In 1998, the late Pierre Bourdieu published with Loïc Wacquant a vigorous polemic against U.S. cultural imperialism that ignored translation as a crucial node in the international production and consumption of ideas. Appearing in English under the title “On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason,” the essay offered a schematic model of transnational intellectual circulation that foregrounded solely questions of domination/imposition and submission/complicity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999; Sansone 2002, 11). Elsewhere, I have dissected Bourdieu and Wacquant’s mischaracterization of *Orpheus and Power*, Michael Han-chard’s 1994 monograph on Brazilian “Black Consciousness” movements, which they falsely attacked for its “imposition” of an “American tradition,” “model,” and “dichotomy” of race on Brazil (French 2000; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999, 44). In this essay, by contrast, I will analyze the dynamics of “reading” and “translation” through which “U.S.” race ideas come to be incorporated into the Brazilian intellectual field, and with results that would have surprised Bourdieu and Wacquant (Teles dos Santos 2002, 184). I will do so by examining the current boom in scholarly publications, by both Brazilians and North Americans, that address questions of race, color, and nation in Brazil within a broader diasporic perspective (French 2002).

**The Missing Dimension: U.S. “Race” Ideas and their “Consumption” in Brazil**

In their polemic, Bourdieu and Wacquant are aggressively dismissive of their adversaries, especially the North Americans and the English, while
criticizing the tropism toward power displayed by many intellectuals in the dominated countries. Yet these two European intellectuals themselves display imperial arrogance in their quick and disdainful glance at the “race” debate in the African New World diaspora. They opine freely about Brazil despite their ignorance of this continent-sized country of 170 million people. In their rendering, the poor Brazilians are in need of a foreign defender in the face of the U.S. onslaught, precisely because the intellectual exchange “flows in one direction only”; even “out of place” North American “race” ideas, they lament, “can impose” themselves on Brazil (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999, 46).

The authors of “On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason” give analytical weight solely to the production and transnational circulation of ideas while neglecting the dynamics of “reading” and “translation” through which “foreign” ideas come to be incorporated into national intellectual fields, each with its own historical trajectory, cultural formation, and social mythologies. Their simplistic model of U.S. domination/imposition and subaltern submission/complicity is empirically and theoretically wrong-headed. It erases the process of local appropriation while vastly exaggerating the power and influence that U.S.-based notions have had or can have in Brazil. In summary, they make a fetish of the “foreign” origin of ideas (itself questionable) while depicting the process of transnational exchange as inherently one-sided. Worst of all, their call for resistance is vitiated by their own preference for taking refuge behind flimsy nationalist barricades rather than conducting serious transnational intellectual and political debate.

Brazilian researchers on and activists against racism and racial inequality today do not, in fact, adhere to the U.S. racial model postulated by Bourdieu and Wacquant—even when they have been educated in the United States or have been beneficiaries of Ford Foundation funding. Nor did the publication of Michael Hanchard’s Orpheus and Power in 1994 lead Brazilian academics and black activists to submit to North American “readings” of race. Instead, it helped to crystallize a Brazilian conviction, across diversity in national origin, race, and gender, that difference is more important than similarity at this moment in the comparative discussion (the vigorous debate can be followed in Bairros 1996; Fry 1995, 1995–96; Hanchard 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 2000, 2001, 2002; Ferreira da Silva 1998; Gomes da Cunha 1998; and Segato 1998). If the tonic of the 1980s was an emphasis on similarity, the most recent literature highlights
Brazilian national specificities and even originality within the diasporic context. It represents, one might argue, the consolidation of a “properly Brazilian race relations problematic, [which began to emerge in the 1950s, and] that distances itself from the comparativist and contrastive standard inherited from Gilberto Freyre” in the 1930s (to which Bourdieu and Wacquant are still hostage with their use of the U.S./Brazil dichotomy) (Guimarães 1999, 91). Where does *Orpheus and Power*, with its U.S./Brazilian contrast, fit into the current renaissance of literature on race, culture, nation, and power in Brazil?

