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The Smithsonian Quilt Controversy: Cultural Dislocation

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My paper documents the recent Smithsonian Controversy, explaining the debate and explicating the significance of the dispute in terms of the cultural and ideological issues it raises. What seems like a trivial issue to the Smithsonian represents a major concern in the quilting community because, as I will argue in this paper, the controversy speaks to how we perceive quilts, what purpose we think they serve, and what cultural meaning we assign to them.

More specifically, the reproductions enact a cultural dislocation of quilts that can be formulated in terms of who controls them. The controversy involves a series of dislocations, disturbing shifts in our cultural perception of quilts: from control by those who make them, primarily women, to control by commercial enterprise; from focus on the quiltmaker to emphasis on the quilt; in other words, from quilt as process to quilt as product. There's also a shift from the quilt embedded in its historical and cultural conditions to the quilt isolated and even alienated from its context; and lastly a shift takes place from quilt as art to quilt as craft. Each of these shifts represents a slippage that undermines the diligent efforts of quilt scholars and enthusiasts to give quilts, and the women's culture they represent, their rightful place in American society.

I wish to argue, then that the Smithsonian Controversy represents a struggle over women's history, its place, purpose, and significance.

We can begin to understand the Smithsonian Controversy if we compare two pages from the 1992 Christmas edition of the Lands' End *Coming Home* Catalog, both of them advertising hand-made quilts. The catalog devotes an entire page to one quilt named The Ameri-

Figure 1. American Eagle quilt from *Lands' End* Coming Home Catalog (Christmas 1992), 34.

can Eagle quilt.[1] (Figure 1) The words "America" or "American" appear twelve times in the text, in bold print three times. The text specifically names the places where the quilt was made as well as the groups who put it together—Bare Soldiers Quilters Co-op of

North Dakota, Cabin Creek Quilting Co-op of West Virginia, and the Freedom Quilting Bee in Alabama. Particular quilters are named: Mary Ann Chasing Hawk Helper from North Dakota, Bessie Keen from West Virginia, and Lucy Pettway from Alabama, along with photos of them at work, all smiles and sunlight. To underscore their individuality, the named quilters are also quoted: "I started making blankets for my family," says Mary Ann, "I make quilts for our ceremonies too."

We are told that only fifty quilts will be made available to shoppers at a price of $800—a reasonable, but not cheap price for a hand-made, queen-size quilt. Everything in this full-page advertisement underscores not only the unique nature of this particular quilt, its artistic and aesthetic value, but also the importance and individuality of the quilters who make the quilts.

Four pages later, we find a two-page spread of six quilts constructed, we're told, by "seamstresses that would machine piece the traditional ginghams and calicos." [2] (Figure 2) In contrast to the American Eagle quilt, which was a celebration of individuality, these seven quilts are noticeable for their anonymity. The names of particular quilters and their location are not mentioned; we have no photos of the quilters at work, no quotes about the pleasures of the work, and we are not told the supply is limited. The word "American" is conspicuous by its absence. If we look carefully, buried in the brief description of each quilt, we find the single word "imported." The cost of one of these queen-size quilts? Between $190 and $230 each.

This comparison illustrates a major controversy in the quilting world that concerns importing cheap quilts from China, advertised as hand-made, meaning machine pieced and hand quilted, and based on traditional American designs. Imported Chinese quilts have been flooding the American market for a number of years, but the issue reached a crisis in July 1991 when the Smithsonian Institution licensed an import company named American Pacific Enterprises Inc. to reproduce four quilts a year over a three-year period from their collection of American heirloom quilts. The Smithsonian reproductions, manufactured in China, are sold through a number of catalogs and department stores.[3] Each quilt was originally accompanied by a registration card, and a mock certificate of authenticity. How-

Figure 2. Chinese quilts from *Lands' End* Coming Home Catalog (Christmas 1992), 38–39.

ever, the quilts contained no markings to indicate that they were not American made.

