



The Rise of British Optimism: Exploration Narratives and Structures of Expectation

Diganta Bhattacharya

Assistant Professor of English, Sundarban Mahavidyalaya

Diganta Bhattacharya did his Masters in English literature in 2006 from the University of Calcutta. He finished his MPhil in 2009 from Jadavpur University. He is currently working as an Assistant Professor in a government-aided college. He is also pursuing his PhD from Presidency University. He has presented academic papers in a number of national and international conferences and has multiple print and online publications to date. His primary research interests are in travel, exploration and settler narratives written on the New World and the concept of inhabited space as it is textualized in such narratives.

Abstract

The altered status of the explorer after the Enlightenment was of crucial significance to England as the country was desperately seeking to realize a potential for excellence that somehow continued to remain unrealized. The Royal Society insisted on sterner empirical standards and expected the explorer to furnish verifiable information concerning what he has recorded in the journal.

The comparatively liberal and less restrictive British temperament in allowing supposedly 'secret' information gleaned through expeditions to be published ensured that the general populace remained as much sympathetic to and enthusiastic about the exploratory endeavours as was preferred by the Admiralty. This essay discusses how in England 'enlightened readership' with significantly more access to information than their Continental counterparts was instrumental in ensuring a sustained interest in overseas adventures, thus retaining a demographic base of support for such activities. As the spate of exploratory outreach coincided with the nation's burgeoning sense of maritime capabilities and an increased sense of racial significance, such activities were accorded additional importance and reputation since they effectively enshrined the nation's aspirational projection of its still-unrealized esteem and worth.

Thus, this study seeks to trace how England, admittedly a late starter in the scramble for new lands, sought to navigate through diplomatically troubled waters in achieving a maritime supremacy through a strategic formation of what can be referred to as 'exploration subculture.' Thus, she managed not only to secure a steady pull of much-needed volunteers for such expeditions, but also ensured a dedicated readership for exploration texts which further stoked their fantasies that could now be viewed as indistinguishable from national aspirations.

Keywords

Exploration, narrative, information, publication, censorship

Exploration and Expectations

Being an explorer during the post-Elizabethan era was surely different from being one about a couple of centuries after. Things changed, the world eventually got smaller and most importantly, *more* was expected of the figure of one who sought or, rather aspired to be identified as an Explorer. One just could no longer hope to sail through the seven seas with high hopes of finding hitherto-undiscovered shores or unobserved cultures that would completely astonish the Continental ‘audience’. And this ‘audience’ consisted of an unnervingly wide, divergent array of people that ranged from those who could barely read to those who could perfectly find out the slightest mistake in the theodolite-reading that was taken thousands of kilometres away from London or any Continental metropolitan centre. Interesting things of far-reaching significance were shaping up only in London; the establishment of the Royal Geographical Society in 1830 for the advancement of ‘Geographical Sciences’ had been an all-too-apparent attempt at *codifying* Geographical-topographical findings, observations and hypotheses in the same way the Royal Society sought to organize existing body of Natural Philosophy on sterner empirical grounds. What is of particular importance here is the emphasis laid upon the Enlightenment principles of gathering, organizing and textualizing information or *functional knowledge* in a way that is rigorous and established on experimentally verified as well as verifiable processes.¹ An overactive imagination, coupled with an insatiable thirst for adventure, was no longer adequate qualifications for an ambitious explorer. Sir Richard Francis Burton perfectly sums it up:

The [Anglo- African] traveller is an overworked professional...[He] is expected to survey and observe, to record meteorology and trigonometry, to shoot and stuff birds and beasts, to collect geological specimens and theories, to gather political and commercial information, beginning, of course, with cotton; to advance the infant study of anthropology; to keep accounts, to sketch, to indite a copious, legible journal— notes are now not deemed sufficient— and to forward long reports which shall prevent the Royal Geographical Society from napping through its evenings (Burton 222).

