

The Aesthetics of Race and Relativity in A. Van Jordan's *Quantum Lyrics*

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Abstract

Van Jordan uses physics in his poetry to explore many sub-texts—such as, race in American society, gender, autobiographical memories of youth, as well as the story of Albert Einstein's marriage to his first wife. Van Jordan examines the possibility that Einstein's wife may have helped in discovering the theory of relativity despite the fact that Einstein failed to give her any credit for doing so. The poet's stories of his personal memories of experiencing youthful love and disillusionment, along with the poet's unfortunate encounters with racism in America, are juxtaposed in the *Quantum Lyrics* beside the story of Albert Einstein's personal life. The poet moves back and forth in the volume between the language of music and the language of science as a means of exploring how far either one can penetrate to the core of the human experience.

[**Keywords:** A. Van Jordan, *Quantum Lyrics*, Einstein, theory of relativity]

Introduction

The poet A. Van Jordan in his collection, *Quantum Lyrics*, uses Albert Einstein's theory of relativity to explore the meaning, boundaries, and relationship of race and art in American society. If neither A. Van Jordan nor his readers are scientists but they are familiar with the aesthetics of poetry, how is it that we are able to take in, absorb, and explore Einstein's theories via the conduit of art? One way is that Van Jordan weaves together with brilliance and sophistication of style *biographical sketches* of Einstein's personal life along with *autobiographical impressions* of a poet's life, and in doing so Van Jordan approaches the painful subject of how America has created reified negative images of race for African Americans as well as for Jewish Americans. Henry B. Wonham in *Criticism and the Color Line* argues, "The idea of 'America' has been a way of assuming cultural, historical, and narrative coherence, and in the process, of constraining the interpretation of facts and of texts" (46). In *Quantum Lyrics*, Van Jordan uses the language of poetry to investigate how scientific narratives—also a part of historical narrative and text—can be used to depict seemingly non-scientific elements of life. Can a man's life be reduced to fractals? In the poem "Fractals," Van Jordan asks just this by writing, "The sun falls like a hemline breaking/Over a man's shoe: I finally notice how/The horizon's line drapes in place" (94). Can a woman's desire to gain the attention of an absent husband be explained in the same way as the scientist analyzes light particles? Can falling in and out love be exchanged or interchanged with the ideas of time travel? Maybe not, but

Quantum Lyrics explores the possibility and in doing so the poet asks a brave question (or, at least a 'brave new world' kind of question)—can the same language poets use in building their aesthetics be exchanged for the language of the scientist conducting experiments? What can the poet know of the reality of what stands behind the phenomena of the human mind as it experiences its own existence in terms of love, denial, rejection, fear, violence, and socially in terms of the experience of race? How can a theory of relativity—Einstein's theory—approach the *relativism of everyday life as we really live it*? These are the questions that *Quantum Lyrics* raises for readers.

For those readers who may be less familiar with Van Jordan's work, *Quantum Lyrics* is his third book of poems published; his other works include *Rise* and *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A*. In all of Van Jordan's poetry, he makes his presence felt as a current African American poet. Between the lines of a Van Jordan poem it is easy to "see" or even "hear" the syncopated influences of other contemporary African American poets, such as Sonia Sanchez and Cornelius Eady. Van Jordan confesses to having been greatly inspired by both writers during his first start as a poet. Other Influences in Van Jordan's development as a poet include his family, his life experiences growing up in the Midwest (Akron, Ohio), and generational stories of the South that were passed down to him by his parent. Van Jordan's poetry combines family history, personal experience, and love of African American music, especially jazz. Aesthetically, in Van Jordan's first two poetry books, music as well as heroic characters form two of the strongest components, but so does family knowledge of the South's racism. In a 2004 interview by Charles Henry Rowell, Van Jordan described how historical memory and family memory informs his poetry.

One: growing up in Akron, Ohio, is probably as close to Mississippi or Alabama or Louisiana, as one can get in the Midwest; there are so many people from the South who live there or who made their homes there during the Great Migration. There's a great deal of the tradition or the culture, I should say, of the South that still resides in the west side of Akron. My mother came from Alexandria, Louisiana. My father is from Midway, Alabama. But my parents, you have to understand, left the South, both of them, for different reasons as teens. They're both in their seventies, and I have to tell you, they absolutely hate the South. And it's because of that experience they had from their youth that now they pretty much reject it. So when you ask about the South and my understanding of it, you have to understand how my household informed my understanding of it. I don't have any romantic notions about the South (913).