What began as general grumblings among quilters escalated to a battle cry and the Smithsonian Controversy was officially named. The Smithsonian Controversy brought some of the quilt world's most articulate, powerful, and outspoken representatives to the fore, but it's important to note that the voices of many quilters who are deeply affected by the flood of imports often go unheard. The two hundred or so participants in Cabin Creek Quilters, a co-op directed by James Thibeault, for example, are mostly rural women in West Virginia whose livelihoods depend upon making and selling quilts. James Thibeault's spring 1992 road trip across the country, displaying the All American Eagle quilt described earlier, represents one effort to give voice to quilters who are often invisible in the quilting world. I want to acknowledge here that my position as a white, middle-class academic means that I cannot cover every aspect of this issue. We need to hear a variety of perspectives, and we should be especially sensitive to the marginal and silenced voices if we are to fully understand the impact of imported quilts on the very diverse American quilting community.

Although my focus here lies with a particular interpretation of the Smithsonian Controversy, I will touch on some of the more general issues regarding Chinese imports and their impact on the American market. Resistance to the imports began as a grassroots movement on the part of quiltmakers who saw their livelihoods threatened. As early as October 1991, for example, Cabin Creek hosted a conference entitled "National meeting on co-operatives and their futures," inviting representatives from four co-ops to attend in order to discuss the threat of imports on local businesses. The controversy became a concern to a wider cross-section of quilters, however, when the Smithsonian quilts were replicated.

We need to begin by briefly looking at the historical and cultural context of the controversy. In other words, why did the Smithsonian decide to reproduce quilts at that particular time? Since Richard Nixon's much publicized trip in the seventies, China has enjoyed Most Favored Trading Nation status. Despite China's appalling human rights record, MFN status was maintained by Reagan and later

Bush, who was himself an ambassador to China before becoming president. The state-run economy of China means goods can be priced low enough to penetrate any market, and textiles are among its top exports, with more than $460 million shipped to the U.S. in 1990.[4]

Politics coincided with finance as quilts have become increasingly fashionable. "Quilts are the hottest things going right now," said a buyer for Lee Jay Bed and Bath, "People are looking for that sense of tradition." The desire for "cocooning," to use the term employed by *Home Furnishings Daily* and the "passion for Americana" made this a profitable time to sell quilts.[5] Jared Block, owner of American Pacific, not only the main importer of Chinese quilts to this country, but also the company with whom the Smithsonian signed their initial contract, says, "We have been in China for eight years. . . .We have millions of dollars of piece goods sitting in China. We have a full-time office there, staffed by two Americans and 10 Chinese to control the volume and movement of piece goods and finished products. . . . We're doing 100,000 quilts a month from China."[6]

Selling imported quilts is obviously big business. Four years ago, American Pacific had annual sales estimated at just under $15 million. *Home Furnishings Daily* reckoned the company's 1992 sales would reach $100 million. The company, realizing the selling potential of quilts, now manufactures baby quilts, pillows, seasonal items, and is talking of opening shops. No wonder the Smithsonian saw imported quilts as a profitable way to increase their revenues. It's also worth noting that while powerful unions and lobbyists protect other industries—peanut butter imported from China is one example of a product that was stopped—quilts have traditionally been an open field for importers. We can frame this as a gender issue in that quilts are primarily a woman's product, and until fairly recently were not protected by the kind of lobbying that is part and parcel of many other businesses.

It was the contract between the Smithsonian and American Pacific that galvanized quilters across the nation to begin protesting in 1991 and led to the much publicized meeting on April 10, 1992 between fifteen leaders in the U.S. quilting community, (including

author Jinny Beyer; director of the Houston Quilt Market and Festival, Karey Bresenhan; editor of *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, Bonnie Leman; and president of the National Quilting Association, Marie Salazar) and Smithsonian personnel. Such a gathering of the top names in the quilting world was unprecedented, marking the gravity of the situation from the quilters' point of view. They asked the Smithsonian to revoke the contract, but the institution refused on the grounds that they had already signed a three-year agreement. The museum representatives did concede to stamp each quilt with indelible ink indicating where the quilts were made, to no longer use registration cards, and to delete such language as "heirloom" and "American heritage" from their advertising. Although the quilters were unsuccessful in achieving their main aim at that time—of discontinuing the sale of imports—the museum's concessions effected a minor victory in terms of distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate documentation of quilts.

