tucson are the hundreds of thousands inspired by the spirit macaws and their own intuitive links with the sacred.

As a chart of prophetic time, Silko's map is imperfect, for it does not coincide with or even designate the six parts of the novel, intentionally resembling the fragments of the ancient Maya codices, and entitled "The United States of America" "Mexico", "Africa," "The Americas," "The Fifth World," and "One World, Many Tribes." With each of these parts further conceived in geographical terms, such as "The Border," "The North," "Rivers," "Mountains," as well as various cities, the novel might better have been mapped by a mandala, a cosmograph, or Navajo sand painting of the sort described in Ceremony. Indeed, the quasi-geographical, single-dimensional map of the white people, based on precise calculation of longitudes and latitudes by chronometer and triangulation, is quite inadequate to contain the powerful prophecies put forward in the novel. Yet the map legends, which refer to the Indian Connection, Tucson's history, and Prophecy, form another sort of triangulation: that of victims, destroyers, and ultimate justice.

Silko's diagram, constructed perhaps originally for her own use in managing a vast cast of characters, includes a list of dramatis personae conveniently located in their respective centers of operation. The map, which points to San Diego in the west and New Jersey in the east, Alaska in the north, and Tuxtla Gutierrez, Mexico City, Cartagena, and Buenos Aires in the south, represents the world of the Americas, and thus the world encompassed by the novel. Silko's map legends also refer to encoding of the future in arcane symbols (The Giant Stone Snake) and old narratives (the almanac), thus balancing the historical with the prophetic. To the extent that Silko diagrams the spiritual message of her narrative, she encourages the reader to penetrate an implicit allegory. Because the story is essentially a web of quests, not only for a lost baby and lost texts but also for the lost will to rebel, it is both like and unlike Dante's dream vision, which is the allegorical narrative of a single soul in search of justice and spiritual identity.

Using Dante's descriptive details, two of his translators, John Ciardi and Dorothy Sayers, have mapped the three areas of the afterlife as envisioned by the poet in the *Commedia*. Hell is a concentric pit with multiple levels; Purgatory, a mountain with a path spiraling upward; and Heaven, a series of spheres revolving each inside the other. Each of the characters inhabiting

these worlds, moreover, has a historical role in the struggles between Blacks and Whites, Guelphs and Ghibellines, the Papacy and French government. Dante's poem came about because, as a member of the White Guelph political faction in Florence, he was banished from the city on trumped-up charges of graft and corruption. One of six supreme magistrates, he was on the verge of a brilliant career. Yet as an opponent of Boniface VIII, he suffered nineteen years of exile under penalty of being burned alive if he returned to his beloved city. The centrality of these events for Dante, and also the sense of injustice with which he struggled, are evident in the fact that he deliberately sets his poem in the past in order to establish a prophetic mode.

Knowing full well the events that will transpire, he sees the "Inferno" and "Purgatorio" with enigmatic predictions, couched as riddles, of events leading up to the day of his defeat and casting out by the Black Guelphs. Silko achieves a similar effect by the device of the almanac, which has already predicted, to the day, the appearance of Cortés. Although the ancient Mayan almanacs had warned the people hundreds of years before the Europeans arrived about "the appearance, conflict with and disappearance of things European," the Aztecs had ignored the prophecies. Yet Silko identifies both as Destroyers, fellow worshippers of blood and destruction; "Montezuma and Cortés had been meant for each other" (570). Unlike the *Commedia*, Silko's novel is set forward in time, into an undatable future when the Mexican economy has collapsed, fleeing government officials have stripped the National Treasury, and electrical power lines and water mains to the city center have been dynamited. In the United States at the same time, Tucson has lost population as Arizona banks fail and blue-chip industries flee. Combined with earlier accurate almanac prophecies, the events of the novel seem to corroborate the message that the dispossessed will one day have land and the tribes of the Americas retake the continents.