The idea of the African diaspora has, itself, been a conceptual breakthrough that highlights the shared backdrop of racial slavery and its antiblack ideologies of white superiority without, however, reducing the subsequent history of African-descended peoples solely to their victimization by that racial subordination. “African civilization and blackness bear upon each other,” as anthropologist Rita Segato (1998, 130) notes, “and the place of Africa and the place of race in New World nations are mutually suffused in a complex articulation [that is] extremely difficult to disentangle . . . [but that] varies according to national framework.” “Our shared blackness” within the New World, observes Denise Ferreira da Silva (1998, 230), “has been traversed by the particular effects of specific national, gender, and class conditions. Slavery and colonialism composed the historical ground . . . [but] in each case, it is constructed . . . according to historical and social conditions of a given multiracial social space . . . [and] the specific historical and discursive developments informing a society’s strategies of racial subordination.” As Ferreira da Silva puts it, there are many black subjectivities within the New World African diaspora that cannot be easily analogized to the U.S. case.  

“It is important to emphasize the difference in how the Brazilian racial system has been constituted,” argues anthropologist Olívia Gomes da Cunha (1998, 247), because “the paradigmatic cases of Brazil and the United States show that specific modalities of exclusion and ethnic conceptions are deeply related . . . [to] the variety of cognitive operations of discrimination and exclusion we blend under the common term racism [and that these] . . . are deeply ingrained in the structures of relationships developed through a particular national history” (Segato 1998, 130, 135). In summary, “racism in Brazil, no matter how fruitfully we may locate it within global continuities, remains culturally distinct” (Sheriff 1997, 42).
The difficulty posed by the U.S./Brazilian comparison, Ferreira da Silva 1998, 204, 206–7) suggests, lies in the fact that

the presuppositions informing contemporary analysis of racial subordination in Brazil . . . [as well as] the categories employed in the study of multiracial societies [first] emerged in the attempt to deal with a particular condition of multiraciality, the United States. . . . When scholars began focusing on the similarities between these two societies . . . they tended to interpret racial subordination in Brazil as a mere variation on the model that . . . was the point of contrast in the first place. . . . [Thus] the peculiarities of race in Brazil appear as a matter of degree, as a less developed actualisation of a construction of race, which is premised upon a view of society as composed by clearly distinguishable racial groups.

Thus there is a serious flaw, Ferreira da Silva argues, in the arguments of some of the less careful U.S. analysts, such as Howard Winant, Michael Hanchard’s “principal interlocutor.” (Hanchard 1994a, ix). Although Winant theoretically embraces a social constructionist approach to race, his writing is still based on the U.S.-specific perception “that racial difference is (like sex) a pre-social substratum upon which social relations develop. What is lost . . . is that the political importance of race resides not in the interpretation and imposition of meanings upon these [phenotypi- cal] differences but in the very production of those differences as racial” (Ferreira da Silva 1998, 208). Winant thus treats race as “a fact that cuts across contextual boundaries” (Segato 1998, 132) while revealing “the social and historical boundedness” of his “notion of racial formation” (Ferreira da Silva 1998, 212).

“Ironically, Hanchard’s problematic effort to answer the question also provides important clues for addressing the issue,” Ferreira da Silva continues, even though he replicates, at least in part, Winant’s “ethnocentric universality.” When Hanchard argues that the ideology of racial democracy has “neutralized racial identification” and produced “the absence of racial consciousness among Afro-Brazilians,” she goes on, he forgets that the Afro–North American’s subjectivity (a term she prefers to “racial consciousness”) “emerged out of a particular condition of racial subordination. As a result, this particular construction of black subjectivity surreptitiously
colonizes his analysis of racial mobilization in Brazil. . . . [Yet] the specific articulation of race, nation, and gender that characterizes the Brazilian construction of race," she reiterates, "is not better or worse than that prevailing in the United States; it is [merely] different. And this difference should be the point of departure in any analysis of racial politics in Brazil" (222–23).

