

Kerry Greenwood's "Rewriting" of Agatha Christie

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The first chapter of the first novel in Kerry Greenwood's Phryne Fisher series, *Cocaine Blues*, invites the reader to compare Greenwood's and Agatha Christie's crime fiction. In it the author uses what could be construed as an "Empire-writes-back" procedure, taking a typical Christie situation and subverting the canonical structure: Phryne Fisher attends a dinner party in late 1920s England with all the stereotyped characters of an Agatha Christie clue-puzzle, right down to the retired Indian colonel. The party is interrupted by a blackout during which some family jewels are daringly stolen. The stage seems to be set for a classic Agatha Christie investigation that would take Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple the space of the entire novel to solve. But Phryne Fisher brilliantly solves the enigma and finds the culprit and the jewels within the space of a couple of pages. She then flees to Australia to escape the deadly boredom of her life in Christie's England.

Greenwood is mischievously indicating that she does *not* write classic Christie detective fiction with its long drawn-out investigations, set in stuffy 1920s England and conducted by plodding, ageing, asexual detectives. She promises investigations with a faster pace, set in young dynamic 1920s Australia and conducted by an alluring young female detective. This attitude and the geographical transfer from the imperial Centre to the colonial Margins could signal her intention to undertake a postcolonial "rewriting" of the Queen of Crime.

How, then, does she restructure the classic Christie clue-puzzle in *Cocaine Blues* after the provocative statement made in its opening chapter? There are three strands of enquiry, two of which proceed in classic clue-puzzle fashion while the third is conducted according to the conventions of the contemporary police procedural sub-genre. In the penultimate chapter, there is a scene where all is revealed, bringing together strands one and two and giving the solutions to both clue-puzzles simultaneously—Lydia, the King of Snow, has been giving herself non-lethal doses of poison in preparation for

poisoning her husband and then blaming it on him, a technique borrowed from Dorothy Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1930). This denouement comes not in Agatha Christie style, where the detective gives a pedantic lecture about the outcome of her cogitations, but in a set scene from all those television and cinema crime shows where the Villain holds the Hero in his clutches and, just before killing him, reveals all. Then the Hero escapes in an action-scene and the Villain is thwarted.

In the final chapter, the Hercule Poirot-style lecture is indeed delivered, but offstage to the other characters who are still ignorant of the final solution. Greenwood does not repeat it for the readers since they already know all after the spectacular confrontation in the preceding chapter. Greenwood has "rewritten" the Agatha Christie clue-puzzle by mixing it with other popular contemporary sub-genres of crime fiction—the police procedural and the action thriller. The resulting hybrid borrows blithely from both the classic British clue-puzzle and the American hard-boiled heritages. Its narrative structure combines multiple strands and culminates in multiple climaxes that follow each other in relatively quick succession near the end of the story. Greenwood's gender reversals, whereby the female protagonist becomes the action hero and her boyfriend becomes a damsel in distress, offer a pleasing fantasy of power to the female reader who identifies with the protagonist.

The titles of several of her subsequent Phryne Fisher novels certainly recall Christie titles: *Death at Victoria Dock*, *Death before Wicket*, *Death by Water*, *Murder in Montparnasse*, *The Castlemaine Murders*. Above all, *Murder on the Ballarat Train* with its obvious playful reference to *Murder on the Orient Express* and deliberate parochialism, mocks its connotations of opulence. The content of the novel does not, however, offer a sustained comparison with the Christie text.

In many other Phryne Fisher novels there are implicit references to Christie's crime novels as Greenwood subverts the elitist ideology that underpins the Queen of Crime's fiction. For instance, in Christie's Poirot novels, the retired Belgian detective regularly uses obfuscation to prevent the reader from guessing the solution of the enigma too early. Poirot irritatingly asks Captain Hastings and others cryptic questions but then refuses to explain his "little ideas" based on the answers. Greenwood clearly objects on moral grounds to this method of delaying the moment of resolution as a lack of respect towards both readers and fictional subordinates. When she resorts to this technique herself in *Away with the Fairies*, she feels the need to justify herself. In this novel, Phryne asks her pet policeman, Jack Robinson, two sphinx-like questions and promises that, if he can obtain the answers for

her, she will supply him with the key to the mystery the next day (242-43). Robinson delivers the answers, which apparently enable Phryne to solve the mystery to her own satisfaction but, when Robinson very reasonably requests enlightenment, she refuses, fobbing him off with a somewhat disingenuous: "I'll have to show you Jack, or you'll never believe me [. . .] Really, I'm not doing an Agatha Christie on you. I won't know who did this until I can set up a trap" (252).