Both the mappings of Dante's journey through a Christian cosmos and Silko's map suggest symbolic schema that have emerged over the centuries to represent experiences of the visionary consciousness. In mystic traditions known to the West, by virtue of the nature of the spirit world, "descriptions of spiritual experience must always be symbolic, elusive, oblique: always suggest, but never tell the truth..., the greater the suggestive quality of the symbol used, the more answering emotion it evokes in those to whom it is addressed, the more truth it will convey" (126). Silko, in her unrelieved chronicling of Destroyers at work, belies this quality of suggestiveness, working instead in a matter-of-fact mode typical of tribal storytellers. One problem in comparing Silko's work with Dante's is that the stone snake and the remaining fragments of the Mayan codices lack the color and richness of the symbolic structures Dante was able to create. Silko, by contrast, also devotes far less of her story to these positive elements than to the web of destruction woven by the white man. Yet her way of dealing with these all-important narrative elements is quintessentially Native American. As she explains in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, "as with the web, the structure emerges as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made" (49). Only from a Western literary perspective, then, can we ask whether the symbolism of the Almanac and the stone serpent are sufficient to carry the spiritual message that Silko intends to convey.

As Underhill, speaking from that perspective, insists, "a good symbolism will be more than mere diagram or mere allegory: it will use to the utmost the resources of beauty and passion, will bring with it hints of mystery and wonder, bewitch with dreamy periods the mind to which it is

addressed. Its appeal will not be to the clever brain, but to the desirous heart, the intuitive sense of man" (126). Silko achieved such mystery, wonder, and bewitchment with her earlier novel, *Ceremony*, goes unquestioned. And for that reason, many of her booklovers are confused by *Almanac of the Dead*. As an anonymous resident at Laguna stated, "The novel contains truths, but the ugliness of that book is not necessary." Such responses, however, cause one to reconsider the entire narrative as disruptive, both within the sphere of contemporary Western literature and within the writer's personal corpus. Further, readers are compelled to acknowledge the technique of rupture, used by Renaissance allegorists within a particular text, to force viewers to move from lower to higher levels of understanding (146).

The disruptive qualities of Dante's "Inferno" must have had a similar effect on his fourteenth-century audience. It is the vileness of the Inferno that impresses upon the sinner the need to change his ways. Dante's tripartite afterlife is astonishing on all its allegorical levels, and so completely structured as to assure the reader that received truths have become expressible only through divine inspiration. The autobiographical level is a necessary key - to the political and historical complexity of the *Commedia*. On the literal level, Dante's spiritual journey is exceedingly detailed and realistic, although the poet's journey must be understood in all of its dimensions: in terms of political and moral concerns (human-centered in time); church doctrine and practice (god-centered in time); anagogical or spiritual concerns (god-centered out of time). Although structured quite differently from the *Commedia*, Silko's novel may also be read on each of these four allegorical levels.

It may be useful to begin with the autobiographical level, which in Silko's narrative is provided by Sterling, who has had difficulties with the tribe and is persona non grata at Laguna. Sterling's error was inadvertent. Appointed to keep a Hollywood film crew under control, he failed to prevent them from filming the giant stone snake and is regarded as having betrayed his people's trust in him. Nothing was stolen or removed, nor did the film crew understand what they had photographed, yet the Caciques and War Captains had viewed the event as sacrilege. Sterling's preoccupation with tribal law parallels Dante's focus on government, both having faced painful expulsion at the hands of local authorities whose governance must be considered no more just than that of larger political structures, the United States or Mexican governments, or in Dante's case, the Holy Roman Empire.

Literal details are significant in Silko's text, just as they are in Dante *Commedia* media, for they can be read variously from the Anglo perspective or the native perspective. The landscape of the southwestern United States and northern Mexico, with Tucson at the center, might be seen as empty and barren by whites, who require vast amounts of water and greenery to feel at home there. An extreme example of this "European vision" is the canal development of Venice, Arizona, launched by Leah Blue, with the help of a judge who is persuaded to override environmental legislation. Yet the vast skies and rockscapes of Arizona and Mexico are spiritually alive and "full" to the indigenous peoples who have lived there for far longer than the last five centuries. Mosca, for instance, watches the steam rise off the Santa Cruz River "on mornings when cold mountain air settled over Tucson. He understood how the steam was the moisture of the river rising, so that you had a river running in the sky, in all directions of the winds--but also that these were the souls of the dead rising out of the purgatory where they had

been imprisoned hundreds and thousands of years waiting to be released so they could return and help their beloved descendants" (603).