The expectation was high indeed. There were a number of factors that contributed to the incremental and unavoidable strengthening of the explorer’s status and position. People started asking uncomfortable questions as regards the veracity of the ‘truth claims’ of the explorers, the verbal promise of the truth content that constituted the very fulcrum of exploration narratives was proving to be increasingly untenable when met with stringent demands for empirical evidence. The infamous ‘armchair travelers’ who were extremely well-versed in topographical calculations were busier than ever nit-picking ‘fresh’ exploration accounts and most importantly the governments were far more serious about the functional applicability of those findings in the face of the Continental scramble for the discovery of newer sea-routes that would ensure commercial and naval supremacy. The pre- and mid-Victorian explorations into remoter land and sea regions were no less than critically important for respective governments: for an activity-hungry, swelling and tremendously able group of earnest and bawdy young men eager for good payment and a healthy dose of adventure, exploration and related activities were perfect substitutes for

the adrenaline rush of the war-times.ⁱⁱ England, a rather late starter in this race of overseas explorations, had much 'ground' to cover as it lagged about 80 years behind Spain and Portugalⁱⁱⁱ and to ensure popular participation in this state-funded endeavour, the Admiralty took care that narratives on explorations are published and projected as national achievements. The narratives, consequently, possessed a strong patriotic component that was competitive to the point of appearing combative. William. E. Sherman pertinently observes:

English travellers had made sporadic voyages to Brazil, the Caribbean, Newfoundland, and Northern Russia from the 1480s to the 1550s, but few of their forays had any lasting impact and as late as the 1550s they had not yet made a concerted effort to travel to, write about, or take possession of other parts of the globe. This belatedness accounts for several features in the pattern of early English expansionism. The fact that Spain and Portugal had already secured the safest and most profitable trade routes meant, first, that English accounts would be marked by a patriotic rhetoric fired by political and commercial competition (Sherman 18).

A fitting example of this narrative predisposition is exemplified in Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* which, due to its projection of international tension, has been seen as "...among other things, comparable about the importance of unity against the Spanish (Steggle 77)." Hakluyt obviously had other scores to settle including personal ones^{iv} but he was absolutely instrumental in structuring a triumphalist, belligerent nationalistic expansionism which had a sustained, extended impact on how popular imagination would approach such activities. James P Helfers maintains:

Hakluyt's patriotic motive of silencing the foreign critics of England's maritime might come out both in the narratives he includes and in the kind of editorial changes he makes. He includes many accounts of sea battles with Spain, some of which are irrelevant as exploration, and which are only nominally concerned with trade. The most noticeable of these is the account of the 1588 defeat of the Spanish Armada. In fact, it is in the inclusion of such a great mass of material that Hakluyt's patriotic motive is most clearly evident. He wants to disprove foreign notions about English "sluggish security" by the rhetorical expedient of simple accretion. During his introductory remarks, Hakluyt provides a catalogue which shows, by its sheer bulk that English mariners and explorers have gone to all parts of the globe (Helfers 170).

Richard Hakluyt is mentioned here with the chief purpose of outlining a trend in the emerging genre of Exploration Narratives as it was undergoing rapid and irreversible changes; the most significant among all of them being a resurgent nationalistic-supremacist mind set crafted through the strategic representation of 'cultural cavalcade' along with its enormous 'propaganda package' that to a significant extent demonstrated how these texts sought to interpret the world as "...a vast adventure playground in which Anglo-Saxon superiority could be repeatedly demonstrated vis-a-vis all other races, most of whom were depicted as treacherous and evil (MacKenzie 204)". For this patriotic strain to be effectively incorporated, a text that contained descriptions or personal

experience of exploration or travel needed to undergo a substantial transition from the purely descriptive/factual or exorbitantly imaginary/fantastic to the practicably contextual/functional *and* literary/stimulating. This demanded a “generic blending of factual information and literary art (Batten 5-6).” The popular idea of the traveler-explorer who “...has the security and privilege to move about in relatively unconstrained ways (Clifford 34)” was unproblematically reduced to a myth only as great powers began contesting over ownership of lucrative sea-routes. This underscored a transition from exploration and the associations of romance to what Sherman has succinctly referred to as “venture capitalism” (Sherman 25), a professional enterprise of sorts, with its unique discursive apparatus that involved, among other things, supervised publication as well as strategic withholding of functional information and actionable intelligence. Quite unsurprisingly, therefore, people responded with cheerful and encouraging excitement when material(s) that were considered sensitive and ‘secret’ by other Continental Governmental bodies were allowed to capture popular British imagination due to the much more open and liberal access to information as well as the existence of a relatively free press.