Refusal to share information may go against Greenwood's egalitarian principles, but Christie has no such qualms. Poirot not only uses this technique on his hapless foil, Hastings, he also makes disdainful remarks about the latter's lack of intelligence and frequently humiliates him with quizzing on the deductions the Captain has drawn from the facts they both have at their disposal. Of course, while Poirot's deductions are brilliant and apposite, Hastings' are far-fetched and erroneous (for example, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* 77, 122-23).

Greenwood's heroine treats *her* offsider with far more respect. In the Phryne Fisher series, Dot, Phryne's maid and companion, gradually also becomes her offsider in crime solving, like Lord Peter Wimsey's servant, Bunter, with his skills in forensic photography. In *Raisins and Almonds*, Dot first acts the sleuth, down on her hands and knees searching for clues (16), then plays the role of secretary (30-32) and, when Phryne asks her for her assessment of the case, it is not in order to humiliate her and to use Dot's obtuseness as a foil for her own brilliance, but because she genuinely values her opinion (51-52). Later, Phryne sends Dot out to investigate and interview witnesses on her behalf. In *Away with the Fairies*, Dot is elevated to the status of "fellow sleuth" (190, 195). In *Queen of the Flowers*, Phryne and Dot work as a team, deciphering the encoded diaries of the missing Rose Weston (138). Right from the start of the series, Dot acts as Phryne's consultant on domestic matters—a field in which Miss Fisher herself is blissfully ignorant. Her ignorance contrasts sharply with Hercule Poirot's and Miss Marple's expertise in domestic matters.

Christie's literary predecessors—Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle—created dominant male detective figures (Dupin in the mid-nineteenth century and Sherlock Holmes between the 1890s and the 1920s). Christie was a pioneer in depicting women in the detective role. Although he is a man, Hercule Poirot is physically fussy and slightly effeminate. He often solves crimes by drawing on his knowledge of domestic affairs (Knight 108) at a time when domestic affairs were a woman's domain. In her later stories, Christie's detective becomes a woman, Miss Marple. She

too uses her knowledge of domestic affairs but, as an elderly woman, she is restricted in her mobility. She only has access—via gossip or spying through binoculars—to the events that take place in her small village or, when she is on a cruise or a trip to London, to what passes by her armchair as she sits there knitting. Miss Marple is also a spinster. Bird notes the asexual nature of women detectives in the traditional British clue-puzzle sub-genres: “This desexualisation of early women detectives represents an ideological split between brains and beauty, and relates to the patriarchal stereotyping of women into those who are sexual and wanton deceivers and those who are asexual and moral” (35).

Greenwood firmly rejects this binary. For example, in her third novel, *Murder on the Ballarat Train*, the attractive young law student, Lindsay, having heard that Miss Fisher the detective is “good at puzzles” (59) gets it into his head that she is “an old maid with a bent for detection” (59), an allusion to Miss Marple. He is flabbergasted when he meets her and finds her to be beautiful and sexy as well as rich. She proceeds to seduce him, being unable to keep her hands off any attractive young man who happens her way. She refuses to contemplate matrimony and the parents of fortune-hunting young men set their sights on her in vain. Her taste in men runs to the multicultural. Her long list of conquests in the course of the series includes a beautiful Russian dancer of limited intelligence, two Australian lovers—a doctor and a law student, an Italian artist, a Latvian anarchist, a gypsy, an ethnic Chinese, a Jew and many others. She is also a female rewriting of James Bond, with a difference, for she treats all of her lovers with affection and respect. Greenwood’s gender reversal extends to Phryne’s action-hero abilities: she can overpower men twice her size and, each time Dot learns that her employer has been attacked, she enquires with solicitude about how badly the assailant has been damaged (for example, *Murder at Victoria Dock* 8). Occasional allusions to the Christie intertext underline Phryne’s action-hero status: unlike Poirot whose eyes shine with a queer green light when he becomes excited by an intellectual discovery that forwards his enquiry, Miss Fisher’s green eyes shine like emeralds when she is swearing revenge on criminals who have hurt an innocent victim (for example, *Queen of the Flowers* 141).