Ferreira da Silva’s intriguing 1998 critique also reflects the two-sided nature of the exchange that occurs between differing national realities within the diaspora. Although herself a black activist inspired by the struggles of Afro–North Americans, this Brazilian assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego observes that “being black here [in the United States] had given me an advantage of seeing myself through the eyes of ‘Others’—blacks and whites in this case. It seemed to have helped me to close the gap and to perceive that I with my fellow activists are more ‘black Brazilians’ than we are led to believe when at home” (225). This experience of alterity parallels the observations of a young African-American historian of Brazil, Kim Butler, in her innovative 1998 book Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition São Paulo and Salvador. The U.S. encounter with Brazil, she insists, makes “clear that what had initially appeared to North American eyes to be a large ‘black’ population, was, in fact, a heterogeneous group of many smaller communities. Despite the shared heritage of enslavement and connection to the continent of Africa, there existed no unifying ethnic identity to forge a true community from this large and diverse demographic group . . . [although its] existence . . . is often taken for granted when viewed through the prism of the U.S. experience” (Butler 1998, 218).

Like the Brazilians, Butler (1998, 218, 50, 7) concludes that “blackness” does “not arise intrinsically out of the fact of African heritage, but was conditioned and modeled by the historical dynamics of each specific slave society . . . [and that] the ethnicity of ‘blackness,’ a combination of somatic features and African cultural heritage, is neither fixed nor constant in the African diaspora.” Explicitly contextualizing her work within the shared commonality of the African diaspora, Butler’s exploration of the Afro-American experience since abolition also reveals the limited utility of national comparisons. In comparing the differing trajectory of African-descended peoples in the cities of São Paulo and Salvador, Butler (1998, 50) illustrates the richness of diversity even within a single national space: “As regional differences are explored, [black] ethnicity appears as a fluid
phenomenon, both in response to, and as an outcome of, sociopolitical conditions.” As Segato (1998, 129) observes, “there is no Africa in the New World without hyphenation.”

If the Brazilian situation in terms of racial inequality and “ethnoracial domination” is far worse than Bourdieu and Wacquant allow, it should also be emphasized that the works they deplore, such as *Orpheus and Power*, have been far from dire in their impact on the intellectual field in Brazil. They could be pleased or, perhaps, reassured by the ineffectiveness of U.S. cultural imperialism on the race question, as well as by the sophistication and clarity with which its Brazilian victims, agents, and accomplices have come to formulate, in far more exacting and convincing terms, a broad critique of “ethnocentric universality” in the conceptual discussion of race. If honest, they might even be impressed by the appearance of these critical articles in English while hailing the heightened and respectful dialogue being conducted on this vital theme. They might even note that it is the Universidade de Brasília’s Rita Segato (1998, 148), not Michael Hanchard, who is harshest in denouncing “the existence of a virulent racist attitude and feeling against people of black color” in Brazil.

Bourdieu and Wacquant do not, however, share common terrain with the current scholars of race and color in Brazil, whether Brazilians, North Americans, or Europeans. In order to indulge their grudge against the United States, the authors of “On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason” have distorted the work of serious scholars like Michael Hanchard and have taken refuge in the facile assertion that the word *race* has no relevance in the Brazilian context because it would have to mean *race* as it is understood in the United States! Even worse, they have adopted, in the name of anti-imperialist solidarity, an uncritical posture of solidarity with Brazil’s national mythology of a race-free society and thus distanced themselves from the antiracist project that unites all participants in the current debate (Burdick 1998; Twine 1997; Sheriff 1997). Their surprising insensitivity to questions of race reflects an implicit denial or downplaying of the historical process of subalternization to which Africans and their descendants have been subjected by Brazil, the United States, and France.

The driving force and urgency of the current debate about race and racism in Brazil comes from a shared search for the most effective weapons to be used in the antiracist struggle. The unfolding of this discussion is thus political in the best sense and reflects, as Olivia Gomes da Cunha explains, the shift in the Brazilian political terrain in the twenty years since...
the founding of the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU). The central question today, she suggests, is “Which language should be used to bring visibility to the racial discrimination and racism that exist in Brazilian society?” (Gomes da Cunha 1998, 240). This insurgent antiracist objective also defines the terrain for transnational dialogue. Comparison with the United States, Segato explains, can be used “to contribute to the formulation of an adequate politics to fight racism in Brazil” (Segato 1998, 148). And Ferreira da Silva (1998, 230), despite her emphasis on difference, insists that, since “race has been the common discursive basis for [the] worldwide subordination of non-whites,” transnational comparison is essential to our common efforts to “formulate insurgent counter discourses, which will be at the same time truly nonethnocentric theoretical and political interventions.”