What's wrong with reproducing historically important quilts? Surely quilts function like anything else that a museum reproduces to sell in its shop. The Smithsonian, after all, has licensing agreements with more than sixty American companies to reproduce or adapt items in their collection for sale. No one, the Smithsonian argues, is likely to mistake the reproduction for the original. Even some members of the quilting community question the harm done by selling reproductions. Elly Sienkiewicz wrote in *Blanket Statements*, the newsletter for the American Quilt Study Group,

> As one who has a Picasso print in her living room, and who listens to taped performances of Mozart, I enjoy these reproductions thoroughly. This despite the fact that those privy to the real thing know that what I thereby enjoy are pale imitations. [7]

The Smithsonian goes further to argue that not only are reproductions harmless, they effect much good. For example, Beverly Addington of the museum's Product Development Office describes the reproductions as "part of an educational process. We want people to know the significance of the quilt." [8] Roger Kennedy, then director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, adds:

> We also treasure our collections and wish to share them more broadly—not everyone can get to Washington and not all objects are on display. When we authorize such products, our goal is to heighten awareness of our collections and educate about a particular technique or art form. We seek to reach the highest possible audience. [9]

Reproduction quilts, the argument goes, serve as an inspiration for artists, an education for the general public, and represent a democratization of quilts, making available what would only be accessible to an elite in the original. That sounds fair enough until we look a little closer.

What seemed like a storm in a teacup to the Smithsonian represented a major concern to some sections of the quilting community because the controversy speaks to how we perceive quilts, what purpose we think they serve, and the cultural meaning we assign to them. More specifically, I will argue here that the reproductions enact a cultural dislocation of quilts that can be formulated in terms of who controls them. The controversy involves a series of dislocations, disturbing shifts in our cultural perception of quilts: from control by those who make them (primarily women), to control by commercial enterprise; from focus on the quiltmaker to emphasis on the quilt; in other words, from quilt as process to quilt as product. There is also a shift from the quilt embedded in its historical and cultural conditions to the quilt isolated and even alienated from its context; and lastly a shift from quilt as art to quilt as craft. Each of these shifts represents a slippage that undermines the diligent efforts of quilt scholars and enthusiasts to give quilts, and the women's culture they represent, their rightful place in American culture. I wish to argue, then, that the Smithsonian Controversy represents a struggle over women's history, its place, purpose, and significance.

Quilters often frame their outrage over the Smithsonian reproductions in terms of a sacred violation. Quilt scholar Virginia Gunn, for example, commented that the museum was "sending an icon to be mass produced," and Martha Waterman said:

> Many of us who make and study quilts believe that our national heritage of quilts is sacred, meant to be valued, protected, and preserved by each generation for the next.[10]

That sacred element is what Marxist philosopher and critic, Walter Benjamin, names an "aura," which he argues is essential to any work of art. He defines a work's aura as a combination of its uniqueness and its context, without which it is stripped of that which makes it art:

> Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership. [11]

The aura is particularly significant in the case of quilts because these textiles were often also women's texts, their only way to speak, to tell their stories, and to record their existence. Would we, for example, know anything about Harriet Powers, one of whose quilts the Smithsonian reproduced and about which I will say more later, if she had not made her Bible quilt? I doubt it.

Placing a quilt in its context, acknowledging in other words its aura, becomes a way to reclaim women's history. As Bonnie Leman said in a recent editorial of *Quilters' Newsletter Magazine*:

> Antique quilts are cultural documents providing information about people's daily lives, about the way women of all classes and ages experienced and reacted to their world in the 18th-, 19th-, and 20th-century America. [12]

When quilts are stripped of their context what we lose is their textuality. In other words, women's history and culture are muted and even silenced, obliterated as insignificant.

Such a discounting of the cultural and historical context of a quilt also undermines the work of quilt scholars for the last twenty years who have labored to recover the history of both quilts and their makers. The reproductions become objects without a history whose makers are rendered invisible and anonymous, which is exactly what quilt scholars have worked to change.