Other moral issues on which Greenwood takes a stance include animal rights, elitism and egalitarianism. In Christie’s fiction, servants belong to “the lower orders” and are virtually part of the scenery; she wastes no words describing their backgrounds or viewpoints. Greenwood, on the other hand, is always careful to show narrative respect to her working-class characters—we learn

the personal histories, viewpoints and feelings of all Phryne's servants, for instance. She engages in fair trade practices (for example, she enquires about official award wages before giving Dot twice the going rate) and treats all her employees with respect. In the first novel in the series, she makes two red-ragger waterside workers turned taxi drivers—Bert and Cec—her associates and they remain so throughout the series. Although Miss Fisher is an heiress and has a title, we are repeatedly informed that she was born impoverished and went cold and hungry during her childhood in Melbourne until World War I killed off all the young men standing between her father and a British fortune and title. Greenwood apparently feels that her heroine's (English) wealth and social position are disreputable and so tells this story of her humble (Australian) origins in order to prove her moral worth. This is a playful reversal of a motif frequently found in colonial literature: the attainment of legitimacy and social recognition through the recovery of a British birthright. In *Blood and Circuses*, Phryne goes so far as to shuck off all her privileges to take on an undercover job as an extra in a circus act. With no power, money or social position, she is thrown back on her natural abilities in her quest to solve the mystery of who is sabotaging the circus and must extract herself from several tight corners. She manages the exploit, feels she has proven her intrinsic worth and can now resume the pleasures of wealth and privilege with a clear conscience. Thus Greenwood pays tribute to the much-vaunted Australian value of egalitarianism in opposition to the elitism that structured Christie's England.

Most of Greenwood's moral and ideological convictions are expressed outside the framework of the Christie intertext. Even in those examples cited above, where she emphasises her stance by briefly contrasting Phryne with Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple, she is not so much "writing back to" Christie as "correcting" social values that were current in Christie's day and age. There are, however, two novels in the Phryne Fisher series that do offer more sustained references to a particular Christie intertext. They are the eighth and fifteenth, thus neatly marking the middle and "end" of the group of novels.

The first is *Urn Burial*, written in 1996. In classic Christie style, it opens with a list of the characters. In this list we find a certain "Miss Mary Mead, a spinster"—an amusing allusion to Miss Marple's home village of St Mary Mead. The story describes a house party in a rich couple's country estate, tantalisingly called Cave House, where a murder is soon committed and the characters are cut off from the outside by a flooding river. At the house party, we find many of the stock characters of the Christie mystery: Miss Mary Mead knitting in a corner; two mysterious star-crossed lovers having

assignments in hidden nooks in the library; the prodigal son (by a first marriage); the jolly, sporty, loud and clumsy young heiress accompanied by her mother who wants to marry her off. The Australian hostess, Evelyn, longs for a house party like the ones “at home” (that is to say in England) (69). In this self-consciously Christie atmosphere, Phryne retires to the library where she finds a book by an author she likes—*The Mysterious Affair at Styles*—Agatha Christie’s first novel (1920), in which she created Hercule Poirot. Clearly, the reader is invited to compare the two texts.

In *Urn Burial*, Judith the heiress is loud, brash and insensitive (49, 104). Socially she is cloddish (118-19), making gaffe upon gaffe in conversation (123). She would much rather play a good, hard game of tennis than flirt with any of the eligible boys her mother dangles before her. There is a similar character in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* called Evie Howard who is the factotum and companion of Mrs Inglethorpe, the murdered lady of the house. Evie has a painfully firm handshake, a stentorian voice (4), is blunt, gruff (66), outspoken (67) and speaks in a staccato, telegraphic style (5). Greenwood’s similarly masculine heiress admits to Phryne that she does not want to get married; she would like to breed horses and be left alone. Phryne tells her to do what she wants with her money, as she herself has done, and encourages her to defy convention and her manipulative mother. Under Phryne’s influence, Judith does just that and is relieved not to “have to play at being a girlie any more” (192). The reader imagines her living happily ever after beyond the confines of the plot. Her counterpart in the Christie novel has no such luck: she turns out to be the murderer’s accomplice and is accordingly punished. Today’s reader may wonder if she is not also implicitly being “punished” by the author for her masculine proclivities.