The practical and ideological terrain on which the antiracist struggle unfolds in Brazil, as Ferreira da Silva (1998, 223) notes, is that of “a multiracial society where manifestations of ‘race prejudice’ and acts of ‘racial discrimination,’ and high levels of inequalities between blacks and whites coexist with a construction of race which rejects racial separation and celebrates racial harmony.” Following Peter Fry (1995), Gomes da Cunha (1998, 225–26) warns against reducing “racial democracy” merely to a myth understood as synonymous with fraud (see also Sheriff 1997, 435–36). Whether dealing with the United States or Brazil, the dynamics of social mythology are far more complex than merely asserting the “truth” against a “lie.” This complexity is suggested by Segato’s (1998, 137) attempt to relate racial and national mythologies in the two societies: “If, from top to bottom, the North American ethnic paradigm is based on separation under the umbrella of a common, color-blind myth of shared effort and meritocratic reward, in Brazil the ethnic paradigm is based on encompassing the other, inclusion is its strong motif, and the myth here is the color-blind myth of an interrelating people.”

Many Brazilians, Robin Sheriff (1997, 429) notes, are fearful that black movements will create separation among Brazilians as in U.S. style “race” relations. In fact, she finds that black activists more “often invoked the dream not of a black movement composed entirely by people of color, but of a movement directed towards all forms of discrimination.” Indeed, Hanchar (1994a, 84) also reports that the creation of an alternative black countersociety, as in the United States, was not a goal expressed by the black activists he interviewed: “No one expressed interest in being part of a racially specific political party, church, or other institution on a national level.” It
might be suggested that the core demand of black movements in Brazil, as articulated in the MNU’s founding manifesto of 1978, is that Brazil be a true racial democracy, and not that the idea of a racial democracy be rejected per se. Their hope for Brazilian society, as Sheriff (1997, 431) puts it, is “simply to turn it more fully and honestly towards its own dreaming” (see her full argument in Sheriff 2001).

Brazil’s “black consciousness” movement, reborn as part and parcel of the massive democratic insurgency against the military regime in the late 1970s, did embrace foreign discourses and symbols from both the United States and Africa (a practice that Michael Hanchard criticizes in *Orpheus and Power*). The movement adopted the radically iconoclastic gesture of asserting that race and racism in Brazil is like the United States, but this discourse should never be understood the way Bourdieu and Wacquant suggest, as simple “imitation” of or submission to a “foreign” import. If anything, the case of U.S. “race” ideas and their appropriation in Brazil will demonstrate the subaltern intellectuals’ capacity to subvert foreign ideas.

As a peripheral society on the margins of the North Atlantic world, Brazilians have long experienced the wholesale importation of ideas from the metropole, and cultural dependency has generated a sharp debate about the role of such “out-of-place ideas” (Schwarz 1992). The issues are fundamental: Do ideas in fact have a place? And what role, if any, do “imported” ideas play within Brazilian reality? Are they detrimental diversions to be combated or pure ornamentation that is irrelevant? Do they do damage or do they play a positive role? This long-standing controversy has largely focused on the import of not U.S. but European ideas, such as liberalism. The limited impact of the prestigious foreign imports of French and English cultural imperialism in the nineteenth century was also demonstrated by the rise of “scientific racism,” as exemplified by the works of the comte de Gobineau, who based his fraudulent “science” in part on his diplomatic service in Brazil (Raeders 1988 [1934]). Brazilian upper class intellectuals widely accepted this doctrine of white European superiority, but in doing so, as Thomas Skidmore (1993 [1974]) and Emília Viotti da Costa (2000 [1985]) have shown, they discarded several of the fundamental underlying principles of the racist orthodoxy they claimed to embrace.