Not all the inhabitants of this landscape, however, are so sensitive to its spiritual elements. A complex web of malign characters--Mafiosi, drug addicts, computer pirates, smugglers, homosexuals, human organ and arms traders, corrupt politicians and police--offer a contemporary parallel to the inhabitants of Dante's concentric ledges in the *Inferno*. Regarding political and moral concerns (human-centered in time), Silko seems intent on showing her readers, as Dante did, that the Eurocentric society, and those who imitate them, are lost in a wilderness of destruction. In their frantic pursuit of capital, spiritual connections with each other and with the earth have been abandoned. Both the map and the text locate and name all the characters but one, placing them in self contained geographical worlds. The depravity of their lives renders the entire novel an *inferno* of corruption, with no redemptive vision save those of the almanac prophecies and the enigmatic stone snake.

The Mafia family, Max and Leah Blue and their two sons, emigrate from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, to Tucson, Arizona, where they gain control of real estate, video games, racing, and drugs, and also carry out murders for hire. In multiple locations (San Diego, Cartagena, Buenos Aires), Beaufrey commits horrendous acts: he cannibalizes Seese's baby and manipulates his homosexual lovers, encouraging Eric to commit suicide and David to exhibit photographs of the dead man in an art gallery. A corrupt trio--the Arizona senator, the Tucson judge, and the police chief--who make deals and protect Mafia criminals and arms traders, has its counterpart south of the border in General J, the Mexico City police chief, and his brother, who films police torture interrogations for sale to Argentine pornographic film companies. Both sets of officials are concerned about the Indians flooding their borders from further south. Unaware of the prophecies, they too fear a time when "the world that the whites brought with them would be swept away in a gust of wind" (235).

The Native Americans in the novel at first appear to be problematical figures in that those who are full-blooded are also engaged in destructive acts, while many mestizos are only partially aware of their spiritual connections and consequently linked with violence in both worlds. For instance, an arms trader, Menardo, in full flight from his Indian ancestry, is shaken by powerful dreams, but remains dependent on his Indian chauffeur to interpret them. Yet Silko's earth oriented logic makes sense of all of the destruction. Rose, an Eskimo who accesses great spiritual power, uses it to down the airplanes of petroleum exploration companies in Alaska. These acts, in defense of the earth, parallel others: the blowing up of a dam by eco-warriors and Awa Gee's computer plan to undermine energy sources all over the United States simultaneously. Root and Mosca work for Calabazas, who indiscriminately smuggles people, drugs, and arms; he knows the desert and pays no attention to borders, which for him and his ancestors are not real. Angelita la Escapía plots with a Cuban, Bartolomeo, to train Chiapas indigenes as a People's Army, then wearies of the Marxist's failure to appreciate the spiritual impetus of the people and kills him. These are not actions of Destroyers, but rather the overturning of conventional moral categories. Destruction and lawlessness are condoned, even celebrated, if one is protecting the earth and indigenous peoples against those who seek only economic gain.

Perhaps because the church seems powerless to address the destructive aspects of contemporary life, Silko deals with church affairs (god-centeredness in time) only briefly. As in Dante's Italy, church officials are painted as corrupt, in particular the monsignor, who drives donated Cadillacs and sleeps with Calabazas's wife. According to old Yeomen, "the Catholic Church had been finished, a dead thing even before the Spanish ships had arrived in the Americas" (717). Fixation on the crucifixion of Jesus, as well as the torturing of heretics and Jews, is linked with the human sacrifices of the Aztecs as the work of Destroyers, "who feed off the energy released by destruction" (336). The Europeans had been human sacrificers too: "'Mother Church' was a cannibal monster. Since the Europeans had no other gods or beliefs left, they had to continue the church rituals and worship; but they knew the truth" (718). Yet the indigenous tribes who migrated north had refused to feed the spirits blood anymore.

Silko's allegations emerge quite logically from the premise that "a church that tortures and kills is a church that can no longer heal; thus the Europeans had arrived in the New World in precarious spiritual health" (718). In their confrontation with the people of the Americas, the colonialists sensed that their Christianity was inadequate in the face of the powerful spirit beings that inhabited the new land. Although the general public is viewed as hostile toward people with abilities to "see" or "foretell" Lecha, the mestizo psychic, is visited by affluent, educated white people who come to her with a deep sense of something lost: "The white man had violated the Mother Earth, and he had been stricken with the sensation of a gaping emptiness between his throat and his heart" (121). The International Holistic Healers convention comes closest to a spiritual gathering, for it represents a fusion of peoples exploring various modes of psychological and physical healing with Native American prophets and eco-warriors bent on saving the earth. Yet even that gathering verges on parody as people of all ages and origins mill about urgently, spending money in desperate attempts to heal their loss.