Censorship and Publication: Spain vis-à-vis England

Britain’s comparatively more ‘open’ and permissive atmosphere regarding information and its accessibility dates back as far as the momentous expiry of the Licensing Act in 1695 that halted state censorship of the press. This was followed hot on the heels by no less than 10 general elections in the next 20 years, with an exorbitant amount of belligerent pamphleteering and other not-so-courteous means of opinion-formation. Older legal traditions like the Habeas Corpus Act and the long-held administrative tradition of the separation of powers between the crown and parliament in England (obviously the first European state to achieve this as an established norm of how state affairs would be conducted) had been the key factors that eventually led to the abolition of the culture of state censorship and a grudging admiration for the free press which was accorded a much-awaited acknowledgement and recognition for the first time at the beginning of the 1640s in the context of the Puritan Revolution. But the staunch advocates of deregulated press had to wait until 1695 that saw the parliament allowing the Printing Act to lapse, after which the pre-publication censorship came to an end, and England could boast a much more comprehensive freedom of expression and publication, at least compared to its Continental neighbours.

In England, consequently, the readership increased dramatically for the minimum amount of censorship imposed by the government on travelogues that were popularly believed to contain top secret information of national significance. The incremental formation of what can be called an ‘expectant readership’ assumes more significance vis-à-vis a Continental rival like the Spanish administration which, contrarily, was much less admmissive of the British idea of what constitutes a ‘free press’ and naturally more prohibitive when it came to the publication of any kind of account of the voyages undertaken by their explorers, the records of which were considered classified information. Starting from the 16th century, the Spanish had a somewhat different policy regarding publication and popular access to information. By the Pragmatic of July 8,

1502, the King and the Queen (Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella) had their system of prior censorship 'installed' in a way that functioned both before a document got printed and before issuing a permit for importing books or textual documents from elsewhere. Every bookseller was required to have foreign publications properly examined and every printer needed to procure a printing licence, to be issued by the following officials: at Valladolid and Grenada, by the President of the Audiencia; at Toledo by the Archbishop; at Seville by the Archbishop; at Burgos by the Bishop; at Salamanca and Zamora by the Bishop of Salamanca. Those who failed to comply or act accordingly, ran the risk of losing all their books and profits, had to pay a hefty fine which was then to be divided into three equal parts: one for the accuser, one for the judge, one for the royal treasury. Along with all these penalties, they were no longer authorized to engage either in printing or in merchandising. Things went only downhill after the Inquisitor of the Roman Church, Cardinal Carafa, assumed power in the form of the pontifical throne and a royal order in July, 1559, ordered all Spanish students to return from universities abroad lest their minds are too 'vitiated' by the Lutheran diatribe. The famous trials and autos-da-fés of Valladolid, 1559, and Seville, 1560, sought to comprehensively thwart the Spanish Protestantism, and the strict state-administered control the contemporary Spanish press was subjected to pursued the same aim. A memo from the Inquisitor-General, Don Fernando de Valdes, sent to the Emperor demanded that all imported books are properly and thoroughly examined by the Inquisitors, their titles are documented to be referred back to whenever needed in a special 'list', that the sale of books printed abroad are forbidden, that even if printed in Spanish, such texts must undergo a prior censorship process adjudicated by a board of Inquisitors, that every book so printed must be accompanied by the respective details of the author and the publisher, that a comprehensive 'list' of 'accessible' and 'forbidden' books are made available to the general public, and to top it all, that bookshops are regularly inspected by Inquisitor-officials. Whereas all these details might appear as if they have to do with religious persecution and Inquisition, what has to be remembered is that it created a climate of intolerance that made it difficult for the supposedly 'sensitive material' to be available for public consumption. It was never about religion only: the dubious nature of the Inquisition was never more clearly stated than by Leo X (Pope Leo X, 11 December 1475 – 1 December 1521, born Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici, was Pope from 9 March 1513 to his death in 1521) who had already pointed out in 1520 that it had the power to hunt down those who were active against the national good.^v