These details of the South, the imprints of his parents' memories upon his own soul, and the importance of African American music as a historical art form (as an aesthetics of historical memory) inform his first two volumes of poetry. In fact,

in reference to music as art, memory, and history Van Jordan has been quoted as saying, "I'm looking at the history of African-Americans on this soil through music (Rowell 909-910)." The way that Van Jordan uses African American music as an aesthetic form is similar to the way that Paul Gilroy in the *Black Atlantic* explains the authority of the form; for, Gilroy writes, "The power of music in developing black struggles by communicating information, organizing consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency, whether individual or collective, defensive or transformational, demands attention to both the formal attributes of this expressive culture and its distinctive moral basis (36)" But certainly the use of a community's production of music (as social text) and family stories seems an expected move by a poet; much less expected is the move that Van Jordan makes in *Quantum Lyrics* to use the language of the scientist to express concerns about how race is handled in America as well as concerns about the emotive life of the poet.

For example, if we consider the poem, "Richard P. Feynman Lecture: Intro to Symmetry," Van Jordan begins it by writing, "Love begins in the streets with vibration and ends behind closed doors in jealousy. Creation and destruction" (15). The image is initially one of music; when we read or hear the word vibration we are likely to imagine an instrument's vibration; the movement of sound across strings. Yet, the poet, while playing upon that image of the musical, turns to another image, that of the mathematical, and it is this second image that dominates the poem. For he writes, "What do we pray for but the equation that helps us make sense of what happens in our daily lives? What do we believe in if not that which tells us we're alive? Math is spirit and spirit is faith in numbers; both take us to the edge but no further than we can imagine." By invoking the image of the mathematical, Van Jordan turns around and brings the issue to further level of development, that of faith. But faith in what—in God, in science, in the vibrations of the universe? He writes in the poem's next line, "You don't believe in math? Try to figure the velocity of Earth's orbit around the Sun to land a man on the Moon without it. You don't believe in God? Try to use math to calculate what the eye does every second of any given moment." The poem itself is written in the form of prose and visually on the page does not look like a poem in the sense of containing expected line breaks. This too, the prose format is an aesthetic technique, whereby the poet is able to collapse several concepts into one. As the poem progresses, Van Jordan moves into the language of the physicist, talking about love from the standpoint of bodies colliding, but as he uses the language he conceals the objectivity of scientific language by masking it with the language of subjectivity—the poet's own subjectivity. For he writes, "Mysteries inside mysteries in our own bodies of which we can't make sense, another world waiting for a religion or calculus to explain." If we want explanations of how we operate, knowing mathematical equations is not enough; instead we need to "Look into any mirror; it's like sitting in a theater watching a

silent movie, but you're the one pantomiming your story." Here, we see the importance of personal story surface but the self-knowledge produced by the self through knowing one's own story—or telling it—is put into the less than authentic language of what science produces for popular culture, that of technology producing film and reified moving images of otherwise living things—people—on screen. This idea is also present in the poem "Einstein Ruminates on Relativity" where he conflates Charlie Chaplin of Einstein's era with the mustached physicist.

Charlie Chaplin tells me
That the world loves him
Because they understand him
And the world loves me (55).

But what is the grand reception of the world for the physicist when there are no answers to the toughest questions life present? Van Jordan tells us if we really want to understand Einstein's theory of relativity we need to observe ourselves and other people—it is in the shifting notions people hold, including how easily love can be lost and slip away that we come to intimately know just what the concept of relativity really means. Thus, relativity in physics becomes in the poem interchangeable with social relativism, wherein absolutes (including values, ethics, and morals) do not firmly exist but are in flux, always sliding, always tilted toward the side of what is not quite reasonable nor just.

Because they don't, which doesn't seem fair
But it's true: This is relativity.
Journalists ask for a definition,
But the answers are all around (55).

The idea Van Jordan continues to push toward in the poem is how love's loss can reveal how time is *felt to operate* even if it cannot explain the equation of time in relationship to mass. The poem uses science to return to the *emotional experiential dimensions of time*, a part that Einstein was unable to comprehend in his own relationships just as the common person tend to be perplexed by it.