While the quilters tried to emphasize the gravity of the situation, the Smithsonian took the patriarchal role of dismissing the women's

concerns as trivial, blown out of proportion, patronizing them with comments such as Roger Kennedy's closing summary of the meeting as "a little caper," or silencing them by refusing to set up a follow-up meeting.[13]

Trivializing the women's concerns reflects a similar reducing effect on the quilts themselves. Since Jonathan Holstein's landmark 1971 exhibition of quilts at the Whitney Museum of American Art, quilts have been recognized not merely as craft, but in some cases as art. The Smithsonian imports, however, undermine that cultural prestige by undoing the quilt's status as art. To understand why, we need to turn again to Walter Benjamin. In his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he argues that mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the rest of society to that art. Why? Because art jolts our everyday perceptions whereas reproductions lull us. As Benjamin says, "The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion."[14] Benjamin argues that we react *en masse* to reproductions, but individually to unique art. The reproductions don't challenge us to rethink anything, but rather confirm nostalgic myths about an America long gone, one that probably never existed.

As a craft rather than an art, the artist or, more particularly here, the quilter, becomes less significant, and in the case of the imports, is erased entirely from the quiltmaking process: the maker becomes dislocated from the product he or she makes. At the April meeting between quilters and Smithsonian personnel, a representative from American Pacific Imports was repeatedly asked about the working conditions of the Chinese quiltmakers who produce the Smithsonian copies, but her answer was always "I don't know." Such an answer suggests that either the company cares very little for the Chinese laborers, or that they have reason not to disclose what information is available to them.

We know, however, that Chinese manufacturing practices turn a blind eye to worker safety and child labor laws, and they pay employees poorly. While the hourly average wage in the U.S. for a textile worker is $6.08, it's a mere 25 cents in China, far lower than in Mexico, Hong Kong, or Haiti. The Chinese working conditions are

quite rightly a matter of concern to American quilters for some similarities exist between the two groups of women workers.

The parallels between American quilters and Chinese laborers can be made most powerfully through a specific example.[15] The Smithsonian chose to copy Harriet Powers' "Bible Quilt" for reproduction, a quilt that Viola Canady, founder of the Daughters of Dorcas, described as "the most precious thing we had." [16] Born a slave in 1837, Harriet Powers inscribed her world view in fabric, creating applique block quilts of significant historical and Biblical events. Powers sold the quilt now housed in the Smithsonian to Jennie Smith, a white school teacher, for a mere five dollars in 1890. She rejected Smith's initial offer four years earlier because, as Smith says, it was "the darling offspring of her brain." Why did she sell it? "Owin' to de hardness of de times," Powers told Smith.[17] One wonders if Chinese laborers make quilts for the American market for much the same reason—owin' to de hardness of de times. How ironic that the work of one oppressed woman in the 1800s should be reproduced by many others who are similarly exploited.

Because of our sophisticated communication networks, we live in a spider's web of a world—if a fly lands in one part, the whole web quivers. We can no longer choose to ignore the plight of others, particularly, if we are quilters, the working conditions of other women quilters. Just as American quilters have fought to honor and value quilters in the Western world, we cannot turn our backs on the exploitation of women quilting in Asia. American quilters have an interest and a responsibility to oppose the world-wide problem of women's oppressive working conditions, especially textile workers who make up a global enterprise that exploits women.

The choice of Harriet Powers' quilt also reinforces what quilt scholar Cuesta Benberry argues in *Always There* is a false picture of African-American quilting as a limited and naive folk art. She says,

> There was a need to dispel certain myths that had developed about African-American quilts, to examine some of the influences on these creations, to portray the enormous diversity that characterized black-made quilts, and, when possible, give voice to the quiltmakers themselves. [18]

Although Powers' work is important as one of the few surviving nineteenth-century black American quilts, it does not represent all African-American quilting.

Indeed, we have only to look at Elizabeth Keckley, who was born a slave but worked for four years as a needlewoman for Mrs. Lincoln in the White House, producing a number of sophisticated quilts, to realize that our myths about African-American quilting are misplaced. Keckley's quilts demonstrate the argument Benberry makes, that African and European influences often blend, thus making the whole process of defining African-American quilts a complex business. By selecting only one, unique African-American quilt that reinforces certain stereotypes, the Smithsonian reproductions oversimplify quilt history to the point that it's misleading, rather than, as Roger Kennedy suggested, educating people about quilts.