The end of 16th century marked the possible beginning of a tumultuous era in terms of the somewhat revolutionary Enlightenment ideas regarding philosophy and exploratory expansion, both of which squarely depended on, and were in turn influenced by written and published texts. Royal censorship began exerting its influence in France from 1620's, a model derived from Spain and in turn followed by the Dutch administration that sought, more successfully and effectively, to regulate as well as consolidate the state's control over information. This was as much motivated by theological interest as it was by mercantile and financial ones. There were other, more pragmatic reasons behind the publisher's interest in obtaining royal certification that would allow publication: the reasons ranged from less chance of the circulation of pirated

copies to a significantly decreased possibility of the much-dreaded post-publication confrontation between authors, censors, and religious and secular institutions.^{vi} The Spanish mostly, and the Dutch along with the French later, habitually suffered from an entrenched insecurity complex as regards the safety of such ‘secret information’ that oftener than not had to do with their colonized territories as they conscientiously attempted to maintain and exercise what Raymond Birn has categorically characterized as “enlightened censorship” (Hasse 1610).

England and a Promise of Greatness

England’s task was difficult: she had to raise her colours against this agitated backdrop of intense Continental competition that was chronically spiralling into something truly international in scope in so far as its geographical outreach and strategic possibilities were concerned. Both factors were exceedingly significant in terms of mercantile interest and military supremacy that would eventually benefit colonial expansion and fuel industrial revolution by finding newer shores to dump her surplus products. England, admittedly a rather late starter in the *great game*, began flexing her maritime muscle almost eight decades after Spain or Portugal, and felt she had to instil a genuine strain of patriotism among those associated with these explorations to elevate the sense of importance. Things, from England’s perspective, needed to be rushed after the *Inter Caetera*; a treaty signed by Pope Alexander VI in 1493 that had sought to ‘allocate’ the entire continental landmasses connected through newly-discovered sea-route to the heirs of the Spanish throne as a means of diplomatic and ‘civilized resolution’ of maritime disputes between Spain and Portugal.^{vii}

England was widely believed to be a country poised on the cusp of greatness and hold the proverbial candle to the rest of Europe: after all it was England that had been able to achieve the finest balance between people’s rights and a centralized administration with the monarch as no more than a traditional, although convenient symbol. England became the embodiment of a liberated space that allowed for relatively independent socio-political choices and this was an impression that was chiefly motivated by the fact that knowledge was not forcibly suppressed and information was neither censored nor restricted by the British administration which was comparatively much more democratic due to a parliamentary system that could effectively restrict dictatorial aspirations. Besides the obvious factor of a national policy conducive to overseas explorations and the publication of textual descriptions of those feats, what was particularly *instrumental* (pun intended) was the invention and refinement of a bevy of mechanical devices that considerably eased the workload of the voyagers both in terms of navigation and cartographic documentation. A legendary figure like Captain James Cook himself in several places of his Second Journal has praised ‘Mr. Kendall’s watch’ without which, he humbly admits at least twice (Cook 186, 87), observational activities would have been much more difficult and imprecise.^{viii} The list of such significant instrumental add-ons was indeed hefty, as were the price tags that accompanied these novel mechanical developments.^{ix}

Knowledge and understanding, thus, did not increase in occasional flashes of revelation: it was a gradual outcome of strenuous, tortuous labour and steadfast commitment, accomplished through the conjoined factors of physical fortitude and cerebral achievements. The coastline along with the basic outline of the American landmass took centuries to finish, with countless individual explorations incrementally filling in the conceptual vacuums.^x The enormous amount of data that remained to be gleaned and could only be accessed through meticulously-organized exploratory activities also demanded that there needed to be a network of correspondence among domain experts that would configure and determine the operative framework of explorations. Scholarly integration to further strengthen a hypothetical-because-utopian project of archiving functional information in order to enrich the chronically-swelling reservoir of knowledge was sought with increased urgency and effectiveness since 1600's.^{xi} An exhaustive study by Robert K. Merton demonstrates that among the most significant shifts in the 17th century British demographics was an abrupt increase in the number of people who somehow concerned themselves with the paraphernalia of the natural sciences.^{xii} There was a remarkable increase in military participation as well, with swelling numbers available for explorations approved by the Admiralty, approved and conducted in British political interest.^{xiii} The Royal Society issued a "Directions for Sea-Men" in 1665-66, a significant document that was supposed to instruct and regulate the swelling-to-the-point-of-being-uncontrollable expeditions by offering a general guideline as to how to maximize the functional output of such endeavours.^{xiv} This inclination towards a sort of academic naturalization was further continued in Robert Boyle's influential *General Heads for a Natural History of a Countrey, Great or Small* which reinstates Society's insistence on Baconian imperatives and was characterized by an obsessive emphasis on objective, quantifiable data through collection, measurement and classification which would then allow the ambitious formation of "...composing of a good Natural History, to superstruct, in time, a solid and useful philosophy..." (Boyle 1).