A woman loves you for a lifetime
And it feels like a day; she tells you
She's leaving, breaking it off,
And that day feels like a lifetime (55).

Van Jordan ends the poem by leaving the aesthetics of science behind and trading it in for the aesthetics of music; thus, the aesthetics of physical time is replaced at the poem's end by the aesthetics of sound. But through the reception of sound, and the intersection of sound with emotion, the physical dimension of time *seems* to slow down though it literally never does slow down.

Passing slowly. I listen to Armstrong
Play his cornet and it sounds
Like a Wednesday afternoon in heaven;

Some hear Armstrong play (55).

Returning to the poem “Richard P. Feynman Lecture: Intro to Symmetry,” it falls into the language of discovery, of that kind of epistemological awareness created by wanting to know how one’s own subjectivity overlaps and submerges with that of another’s subjectivity. And so, Van Jordan writes in the poem, “You cannot solve for the use of one side of the body over the other, so there is no single voice that emits from it. You cannot solve for the harmonics of the dual body, facing each other, both inquisitive.” Thus, Van Jordan completes the poem by returning to the problems physics cannot answer, “You cannot solve for the marriage of opposites, their fit, their match, their endlessness. You cannot solve for the morning stretch that calls to both sides, first this one, then that one, aligning the day.” At the poem’s end, he decides that music has more awareness in his use of rhythm than physics has in its explanation of how rhythm is produced, “You cannot solve for the bass of one hand and the treble of the other, both keeping rhythm hostage under the skin of the bongo.” There is a constant oscillation throughout the poems of *Quantum Lyrics* between science and music.

Throughout the whole of *Quantum Lyrics* Van Jordan continues to rely upon African American music to convey communal memories, as well as express the poet’s desire to explore the depths of love and the disillusionment of love and of fear and trauma, but the approach is also extended to include an added dimension to his aesthetics—the language of Einstein’s theories to capture the feelings of racial trauma in America. Biographical details of Einstein are used in *Quantum Lyrics* as well as autobiographical memory from Van Jordan’s life; this technique indicates the worth of telling one’s story but also the human value of realizing the points of continuity between one’s own story and the stories of others. For Van Jordan, autobiographical memory does not stand apart from that of the historicity of African Americans nor does it stand in isolation from the oppression of other communities; thus, as a poet he is able to placidly juxtapose pieces of African American history with Jewish American history. It is not unlikely either that Van Jordan might have picked Einstein as a figure to use as a way of discussing race in America. Einstein was well aware during his lifetime of the racism inherent to the structures of American society; he wrote to Harry Truman to support the Anti-Lynching Law that was proposed in 1932. And Einstein is famously quoted as saying in his letter to Truman, “trees need only to drop leaves to prove gravity,” not men. In a 2004 interview, Van Jordan is reported as saying,

If physics had a Race Theory, my hypothesis would be that we have more to fight for together than we have reasons for which to fight each other. The older I get, the more I see the proof. It's always been there. Any strides made in civil rights came from a joint effort between blacks and whites, men and women, straight and gay. Einstein embodies this theory. Who would think that a Jewish immigrant from Germany and Switzerland

would be a champion of civil rights in America before World War II? Einstein had great foresight in this way.

He [Einstein] gave up his German citizenship as a teenager before World War I. Adults living in Germany during World War II couldn't see the horrors ahead, but he intuited it. I think he saw the same conflict coming in America with the '60s, which he never witnessed. It's one thing to think of how prescient Richard Wright was with *Native Son* and *Black Boy* before the '60s, but he felt the sting of racism his whole life as a black male living in Jim Crow, pre-Civil Rights, pre-*Brown v. Board of Education* America. Einstein had a very comfortable position as a Princeton professor and international acclaim and respect as a genius. He didn't have to have the empathy that he expressed. It's as preternatural a gift as his insight into relativity.