The alienation of quilter from her quilt is underlined by the irony that those who make the quilts can no longer actually afford them. If we turn back to the Lands' End "American Eagle" advertisement, we read that Mary Ann Chasing Hawk Helper makes the $800 quilts to "pay the rent and pay for food." As Walter Benjamin says of any such capitalist system, "This market, where [the worker] offers not only [her] labor but also [her] whole self, [her] heart and soul, is beyond [her] reach."[19] I wonder if Mary Ann Chasing Hawk Helper can afford to buy the quilts she is making.

By dislocating the quilter from the quilt, the quilter loses control of the product she makes as it passes into the hands of business people who may, or may not, care for quilts and quilt culture. "The quilt makers and preservers will have to work much harder at getting their point across because it is now the users and consumers who have the ultimate—read financial—control of the American quilt," says Martha Waterman.[20] Historically women have not been able to control their property, their bodies, their very lives. Their voices have not been heard or taken into account. Part of quilt scholarship concerns reclaiming some cultural power through quilts—who possesses them, what happens to them, how they are used. The anonymity of the workers, their possibly oppressive working conditions, and the lack of control both in China and the States on the part of quilters

represents a return to a cultural status women have fought long and hard to escape.

No longer representing women's culture, in the control of business, quilts become meaningful in terms primarily of profit. Stripped of their aura, their cultural context, taken out of the control of those who make and preserve them, quilts take on quite a different meaning. Benjamin explains,

> The instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics. [21]

That's an important shift. The quilt is valued not for its ritual purpose, which in this case could be defined as the record of women's history, but as a political move to make money.

And who is making most of the money? Not the quilters. There are more equitable models for selling quilts, as we see in the case of the American quilting co-ops, groups which consciously choose to do business in ways that honor both the quilt and the maker.

Not only quiltmakers, but also collectors and dealers make a living from American quilts, and their livelihood, too, is threatened by the flood of cheap imports. Quilt shop owner, Karey Bresenhan, reckons the U.S. suffered a loss of about $46 million in one year alone in domestic quilt sales. Bresenhan also points out the irony of the source of competition: "Our tax dollars should not be used to cut our own throats," she says.[22] The Smithsonian receives 85 percent of its funding from tax dollars, $429.2 million in fiscal 1992, $332 million of which was taxpayers' money. The museum argues that the copied quilts represent added income for the Smithsonian: $500,000 to $750,000 over the life of the three-year contract, which they say is plowed back into the Textile Division.[23] However, put into perspective, those thousands represent only a fraction of the museum's overall operating costs. Does the amount made, and the use it's put to, justify the sense of disruption and betrayal felt in the quilting community? The museum believes it is justified; quilters feel it is not.

The question I've asked throughout this paper is who controls quilts and what difference does that make? There's another, more

elemental question that the Smithsonian Controversy raises, and that is, what is a quilt? I have argued that a quilt is more than a material object; it's also a cultural concept. Quilts, like many cultural artifacts, function as a mirror which reflects how we view ourselves. Literary critic Elaine Showalter, for example, argues that the quilt has replaced the metaphor of the melting pot as we focus increasingly on cultural diversity in this country:

> Americans needed a new metaphor of national identity, one that acknowledged ethnic difference, heterogeneity, and multiplicity, that incorporated contemporary concerns for gender, race and class. [24]

Quilts are no longer simply bed coverings. They have become important cultural metaphors.

The quilters' meeting with Smithsonian representatives continued a well-established tradition of employing quilts as a vehicle for political action. The social and political work of nineteenth century quilts and quilters, for example, is marvelously documented in the book, *Hearts and Hands*. However, twentieth-century quilters have a little more sophisticated leverage than their nineteenth-century sisters: a group of quilters out of Knoxville, led by Linda Claussen, and calling themselves the American Quilt Defense Fund, hired a lobbyist to negotiate with the Smithsonian.