The adoption of U.S. race ideas by Brazilian intellectuals and black activists was also marked, over time, by the very Brazilian “readings” they gave to these “out-of-place ideas.” Activist Joel Rufino dos Santos has recently called attention to the difficulties involved with the movement’s use
of an “eighteenth-century idea of race” to achieve antiracist objectives. What is “black” in Brazil, he proposed, following Guerreiro Ramos (Oliveira 1995), should instead be seen as

a social configuration, a place that can be occupied even by nonblacks (just as the place of the white can be occupied by a preto [black] or mulatto). How should one define this place? The coordinates to fix the black as a place would be: phenotype (crioulo [creole]), social condition (poor), cultural patrimony (popular), historical origin (African ancestors), and identity (self-definition or definition by others). The weakest coordinate is phenotype, since the majority of our population tends toward the dark. The Brazilian is, as one can deduce, the best synonym for black; and white a synonym for non-Brazilian. (Rufino dos Santos 1996, 223)

To “present the problem of the black as the problem of Brazil,” he goes on, is the most radical way of fighting racism. “The problem of the black,” another activist, Clóvis Moura (1994, 234), insists, “is part and parcel of the national problem and . . . [and will be resolved] through his/her social, economic, cultural and psychological integration into the bosom of the nation and his/her demarginalization as a citizen.” Veteran activist Hamilton Cardoso (1987, 89) sounds a similar note: “The crucial problem lies in defining the way of being of the Brazilian who, today, however white he may be, when viewed by a European (the real white, the pure, the legitimate, as we are accustomed to saying, ironically, among blacks) is seen as ‘an out-of-place white.’” This is what “black activists, militants, and intellectuals” mean, Cordoso continues, when they observe that all Brazilian “whites have a foot in the slave quarter.” To resolve the problem of racism in Brazil, as MNU leader Lélia Gonzales once said, would be to resolve a “Brazilian cultural neurosis. . . . Racism? In Brazil? That’s a [North] American thing!” (cited in Bento 1998, n.p.).

Although often criticized for being “un-Brazilian,” black consciousness movements and activists have demonstrated their ability to incorporate alien ideas into a very Brazilian worldview that speaks to the best of what that country dreams itself to be. While foreign imports have prompted more than their share of nationalist defensiveness in Brazil, the healthiest response to Brazil’s cultural dependency has been confidently
to “consume” foreign ideas and incorporate them into original Brazilian productions. We thus arrive at the Brazilian celebration of antropofagia (cannibalism), dating from the 1920s, as the central metaphor for conceptualizing the link between the local and the global in a world ever more tightly, if unequally, bound together (Johnson 1987; Santiago 1978).

**Conclusion**

The historical trajectory of African-descended peoples in Brazil and the United States has attracted successive generations of talented scholars over the past seventy years while producing a sustained body of high-quality social science research across many disciplines (Barcelos, Gomes da Cunha, and Nascimento Araújo 1991; Andrews 1997; Bastide 1974; Fontaine 1980; French 2002; Parker 1978; Russell-Wood 1982). The last decade has witnessed an exciting new phase of engagement, in both Brazil and the United States, with Brazilians playing an increasingly active transnational role along with intellectuals of African descent in the two countries. Most important, this pathbreaking transnational dialogue, to which Bourdieu and Wacquant are blind, is far less unbalanced than in the past; indeed, one of the most fruitful and provocative developments has been the emergence of a clearly enunciated Brazilian articulation of the dialectics of similarity and differences between Brazil and the United States, especially in terms of identities and subjectivities (Gomes da Cunha 1998; Ferreira da Silva 1999; Segato 1998; Guimarães 1999).

The global hegemony of “U.S. ideas” today, Bourdieu and Wacquant rightly observe, is not in fact “natural,” despite the contemporary prevalence of market metaphors; and the heightened volume and rapidity of the exchange of ideas and cultural products does not alter the violent asymmetries between nations. Nor are they wrong to see a worldwide drive by the United States, as the globe’s self-styled “sole superpower,” to achieve, within the intellectual and cultural realms, the same predominance, if not domination, already achieved in the economic, diplomatic, and military realms. Indeed, the very preeminence of the United States serves as a galling contrast for its rivals, lesser imperialist powers like France, who are facing increasing difficulty in maintaining their “place in the sun” within the terrain of global capitalism. Yet Bourdieu and Wacquant’s ill-founded use of the Brazilian example, motivated as it is by French anxieties and sensitivities, contributes little of substance to the current discussion. It would be especially unfortunate, however, if nonspecialist readers, out of respect for the late Pierre Bourdieu’s many intellectual contributions, were
discouraged from exploring this promising transnational dialogue about Brazil in which new questions are being asked, of an old topic, within the framework of a common struggle against racism and inequality.