Thus began the great era of the British expansion: the English people, "men full of activity, stirrers abroad, and searchers of the remote parts of the world (Hakluyt 6)," attempted daring exploits, challenged firmly-entrenched status of 'established' naval powers, fought countless wars, grabbed huge chunks of land and exerted control over absolutely crucial waterways, failed in some, succeeded in most, and perhaps most significantly of all, wrote about all that. The pioneer in this was once again Hakluyt who took it upon himself to project England as an emerging maritime powerhouse with a substantial and illustrious history of overseas explorations across one and a half millennia; and filled about 834 folio pages of *Principal Navigations Vol. 1* with such details and doubled the amount of descriptive details in *Vol 2* (Sherman 19). Textualization was the prime contributor to what can be referred to as 'structures of expectation' regarding a matter no less important than the perceived notions of England's destiny, her role in shaping anew the cartographic layout of the known world itself as it was being incrementally *unravelling* by voluntary as well as involuntary explorations, travels and journey-s undertaken by explorers, travellers, scientists, geographers, merchants, slaves, convicts, soldiers, Admiralty-officials and captains, ambassadors,

captives, expatriates, castaways, pirates, colonizers, adventurers both professional and amateur, and pilgrims.

Endnotes

ⁱ To one as intimately implicated in the process of the British Enlightenment as Francis Bacon, travel was "...in the younger Sort...a Part of Education; In the Elder, a Part of Experience" (Bacon, "Of Travel" 79). The empirical rigour that attached supreme importance to eyewitness accounts- the chief reason why exploration narratives enjoyed such dedicated readership, -imparted a sought-after element of heightened consciousness and awareness as regards how exploration-as-performed was increasingly construed as an ostensibly object-focused empirical enterprise. Exploration narrative managed to establish itself as one of the most respectable and intellectually significant genres of the age following the Enlightenment as it managed to incorporate debates central to contemporary issues of science, philosophy and many other associated disciplines within a pleasurable *package* that a linear, 'plotted' narrative can afford to.

ⁱⁱ An interesting argument on how the act of tourism has been 'appropriated' in the same vein has been forwarded in *Shores of Discovery* 263.

ⁱⁱⁱ The 'late start' of England when compared to other European powers like the French and the Spanish and the Portuguese is considered a taken-for-granted characteristic of the great era of European exploration; but it might appear not that apparent if one looks at 16th century Continental history of exploration: Giovanni Caboto or John Cabot was enjoined by King Henry VII In 1496 to find newer regions and routes for overseas business, after an initial failed attempt sailed out of Bristol on the small ship *Matthew* in May 1497, with a crew of 18 men. The expedition made landfall in North America on June 24, the area is hypothesized to be southern Labrador, the island of Newfoundland or Cape Breton Island. But Cabot was Italian by birth and only a late expatriate to England. Besides, it was not a circumnavigation of the sort that Magellan would attempt amidst huge and widespread applause about 20 years later and although Magellan was killed in Philippines on 27 April 1521, that set a phenomenal precedent, the British answer to the like of which would only be served by Sir Francis Drake who, during 1577-80, circumnavigated the globe and frantically searched for the elusive Great Southern Continent, destroying Spanish naval bases in his way. He was an undisputed national figure.

^{iv} Hakluyt's public disparagement of Charles Chester, the 'scurrilous tavern railer' of the 1590s is in fact the chief critical purpose of Steggle's essay: Chester was somehow made privy to some sensitive diplomatic information, rubbed unwitting shoulders with the Spanish and was branded traitor by Hakluyt.

^v For a more detailed study of state-induced censorship of printed documents in Sixteenth Century Spain and the way it modulated the 'official' Spanish attitude to the same, consult Bujanda, 51-63

^{vi} Elaborate and intricate networks of censorship existed and were mutually co-dependent: they manifested to regulate and manage 'preferred flow of information' that was supposed to suit the authority and had far-reaching implications in the publication as well as dissemination of exploration accounts, along with the sort of information they'd contain.