Van Jordan's point seems clear enough—when an individual can escape racism but chooses to identify with an oppressed class voluntarily thereby giving up the rights of the privileged then such an individual is not only rare but exemplary. Paul Gilroy once wrote in *The Idea of Race* that “The political language of identity levels out distinctions between chosen connections and given particularities: between the person *you choose to be* and the things that determine your individuality *be being thrust upon you*” (106; emphasis mine). In *Quantum Lyrics*, Van Jordan captures this belief in poem where he imagines Einstein writing a letter to W.E.B. DuBois. In the poem, Einstein tells DuBois that racism is the result of an unnecessary struggle “to access hierarchy.” The poem, “Mr. W.E. Burghart DuBois” in its entirety is as follows,

There exists no erasure for race.
 Not talking about it will not ease
 The pain of questioning who is white,
 Negro or Jewish, just to access hierarchy
 Over humanity, hunger or hands reaching
 For faces. The universe expands the earth
 Orbits and we cannot change these phenomena
 Anymore than we should expect
 To change someone's skin because
 They're born closer to or farther from
 The equator. Adding these factors won't equal
 Peace, unless we learn
 They're pieces of a whole (54).

If we take the poems collected in *Quantum Lyrics* as a sum total, then it reads as a story that shoots back and forth between the present and the past, between the poles of immediate consciousness and remote consciousness (the source of which is memory). The nature of the story that Van Jordan tells is his

own experience as an African American male growing up in a post-Civil Rights society; that is, in a society that legally was not supposed to be segregated and that legally could not restrict members of society on the basis of race but that ideologically, culturally, and psychologically continued to operate as though in a Jim Crow era. Yet, while memory, through generational roots, may reveal the continuum of racism in America from Jim Crow onward, Van Jordan is more complicated as a poet than to reduce his own experience as a youth to simple racial binaries. Poems in *Quantum Lyrics* may reach back to discuss W.E.B. DuBois but so many other poems tell the story of Van Jordan as a young man groping his way through universal teenage issues, like love and angst. Van Jordan in an interview with Anna Clark states about this aspect of the book, "*Quantum Lyrics* is an exploration of male vulnerability, and these figures are pop cultural examples of men who, ostensibly, are invincible." But the pretense of invincibility gets released from its cultural neurosis in Van Jordan's poems. In fact, the opening of *Quantum Lyrics* is a poem about pop culture, a comic book hero. The adolescent comic book hero (the character of Flash in several of the book's poems) becomes the springboard though for Van Jordan's adult journey to discover how time makes itself know through the past, present, and future and how these three levels of our conscious being create psychical fields of gravitational pull, often pulling in different directions. Even the very male historical character of Albert Einstein is unmasked in *Quantum Lyrics* to show his softer, more confused side. Einstein may have been able to explain how parts of the universe worked but he would not explain how love or women worked, and this simple fact features large throughout *Quantum Lyrics*.

What Van Jordan makes clear though is that in remembering his youth and in capturing details of it down on paper he can never tell the story entirely as a linear progression; *he can't tell the story straight*. And what holds his story back from being told linearly is the intrusion of the psychic wounds inflicted upon him in his youth by the violence of witnessing the ill treatment of others, including the violence of racial mistreatment. Van Jordan's point is that *in America no story can be told straight*. For, the history of racism in America will forever bend one's story backward to recall the past, while simultaneously propelling one's story forward to contest oppression. This movement of returning psychically to the past while confronting the need to move on from the past and create a new day causes there to forever be a loop, a cycle of destruction and creation that the victim of oppression gets caught in and fights against. To reinforce this idea of being trapped inside a psychic loop of trauma, Van Jordan relies upon an extended metaphor of Einstein's theory of relativity to help demonstrate that what we imagine as standing still in life is in motion and that our perception of time versus distance is never quite accurate but always a distortion dependent upon how fast we travel.

In the 2004 interview with Rowell, Van Jordan observed about his own methods as a poet that "Everything starts from my interior understanding or

misunderstanding of my subject. That's either the first artistic problem or the first artistic asset. The challenge is the check and balance of what comes once I venture into the exterior landscape" (919). We see this ability come through in the poem, "The First Law of Motion," where he writes,

Water damaged over time,
My 6th grade reader
Cracks in my hands
And I smell the day thirty years before:

Young male musk, after recess;
Paco Rabanne cologne;
Afro Sheen; and watermelon,
Now and Later candy.

She spots us. She tells Gerald, who can barely read,
To stand up and read a page aloud.
He shoots a glance at me for help.
For him, reading is an unfamiliar face (17).