In *Urn Burial*, both the reader and Phryne are surprised to discover that the mysterious star-crossed lovers are in fact both young men. They repair to the boathouse where Phryne and her lover Lin have already found a secluded place for some amorous dalliance. Phryne and Lin are neither shocked nor repulsed by the men’s sexual preference. On the contrary, they spy on the gay lovers and watch the scene with mounting arousal. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* the star-crossed lovers are, of course, a heterosexual couple, Lawrence Cavendish and Cynthia. After some matchmaking by “Papa Poirot”, they come together in lawful wedlock.

Greenwood’s retired Indian colonist, Major Luttrell, at first sight another Christie stock character, turns out to be a wife beater, a rapist and a murderer who began his career in crime by inflicting his perversions on the colonised native women in India. While knitting a small fluffy bootee, Miss

Mead firmly encourages his oppressed wife, Letty, to leave him (117-18). Greenwood thus shows her affection for the Christie character, Miss Marple, by giving her counterpart late twentieth-century feminist sensibilities.

Like Hercule Poirot in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Phryne encounters some difficulty in elucidating the mystery in *Urn Burial* because all the characters at the house party have something to hide and therefore withhold important information. Miss Mead's secret, revealed at the end of the diegesis, delights the reader. She turns out to be a private detective from South Yarra who has come to Cave House to investigate Miss Cray, an embezzler of monies donated to Christian missionary funds. Miss Mead and Phryne are colleagues, though their methods are different. Since no one notices old ladies, Mary Mead just has to sit about, knit and listen (249), like Miss Marple.

In *Urn Burial*, Greenwood does not "write back to" her Christie intertext. She uses it as a springboard to "mend" some of the social and sexual prejudices prevalent in Christie's day. There is also an element of playful pastiche and an affectionate homage to a literary predecessor. In Greenwood's 2005 novel, *Death by Water*, the Christie intertext is more insistently signposted. Once again, the situation is classic Christie: Phryne embarks on a cruise on a P&O luxury liner in order to unmask a jewel thief. The first explicit reference to Christie is to be found on page 75 where Phryne, who is supposed to be working incognito, has just been recognised as a private detective by a member of the crew and remarks that: "It was no more use trying to keep secrets on a ship than in one of those small villages beloved by Agatha Christie" (75).

On page 134, the first-class passengers have a discussion about how Dorothy Sayers' fiction implicitly invites rereading in order to check if railway timetables, for example, and the various characters' alibis are in concord—an allusion, in particular, to Sayers' *The Five Red Herrings*. This reference provides the reader with a hermeneutic clue. Consequently, when the Wests, whom we suspect of being the jewel thieves, claim that they were with Jack Mason at the time of the crime, we are sceptical: Jack's eyes were bandaged so he could only tell the time by the chimes of his clock. This, moreover, reminds the Christie buff of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and of the dictaphone put on a timer so that "ear-witnesses" believed they had heard the deceased speak after the actual time of death. Soon after, on page 234, Phryne starts to read *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. The reader is likely to examine the plot of the Christie novel for further hermeneutic keys to the Greenwood mystery. There is a second mention of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* on page 244 and a third on page 246. Even the most obtuse reader cannot fail to recognise

the invitation to comparison. But, in fact, the only key turns out to be the solution to the above-mentioned discrepancy in times: the Wests had indeed altered Jack's clock to mislead him about the time of their visit. This is rather a let-down, as it hardly seems necessary to provide such an emphatic Christie intertext, on top of the Sayers allusion, in order to indicate the solution to this remarkably simple enigma.