The anagogical meaning of Silko's novel (god- or spirit-centered out of time) is presumably what justifies the enormous tapestry of moral depravity that she weaves. Indeed, Silko writes in the manner of a Medieval allegorist, offering us a system of characters and images that will enable the reader to perceive the vision that haunts the visionary. Explicit throughout *Almanac of the Dead* is the bankrupt quality of Anglo life. Seese, although she exhibits maternal attachment to her missing son, is hopelessly addicted to alcohol and cocaine. Trigg makes his fortune dealing in human organs and is not particular about how they are acquired. Numerous male characters seek escape in illicit sex with sleazy women, twisted homosexual lovers, and dogs. A Korean computer genius, Awa Gee, gets high on computers and numbers. The house that Alegría designs for Menardo and Iliana is a virtual temple to greed. Thus, absurdities in the literal narrative function as stairways leading to other levels (145-55). Many of Silko's readers, however, refuse to accept the revelation that she offers, perhaps because it is not hidden by a veil of allegory but appears overtly as the accumulated terrible deeds of our civilization. These, implies Silko, must be confronted before they can be transcended. To understand their identity as Destroyers, Anglos must travel through the hell of utter degradation that Silko has constructed, retch at the accumulated horror, and vomit out the values of a wealthcentered Eurocentric culture.

Meanwhile, native peoples who have been induced to sell their souls to the white man, watch and wait, take heart from the slimmest of prophecies, and rouse themselves to action. The many

lessons of Native American history woven through the first part of the novel should be common knowledge to everyone in the United States but are not. Instead, they are the horror stories told and retold by the victims: children sent thousands of miles from home to Indian schools that robbed them of their language, culture, and tribal ties; black Indians, a strong race born of escaped African slaves and indigenous Americans; Geronimo, captured and executed because of a bad-faith promise. The most fundamental point, however, is the illegality of governments: "There was not, and there never had been, a legal government by Europeans anywhere in the Americas. Not by any definition, not even by the Europeans' own definitions and laws. Because no legal government could be established on stolen land. Because stolen land had never had clear title" (133).

In Silko's novel, Native American history is meant to be read spiritually. The Apache in the execution photographs is not the man the U.S. Army has been chasing, and other photographs taken of Geronimo at different times show very different images. These phenomena cannot be explained. Nor can logical sense be made of the great stone snake, which on the map is labeled "ancient spirit messenger," to mark its sudden enigmatic appearance near the open-pit uranium mine, opened in the 1940s, at Laguna Pueblo. The actual mine, operated by the U.S. government, using monetary incentives to override the objections of the tribe, is today a recovering scar on the earth. With very little equipment, tribal members have been working to reclaim the land, a slow process. Stories about these errors of greed and desecration of the earth are now part of the tribal legacy. Wisely, Silko does not attempt to assign precise meaning to the stone image, which she first discovered in 1979 while making a film at Laguna.⁸ At the end of the novel, although the snake says nothing, its position tells all: "the snake was looking south, in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come" (763).

Without elaborating, or even pressing home the point, Silko's symbol reveals the suppressed power of the plumed serpent. Dante also uses the image of a feathered reptile to represent the corruption of the church, beginning with the Donation of Constantine. Unlike its negative role in Christianity, however, the Native American snake is a positive figure, incorporating modes of goodness, fertility, movement, and survival, barely comprehended by non-native peoples. Union of bird and reptile, Quetzalcoatl is identified both as an ancient deity and legendary ruler of the Toltec. As the god of civilization, the feathered serpent represented the forces of good and light; as a ruler, he is credited with the discovery of maize, the arts, and science. Recent fossil discoveries in South America suggest that in fact feathered dinosaurs existed there, perhaps within the memory of the earliest native people. The earth itself was thought of by the Olmecs as a coiled serpent; Meso-Americans worshipped Coatlicue, a snake goddess, creatrix and mother of celestial deities. Silko has written elsewhere of her impulse to paint a mural featuring a rattlesnake 30 feet long on a wall in her neighborhood: "The snake in my mural is a messenger. He emerges out of a rainstorm and is surrounded by flowers, birds, and other words in Spanish as if they had blossomed out of the flowers and plants that grew around the giant snake. The words, in Spanish, say 'The people are hungry. The people are cold. The rich have stolen the land. The rich have stolen freedom. The people demand justice. Otherwise, Revolution'" (Yellow Woman, 144).