^{vii} *Inter Caetera* was conceived to ratify the Treaty of Tordesillas (1794) between Spain and Portugal, and the Pope also being the head of the notorious Borgia clan, his interests in this matter were self-evident. However, such an arbitrary decree could not go uncontested. In 1608 the twenty-five-year-old Dutch legal theorist Hugo Grotius published *Mare Liberum*, a tract in which he protested against this Spanish-Portuguese monopoly over what was increasingly turning out to be lucrative commercial channels and argued in favour of the 'free sea' that would allow free exploration as well as trade opportunities for all Christian nations. The British response, albeit belated, to the Continent were of course Sir Francis Drake and Humphrey Gilbert both of whom started pushing the proverbial envelop from 1576 and initiated a chain of events that'd inevitably result in a prolonged and twisted history of naval confrontations and blockades and treaties and repudiation of treaties.

^{viii} "Mr Kendall's watch" refers to the watch of Larcum Kendall (1721-1795), the British watchmaker. Cook got his hands on the first prototype, finished in 1769, and it cost a staggering £500. But the money spent was amply recompensed in terms of its practical dividend; as Cook himself admitted:

"Mr Kendal's Watch has exceeded the expectations of its most Zealous advocate (qtd. in *Beaglehole* 319)."

^{ix} Besides the obvious telescope that was always being modified across the Continent, here are some examples of innovative feats of mechanical engineering that can be attributed to the British technicians and innovators: considerable success was achieved in measurements in micrometers by John Bird (1709-1776), noted for the development of techniques for improving the accuracy of engraved divisions on clock dial-plates and the arc plates of quadrants and sextants. He constructed the astronomical quadrant used by James Cook at Tahiti to observe the Transit of Venus in June 1769. In the first half of the century the mechanical

geniuses George Graham (1675-1751), the astronomer who devised the method of continual bisection and John Hadley (1682- 1744), the inventor of Hadley's quadrant, the inventor of octant, later to be refined by Captain John Campbell into the sextant were notable figures. Hadley went on to become the vice-president of the Royal Society and built the first Gregorian telescope in 1721; John Bird, the Durham weaver who came to London and worked under Graham, became a master himself, and had his *Method of Dividing Astronomical Instruments* published by the Board of Longitude in 1767; John Dollond (1706-61), the silk-weaver interested in astronomy and optics, went into the optical trade with his son Peter (1730-1820), and in 1758 invented the achromatic telescope; Edward Nairne (1726-1806), who worked independently on electricity, and published papers in the *Philosophical Transactions*; Jesse Ramsden (1735-1800) created one of the first high-quality dividing engines- the list could only be lengthened.

^x For a brief, reader-friendly, but historically accurate commentary on the steady 'formation' of the textual America in terms of accumulation of topographical, cartographical and geographical data, see Zerubavel 36-66.

^{xi} For a cursory yet useful delineation of such networks of scholarly correspondence and the illustrious names that are associated with such an ambitious project, see Harris 347-55.

^{xii} Merton has painstakingly surveyed the Dictionary of National Biography (D. N. B.) to conduct a "select occupational census" of people who have managed to achieve a "measurable degree of distinction" (8) in the British history. His analyses show that during and after the Restoration a state-encouraged attention to science (Charles II himself had a keen interest in chemistry and navigation), -which is reflected in the data concerning shifts of vocational interests-was a real condition not only in England, but across the Continent. This excitement was shared by other nations with adequate maritime capabilities and it was a prime factor that contributed to the accelerated rate of explorations in the latter part of the century.

^{xiii} "...It is hardly too much to say that for, at any rate, the four years from 1642 to 1646 the English went mad about military matters. Military figures and metaphors abounded in the language and literature of the day, and were used by none more effectively than by John Milton (Fortescue 279)."

^{xiv} It needs to be remembered that the Society conscientiously maintained its commitment to the enrichment of academic discourse, as is apparent from the way it is documented:

"It being the Design of the R. Society, for the better attaining the End of their Institution, to study Nature rather than Books, and from Observations, made of the Phenomena and Effects she presents, to compose such a History of Her, as may hereafter serve to build a Solid and Useful Philosophy upon ... (qtd. in Smethurst 23)."

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