But then, the officer investigating the murder that has occurred during the cruise says to the first class passengers: "I hope the lot of you never take to a life of crime because you'd be bloody good at it" (266). Surely this is reminiscent of *Murder on the Orient Express* with its twelve executioners who each stab the unpunished murderer of a little girl in a show of vigilante justice. In a final twist to Greenwood's plot, it turns out that the Wests were being blackmailed by the other first class passengers in a complex pattern comparable to the solution of the *Orient Express* mystery. We had been led up the garden path and were concentrating on the wrong Christie intertext. So, here Greenwood does not use the intertext to "write back to" Christie or to "correct" the now outmoded social values of her predecessor's time. She has "rewritten" elements of well-known Christie works as part of a literary detective game offered to the experienced crime fiction reader, a ludic activity that offers the secret pleasure of an in-joke to be decoded by those in the know. There is no trace of postcolonial resentment or opposition.

There is one novel in Greenwood's Phryne Fisher series that approaches "rewriting" in a different way to those described above and which does contain a significant component of postcolonial discourse. In this case, it is not, however, Christie she "writes back to". The novel in question is *The Castlemaine Murders*. It has often been noted that popular English fiction designated the colonies as a convenient place to get rid of characters who were embarrassing or otherwise undesirable in the metropolis. In this novel, Eliza Fisher, Phryne's apparently snooty imperialist sister, leaves England for Australia and proceeds to irritate everyone there with her artificial county accent and her disparaging remarks about the superiority of all things British to those Australian. Her denigration is all the less palatable in the light of the fact that she was born a working-class Australian and only became an upper-class Englishwoman as a result of the convenient deaths of several male relatives. When the fictional characters discuss the former imperialist use of the Australian colonies as a human rubbish dump, Eliza dryly remarks that it is still the case "today" (that is to say in 1928) (57-58) and the reader begins to suspect that the reason for her sudden arrival on Phryne's doorstep might be her expulsion from the imperial Centre. This proves to be true: she

has been sent off to Australia by her bigoted father because she has become a Fabian socialist, who works amongst the poor and disapproves of inherited wealth. He accuses her of being a class traitor and exiles her (120-21). She also turns out to be a lesbian—another reason for exclusion from the Centre. Although she has been brainwashed since her childhood into believing in English superiority, she cannot help noticing that not only are the material living conditions—food, climate, and so on—better in Australia than in the UK (61) but also that she might actually fit in here, where there are others who share her social convictions. This “writing back to” colonial discourse is pursued in a narrative strand where an upper-class, snobbish, unintelligent, violent and mentally unhinged English fortune hunter pursues Eliza’s lady friend to Australia hoping to force her into marriage by raping her. He proffers imperialist insults (such as “upjumped colonial”, 246) to all the egalitarian Australians he encounters but is eventually overpowered and led off in a strait-jacket. This caricature that turns the tables on the upper-class English coloniser is satisfying for Greenwood’s Australian readers familiar with the classics of colonial literature, but it is also diverting in a way that consciously postcolonial “rewriting”—one thinks, for instance, of Peter Carey’s earnest *Jack Maggs*—is not.

Parallel to this light-hearted “writing back”, Greenwood also “rewrites” some of the emblematic events of Australian history in this novel. For instance, she deconstructs the national myth of the Eureka Stockade, which has frequently been described as the crucible of Australian egalitarianism. She dismisses the founding myth in the following terms: “Phryne had a very low opinion of the Eureka Stockade. Any revolutionary movement which was easily crushed by twenty-five soldiers in one afternoon did not deserve the name” (5). Or again:

“My dad was there! He saw them build the fence out of logs and hoist the Eureka flag! Every man took an oath of loyalty to the Southern Cross” [enthuses one patriot].

“Yair, and betrayed it. Your dad run like a rabbit as soon as the soldiers came,” observed Bill Gaskin dispassionately. “You run your forge as a non union shop and you squeeze your workers till the pips squeak. Eureka, my arse [. . .] And as for them poor bloody Chinese, Madge’s hubby’s grandpa said they was nice quiet people and he always camped next to them because they wouldn’t cut his throat and pinch his gold while he slept. Unlike your brave Eureka.” (179)

But Greenwood does not limit her “rewriting” of national history to the critique characteristic of postcolonial discourse. For example, she proposes a positive reconstruction of that racist chapter of Australian history—the anti-

Chinese riots on the gold fields in the mid 1800s. She does not dwell on the negative aspects but proposes a new version, narrated by one of her Chinese characters, who tells the story of the brave (white) Constable Thomas Cooke. He risked his job and his life and, alone, stood up to the rampaging white diggers coming to attack the Chinese in his jurisdiction. Thanks to his bravery, the riot was averted and the Chinese community saved. Greenwood alludes to this incident no less than four times (6, 68, 83-84, 188) in the novel and takes pleasure in her contribution to historical memory. "Constable Thomas Cooke was a *real* policeman who stopped a riot, he had vanished from history until I found him again and the cops are putting up a plaque to him" (correspondence with the author, 8 February 2007).