The poem is essentially about the poet's memory of himself in elementary school and of friend who was illiterate. Why then tuck the poem inside something larger than this memory? Why call the problem of an African American child's illiteracy the *first law of motion*? In Einstein's theory, the first law of motion is inertia and it explains the resistance of one object to motion; however, in social terms, the word inertia is used to describe the problem of standing still, not going anywhere, not moving ahead and the inability to even go forward. Van Jordan's point is that illiteracy in an African American male child is essentially the first law of motion in American society—the inability to produce or re-produce oneself through a line of succession of cultural texts means that immobility of social status will follow. In the language of everyday life, the child is stuck in his social condition and won't ever get out of it unless he learns how to relate to the Europeanized world of texts. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. argued in *The Signifying Monkey*, in America, essentially a Europeanized country from its origins, being capable of expressing oneself by way of the social and cultural signifiers of established canons of written texts (as opposed to oral texts) is the only means of entrance into social privilege. Thus, in Van Jordan's poem, the language of Einstein becomes the language of describing the social stasis of his childhood friend.

In the poem, "The Green Lantern Unlocks the Secretes of Black Body Theory," Van Jordan sets up an analogy between the alien, Flash, a superhero from the comic book, *DC Comic*, and that of both the African American and immigrant experiences in America. All the while, through this analogy, he slides in images from physics, such as the image of a penumbra.

A view of my planet from Earth shows

A penumbra from one angle
 And a full eclipse from the other, my origin
 Hidden like any immigrant's history
 Hides from the country of acceptance,
 But, even here on Earth, my planet still radiates
 Within me underneath this mask (33).

The image that the stanza ends with—this mask—makes an allusion to the language of the African American poet James Weldon Johnson and his poem, “We Wear the Mask.” In Johnson’s poem, we find the lines, “We wear the mask that grins and lies,/It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,--“ And as Johnson continues, “This debt we pay to human guile;/With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,/And mouth with myriad subtleties.” This is how the African American and the immigrant experience is configured, as hiding behind the mask of what is unreal, trying to pretend that a past—another country, another place, another communal space, another language, another set of rituals, another religion, another identity, another reality—does not exist. But it does exist. As Van Jordan’s poem “The Green Lantern” continues, he uses the analogy of the alien to discuss whether or not full social rights can ever be achieved in America because the African American and the immigrant both have to leave their past in order to embrace America’s ever-changing future.

We’re all equal under fear,
 But we all huddle
 Under my lantern’s emerald glow,
 Which powers my ring the way an oath
 Empowers the body speaking it aloud,
 But, with that same force, squint your eyes
 In pain: if you get too close to its truth,
 It burns as much as it lights the way (33).

The poem ends with a re-evaluation of another social problem, that of nuclear weaponry. Thus, the green lantern of the alien’s power becomes a new metaphor at the poem’s end, a metaphor for nuclear war, given that with Einstein’s discoveries it opened up the way for science to explore the atom and nuclear atomics.

When I see the lantern floating there, naked and cold,
 I picture its potential at rest,
 What it takes in and gives back,
 Including light and the shadows
 Not allowing the light to escape (33).

In the second part of *Quantum Lyrics*, the poems explore the personal life of Einstein by imagining a rewriting of the love letters exchanged between Einstein and his first wife, the Serbian Mileva Maric, whom he married in the winter of 1903. The relationship produced two sons, one of whom died during

childbirth. Van Jordan imagines how their relationship must have begun on rather equal terms, given that their intimacy started in 1896 when they were both college students at the Federal Polytechnic in Switzerland, but then became in time after their marriage imbalanced. After their marriage, Einstein devoted his time to his career, but Mileva followed the tradition and expectations of her time by trading career for family. The strong sense of emotional unevenness—perhaps even unfairness, if the term can be applied to matters of the heart—that emerged in the marriage is a subject Van Jordan explores. In the poem, “Quantum Lyrics Montage,” he sketches an emotional portrait of Einstein as seducing Mileva.

Tonight, somewhere lost in an occipital lobe
 Filled with geometry and seduction, I consider
 Newton’s laws of motions, force as matter accelerating
 At the speed of sound and tearing through a room
 Like a man bent on destruction (37).