In a world marked by social retrogression and dominated by imperial diktats, the success of popular struggles can only be achieved through a unified and all-encompassing assault on structural inequalities and violence of all sorts, whether between genders, social classes, racial or ethnic groups, regions, or countries. To carry out such a transnational fight requires that intellectuals and activists maintain a vigilantly self-critical vision of the shortcomings of their own societies. At the same time, critical intellectuals must maintain a posture of respect and solidarity (which does not bar disagreement and debate) in which they avoid willful misunderstanding of and ill-founded attacks against potential allies in other countries.

Notes
Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the Portuguese are my own.
1. Bourdieu and Wacquant want to avoid debate and don’t want to be bothered by ideas with which they disagree. Instead, they seek to automatically disqualify “incorrect” views on the basis of their national origin (even though they admit that this is a murky issue). Worst of all, their essay not only fails to foster discussion but actively seeks to foreclose debate through a gesture of disdain that is the opposite of fruitful intellectual and political debate between equals.
2. If intellectuals are to master their analytical instruments, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999, 51) say, we need “a genuine history of the genesis of ideas about the social world, combined with an analysis of the social mechanisms of the international circulation of those ideas.” Their only recognition of the issue of “consumption,” to use their preferred mercantilist metaphor, comes in a reference to the local “retranslation of salient social problems of the day” into an imported idiom by locals (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999, 50).
3. Those without broad exposure to or knowledge of the Afro–North American community tend to assume incorrectly, as Hanchard (1996b) notes in his reply to Peter Fry, that there is only one way of being an African-descended person in the United States. This underestimation of internal diversity within the United States, a misperception shared by Bourdieu and Wacquant as well as many Brazilians, can lead to a distorted rendering of a monolithic and implicitly separatist Afro–North American way-of-being (Segato 1998, 134, 130). Although easy for outsiders to miss, the theme of integration and the
pursuit of the dream of a color-blind society are by no means marginal to contemporary Afro–North American life and struggle.

4. Da Silva’s criticism is well illustrated by Winant’s (1994, 94) claim that his “racial formation theory” is “particularly well suited to deal with the complexities of Brazilian racial dynamics . . . [because] race is seen as a constituent of the individual psyche and of relationships among individuals; it is also an irreducible component of collective identities and social structures” (my emphasis).

5. Livio Sansone (1997, 303–4), an Italian Brazilianist, criticizes Winant for positing that “a unilinear global ethnic polarization is occurring, which is basically to postulate the development all over the world of a single type of polarized race relations and racism—a large scale copy of the situation in the United States and, to a lesser extent, North-Western Europe. Such generalizations reflect a general difficulty within ethnic studies of dealing with situations of unclear ethnic borders of mestizaje [mixture] and underestimates the peculiarities of race relations and ethnic identity in Brazil. . . . Even with globalization,” he notes quite sensibly, “there continue to exist some basic differences between black culture and identity in Bahia and in the black diaspora of Europe or the black community of the United States.”

6. The question of “imported” and “out-of-place ideas” figures in my recent discussion of the debates surrounding Brazil’s extensive but problematic system of labor law (French 2001).


8. I owe this point to Jan Hoffman French, whose ideas about and insights into Brazil inform this article.

9. The increasing participation of Brazilian intellectuals of African descent is a significant new development in terms of the sociology of knowledge. The absence of Afro–Latin American intellectuals, Pierre-Michel Fontaine lamented in his 1980 review, reflects “the structure and distribution of knowledge in the Americas, which is in turn a reflection of the structure and distribution of wealth, power, and status in the region. To put it more directly, this situation reflects the fact that Afro–Latin Americans, for reasons of their low wealth, status, and power, have had little input in the shaping and development” of Latin American studies (111). A superb special issue of Estudos Afro-Asiáticos on the Bourdieu/Wacquant controversy, published by the Centro de Estudos Afro-Asiáticos of the Universidade Candido Mendes in Rio de Janeiro, provides further evidence of this shift (“As artimanhas” 2002). It fully illustrates the fruitfulness of such international, interracial, and interdisciplinary debate, including responses by North Americans, Brazilians, and Europeans.
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