Rather than take an adversarial role, AQDF is interested in cooperating with the Smithsonian to work together towards establishing an ongoing discussion of quilts and their scholarship, as we can see reflected in the agreements reached by both parties. In March 1993, the museum agreed to reproduce only three more quilts abroad even though the original contract with American Pacific allowed for twelve more. "This was a major victory for the quilt world and could only have been accomplished by a joint effort which ultimately involved more than 25,000 protest signatures on 500 petitions presented by them to the Smithsonian."[25] Those three quilts will be selected with the help of an advisory panel of five quilters, taken from a list provided by the American Quilt Defense Fund. The other quilts remaining in the contract will be made in this country by quilting co-operatives. The first, Harvest Sun, is in production with Cabin Creek Quilters, and sold through Lands' End. (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Harvest Sun quilt from *Lands' End* Coming Home Catalog (Fall 1993), 2–3.

AQDF has also agreed to work with other quilting organizations to establish a quilt legacy program to generate funding for Smithsonian quilt programs, involving exhibitions, conservation, and education. Under discussion is the possibility of a major quilt exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in 1997, as well as the construction of a large quilt exhibit case that will allow continuous display of parts of the collection.

In some ways the Smithsonian Controversy acted as a lightning rod, mobilizing the quilting community into action as quilters realize the need to collect and preserve, more consciously than ever, the American quilt heritage. For example, the Alliance for American Quilts, established by Shelly Zegart, Eunice Ray, Karey Bresenhan, and Nancy O'Bryant, hopes to develop an American Quilt History Center and an International Quilt Index, while James Thibeault has plans to create an American Quilt Center for cooperatives.

I'd like to come full circle by taking a look at this fall's Lands' End "Coming Home" catalog in order to illustrate the effect of the Smithsonian controversy in terms of acknowledging women's culture and heritage through quilts. Notice that this year the headline names the quilter, her location, and even a date.[26] The text deliberately places the quilt in its historical context, connecting quilt with quilter:

> Not much is known of Fanny Gatewood Grimes, except that she came from Logan County, Kentucky, a place that's famous for quiltmaking to this very day, she was married to Henry Grimes and sometime between 1875 and 1890, she stitched a marvelous quilt from fine wool challis and crepe. Almost 100 years later, Fanny's granddaughter donated her quilt to the Smithsonian. [27]

The two page spread then goes on to describe how Lands' End came to copy this quilt, the subtext being that the quilt was respected at all times, with particular attention paid to faithful rendition of the original:

> Since we could neither photograph the quilt nor remove it from the museum, we had to fly our quilters to Washington, DC, to make drawings of the pattern and study the colors. We couldn't find a source for the antique wool so we had to match the colors in modern cotton, and that took extra time. After a few false starts, everything was correct right down to the brick red ground. The colors were all accepted and we finally received the Smithsonian's approval. [28]

Unlike the year before, the following page illustrating Chinese quilts is accompanied by a picture of a Lands' End quality management representative talking to Chinese people. We can't tell much from this very small photograph, but it certainly intends to allay our fears concerning what James Thibeault described as "thousands of people quilt[ing] in barns in China for pennies a day." [29]

This comparison between the catalogs from 1992 and 1993 would suggest that the Smithsonian Controversy has effected substantial changes in our cultural perception of quilts, but it's probably too early to make such claims. However, if it's done no more than galvanize quilters into more pro-active protection of quilts, and engen-

dered a growing public awareness of quilts as precious cultural artifacts, some good has come out of the controversy.

I'd like to close by asking a series of questions, focused around four issues I've raised in this paper. First, how can American quilters fill the need Chinese quilts answer? Should we even try? Second, in terms of a cultural heritage, at what point do we object to the replication of a museum quality quilt ? What if patterns or kits were made available? What, in other words, constitutes acceptable copying, and what does not? What are our criteria for making that decision? Third, how can we construct forums in the quilting community through which traditionally silent voices can be heard? In other words, should we look at the class implications of the controversy? While some of us go to the Smithsonian, or write papers such as this, many of the women quilting for a living in rural West Virginia aren't heard even though their lives are deeply affected. We could say that the people who are most hurt are those with the least voice. Last, is the crisis over, or do we need to take further steps to protect American quilts and those who make them?

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