In the novel, other feathered creatures, the macaws that advise the Mayan brothers, are not subject to any mode of deductive or inductive analysis. Rather, the blue-and-yellow birds appear mysteriously, cry of big changes coming, and dictate what must be done as people begin moving from the south. The opal in Tacho's spirit bundle foretells the burning of Mexico City; at other times the bundle bleeds mysteriously. Prophecy in Silko's novel is often left undefined. Meaning is apparent, but its precise nature cannot be known, an aspect of native storytelling often frustrating to readers from the dominant culture. Silko herself, in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, comments that "a great deal of the story is believed to be within the listener; the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listeners" (50). Thus the almanac, preserved at great cost by the children who carry it on the flight north, is incomplete, inchoate, and altogether disappointing to an Anglo mind, schooled in historical record-keeping of another kind. As it is with all native stories, the children who carry the old narratives do not fully understand what has been entrusted to them, only that these fragments are important and must be passed on. Yet these bits of horse-gut, bearing the outline of a giant plumed serpent, possess living power to bring all the tribal people of the Americas together to retake the land. The plumed serpent is thus a powerful spiritual symbol, the key to the lost will to rebel.

Transcendence is similarly what Silko has in mind when she presents the character of Yoeme, grandmother to Lecha and Zeta. One of the old people who understood the significance of the Almanac as well as the language of snakes, Yoeme is among the last whose beings have not been corrupted by Western education or white lifeways. Herself miraculously delivered from death, she passes on significant knowledge: "'You may as well die fighting the white man,' Yoeme had told them when they were girls. 'Because the rain clouds will disappear first; and with them the plants and animals. When the spirits are angry or hurt, they turn their backs on all of us'" (580). Yet as Yoeme also points out, although the white man hates to hear anything about spirits, which are beyond his control, "against the spirits the white man was impotent.... Spirits were immune to the white man's threats and to his bribes of money and food. The white man only knew one way to control himself or others and that was with brute force" (580).

It is difficult to deny what old Yoeme teaches. These truths, however painful for Silko's readers, are the core of the allegory. Just as Dante does, she shows us human beings dealing with each other, with minorities, and with the earth-torturing, butchering, shooting, raping, excavating--until we can stand it no longer and cry out, "Stop!" That is precisely Silko's strategy, what earlier mystics called the *via negativa*. If we are truly horrified, we will take steps toward change. *Almanac of the Dead* is not escape fiction. We may not enjoy reading about violence, but that's because it's redundant; our newspapers and TV screens are full of it. Yet Silko's mission in this novel is to present the horror in such a way that it cannot be shunted aside. The uncanny coincidence of historical events that occurred after the novel's publication--the failure of the Mexican economy and the Oklahoma city bombing--with events described in *Almanac of the Dead* drives home Silko's point.

Sven Birkerts, in his review of Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, remarks, "that the oppressed of the world should break their chains and retake what's theirs is not an unappealing idea (for some), but it is so contrary to what we know both of the structures of power and the psychology of the oppressed that the imagination simply balks.... Her premise of revolutionary insurrection is

tethered to airy nothing" (41). By this observation, Mr. Birkerts admits himself to be one of those who does not take the spirit world seriously, who does not believe that white culture is destroying itself, that the Destroyers in both of Silko's novels are quite real, that in fact we are they. Silko has staked her life, her tribal loyalties, and her commitment to the earth on getting this message across to an increasingly violent world. As in the dream vision of Dante, similarly intended to put an erring society back on track, the writer reveals her truth to those who are perceptive enough to accept it.

CONCLUSION:-

The narrative world that reveals this truth can be mapped in linear fashion, but the vision attained from it transcends that diagram and urges the reader to an immense new spiritual understanding of the Destroyers and the Earth. Yet readers must resist the Eurocentric tendency to label certain actions as good or evil. Silko tells us stories, both traditional myths and modern ones, inviting us to acknowledge the Pueblo vision of the way things are: "In this universe, there is no absolute good or absolute bad; there are only balances and harmonies that ebb and flow" (Yellow Woman, 64). Yet the writer leaves no doubt as to which movement is which.

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