Love can be destructive, can it not? Surely, that observation is keen enough. But, there is a sinister motive hidden in the poem that considers how the physical laws of the universe—the very same laws that bind and hold the universe together—when thought about as emotional principles in the life of the heart (and not the life of the mind) fail to bind and actually do just the opposite, tear apart. Love makes us feel as though we are spinning out of control, and Van Jordan’s poem confirms the suspicion that love does just this by holding up the internality of the laws of desire and attraction (subjectivity) to the externality of laws of motion (objectivity). In a poem “Einstein Defining Special Relativity,” Van Jordan writes in the form of a prose piece,

1: a theory that is based on two postulates (a) that the speed of light in all inertial frames is constant, independent of the source or the observer. As in, the speed of light emitted from the truth is the same as that of a lie coming from the lamp of a face aglow with trust with increased velocity, space is compressed in the direction of the motion and time slows down. As when I look at Mileva, it’s as if I’ve been in a spaceship traveling as close to the speed of light as possible, and when I return, years later, I’m younger than when I began the journey, but she’s grown older, less patient (40).

What these two parts of the poem refer to are the biographical facts of Einstein’s life, that he was younger by three years than his wife, Mileva and that his perpetual obsession with research lead him in time further and further away from Mileva’s embrace. The poem expresses distance and how quickly love can be lost beyond repair; it also expresses the common male attitudes of Einstein’s day by assuming through Einstein’s imagined subjectivity how a woman ages faster than a man. And yet, in the letters we have today that Mileva wrote to others, there is great evidence that it was actually she who was suffering the pangs of

time's arrows; for she once wrote to a friend, Savic, in 1911, that "we women cling much longer to the memory of that remarkable period called youth, and involuntarily would like things always to remain that way" (211). The poem reveals Einstein to be, in spite of his genius, capable of the whole range of ordinary feelings inside the heart of a man falling out of love with his wife. The poem also digs up the contemporary hypothesis that Einstein actually intellectually plagiarized part of his 1905 publications—those same publications that lead to his receiving the Nobel Prize in 1921.

The poem hints, along with other poems in *Quantum Lyrics*, that the person Einstein stole some of his ideas in physics from was Mileva. And furthermore, if Mileva did contribute to Einstein's theory of relativity, she received no real acknowledgement from Einstein. In a series of prose poems that Van Jordan writes in *Quantum Lyrics* where he recreates love letters between Einstein and Mileva, the love letters reveal that the breaking of Mileva's heart and Einstein's lack of interest in keeping their relationship alive. The root of the love poems, however, is Einstein's lack of acknowledgement of Mileva's help in his research. Retelling the historical story of exchange of letters, Van Jordan writes what he imagines to be Mileva's love letters to Albert; he imagines Mileva's letters as subtle, full of music and lyricism, and as an attempt to remind Einstein of their once romance.

Once, we slept under the night sky to understand
 How the wind continues to make shadow
 Puppets of the trees. My body is a reed
 Instrument through which you breathe; a way
 To make music, but it's not a song to which two
 Bodies can dance. Enough of this life as thought experiment (42).

Then Van Jordan recreates Einstein's reply as much harsher, colder, more scientific and detached from the warmth of bodies as experienced in romance.

Our love, despite the evidence, experiments
 With the physics of simply being together. Understand
 That a man must have an accomplice; two
 Hands are not enough: one flips the switch; shadows
 Hide the other. This is our world. Yet, there's no way
 Time will allow us to make love, test ideas and read (42).

There is denial in the imagined reply by Einstein, and time has taken on the dimension of bending hearts and breaking them. Van Jordan uses time throughout his poem as a way of expressing the fact that what we consider love is really just the observer's position relative to the distance of the subject, the beloved.

In sum, what can we think of Van Jordan's hybridization of physics, the love story of Einstein and Mileva, the betrayal of Mileva by Einstein, and the connection made between race in America and the language of relativity?

Quantum Lyrics should be applauded for making us as readers think twice about the relationship of science to poetics, and of the answers science provides us with to explain the universe versus the unexplainable aspects of life, such as matters of the heart and social injustices. And lastly, we should ask, even if science could explain to us why he love and conversely, considering the injustices of the social worlds we live in, what would we think of the answers?

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