This "rewriting" of Australian history could be seen as a conciliatory effort to construct a positive new national image, which the descendants of both the "white Australian" and the Chinese communities can identify with. So, parallel to an element of playful reprisal, when Greenwood "writes back to" British imperial denigration of Australia, *The Castlemaine Murders* also proposes a new version of Australian history that goes beyond the classic focus of postcolonialism on coloniser/colonised conflict, to concentrate on the historical relations between "mainstream" Australians and the various minorities that now compose multicultural Australian society, in an effort to heal the wounds of the past in a spirit of reconciliation.

In other novels in the series, Greenwood explicitly denounces racism against Aborigines and promotes Aboriginal land rights (*Death before Wicket*), condemns anti-Semitism and offers an affectionate description of Jewish culture in Australia in 1928 (*Raisins and Almonds*). In all of these "rewritings" she deconstructs the myths of Australian history which were created and propagated to shore up the white Australian national identity that pre-dated the 1970s, before the Aborigines gained citizenship in 1967 and the White Australia Policy was abolished in 1973. She does not simply deconstruct the old white Australian imperial discourse but proposes a more positive version that includes minorities in the national community in much the same way as European national history written in the nineteenth century anachronistically appropriated earlier periods that predated the existence of the European nation-states.

Thus Greenwood addresses some contemporary arguments about Australian history, seeking out positive and conciliatory elements that she weaves into her narratives. She also includes tolerant contemporary ideologies regarding sex, gender, race. She has chosen as her medium the crime fiction genre,

which owes its popularity at least partly to the fact that it offers comforting fantasies to the reader. To quote Australian crime writer, Lindy Cameron:

fans of crime fiction don't actually read mysteries or crime novels because they *like* being confused, baffled or scared; or because they derive a vicarious thrill from the violence. They read it because everything turns out right in the end. Order is brought to chaos and there is always closure. Compared to that, real life is a bitch. (Greenwood, *On Murder* 44)

Once a week, Kerry Greenwood takes a break from writing and goes to the Magistrate's Court to work as a "Duty Solicitor with the Legal Aid Commission" (Bird 89). In her own words, the job entails "defending the indefensible and explaining the inexplicable" (correspondence with the author, 27 June 2007). Her clients are drug addicts, beaten wives, sexually abused children, shoplifters, and car thieves (Bird 89-90). In 1991 she explained her preference for the clue-puzzle form with reference to her work as a solicitor: "This is not a job where one can bear much more realism [. . .] It has dawned on me that the writers of all the mean streets genre have never been part of them. In the gutter, one requires stars, not more shit [. . .] Writing is my escape from the real world" (Bird 90).

I would like to borrow from the French language to describe the way Greenwood uses the fantasy element of this sub-genre of crime fiction to "rewrite" Australian history and intolerant attitudes of the past. Poirot frequently talks in English that is tainted in its structures, and sometimes its vocabulary, by his native French. Phryne Fisher, like her creator, is a francophile. Her speech is peppered with French words and expressions, and in some of the novels we find extensive extracts written in French and followed by a translation into English. So, as a French-Australian academic, I shall emulate these fictional detectives and indulge in a little French/English linguistic osmosis myself. The term I would like to borrow is *repriser* and it means to mend or to darn. I would like to coin a neologism—to "reprise"—or to "mend" disreputable events and attitudes of the past. In the Phryne Fisher series, Greenwood does this through the creation of a fantasy world where justice always prevails. In conclusion, then, her "rewriting" of Christie is not an act of postcolonial *reprisal* but an attempt to *reprise* historical reality, which she effects by exploiting the comforting fantasy element of the form perfected by the Queen of Crime in order to "rewrite" it as a conciliatory mode.

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