

# *Que viva la música's* Sustained Prescience: Reading Andrés Caicedo's Anti-Bildungsroman Four Decades Later

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**Abstract:** This article explores the relationship between urban dwelling and narrative structure in Andrés Caicedo's *Que viva la música*. We argue that the work's narrative arc is determined by the spatial nodes around which characters gravitate. The urban patterns established by the novel's flâneur-like teenagers create a geographical mapping that lends itself to a spatial visualization of their psychology. This cognitive projection onto urban space makes visible Caicedo's attempt at disrupting the Bildungsroman.

**Key words:** Andrés Caicedo – *Bildungsroman* – Colombian Literature – *Que viva la música* – Urban Literature

*“Quiero escuchar la música inefable  
que con sus ritmos el espacio inunda  
calladamente, silenciosamente;  
y al encenderse las estrellas pálidas,  
romper mis venas y quedarme oyendo  
toda la noche gotear mi sangre”  
-Porfirio Barba Jacob*

**A**s early as the first page of his only completed novel, *Que viva la música* (1977), the Cali-based author, Andrés Caicedo's (1951-1977), protagonist, María del Carmen Huerta, confronts the existential problem that will both haunt and drive her throughout a drug-induced flâneur-styled ambling that frames the work. María discusses how her “whiteness” and hair color lead other *caleños* to associate her with cultural icons from a freshly available international and cosmopolitan register, when she energetically claims:

Pero me decían: “Pelada, voy a ser conciso: ¡es fantástico tu pelo! Y un raro, calvo, prematuro: “Lillian Gish tenía tu mismo pelo”, y yo: “Quién será ésta”, me preguntaba, “¿Una cantante famosa?” Recién me he venido a desayunar que era estrella del cine mudo. Todo este tiempo me la he venido imaginando con miles de collares, cantando, rubia total, a una audiencia enloquecida. Nadie sabe lo que son los huecos de la cultura” (Caicedo 11).

*Que viva la música* is about speed, youthful energy, and the inevitable comedown from earnestness experienced in the context of a young group of friends from Cali, with whom we spend a week in the life under the haze of a sex, drugs, and rock and roll frenzy. Caicedo takes us along for a ride in his 1970s Cali, a time and place in which multi-national corporations began to make great headway in urban Colombia, largely resignifying the urban symbolic order and bringing a string of cultural problems along with them.<sup>1</sup> And through María and her friends, Mariangela and a practically unending flow of gringos and id heavy 20-somethings, Caicedo, a cinephile who co-founded the Cali-based film magazine, *Ojo al cine*, invites the reader to experience, arguably for the first time, Colombia at 24 frames per second.<sup>2</sup>

More than speed, however, the novel is about the “holes in culture” (“los huecos de la cultura”) that María alludes to in her opening exclamations. Along with the new wave of cultural referents that life in Cali brought in the 1970s, a new cosmopolitan border opens up for a young generation that grew up with access to international popular culture on a scale until then unprecedented, causing a clash between a local, many times folkloric, sense of nationality and a new cosmopolitan cultural register. Caicedo uses music to explore this cultural problem, going so far as to include a discography, or sound track, at the end of the work. Music is the impulse that keeps the characters riding a high whose comedown is threatened cyclically, giving way to a largely standard *Bildungsroman* pattern. The protagonist leaves home, experiences a

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<sup>1</sup> According to Charles Bergquist: “With advent of National Front traditional political violence ends. Its sequel of political banditry is repressed by 1966. After 1960, Cuban-inspired guerrilla groups (FARC, ELN, EPL), with some linked to previous Liberal resistance, proliferate. Governments continually resort to state-of-siege powers to contain internal dissent and social unrest. Under orthodox liberal policies adequate coffee prices, economy continues to grow and diversify, and multinational corporations enter Colombia in force” (xiii).

<sup>2</sup> The magazine *Ojo al cine* was the “official” publication of the *Cine Club de Cali*, and had only four editions between 1974 and 1976. The three directors of the *Cine club* and a mutual cinephile friend formed the initial editorial team of the magazine: Andrés Caicedo, Luís Ospina, Ramiro Arbelaez, and Carlos Mayolo. Only Andrés Caicedo and Patricia Restrepo, who had joined the magazine since the third edition, formed the editorial team of the last number. For a history of the *Cine Club de Cali* and Andrés Caicedo’s lasting love with cinema, see the book-length compilation of his critical work, *Ojo al cine*. Particularly informing are the introduction and the notes for each section by Sandro Romero Rey and Luís Ospina.

new cultural form that would symbolically kill her parents – in this case through the international narrative of rock music, and more specifically through the Rolling Stones – considers, though refuses, a return home – represented by salsa within the musical metaphor– and then seeks out a third place, in this case without grounding in the city.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of *Que viva la música*, however, the *Bildungsroman* does not occur seamlessly, at least to the extent that the protagonist does not grow, mature, and successfully carve out a place of her own, but is trapped by the need to continue to move, or is caught in an errancy that parallels her and her peers' growing dependency on drugs. Through María's constant motion we witness signs of both an attempt to re-order the city by walking and dwelling in the urban space and resonances of what Jean Franco refers to as the "decline and fall of the lettered city". In this paper, we hope to complicate both concepts in the context of the Janus-faced liberating and alienating properties of liberal cosmopolitanism and its cultural appendages in Caicedo's 1970s Cali through a case study of one of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Colombia's most decadent and interesting anti-heroes: María del Carmen Huerta.

### Inscribing the City

In what could be argued as the critical moment of *Que viva la música*, published just days before the author's eventual suicide, María del Carmen Huerta, states "cada vida depende del *rumbo* que se escogió en un momento dado, privilegiado" (47, our emphasis). As the narrative progresses, the reader realizes that Caicedo spends much of the novel searching for precisely this moment. The work's characters, as we experience them, are constantly on the verge of making a life altering decision, on a street corner, for instance, about to descend into the city without a clear way back.

In the case of *Que viva la música*, we can understand the privileged moment in spatial terms, represented by the trajectory of errant adolescents in urban Cali, reading in Caicedo's narrative signs of Michél De Certeau's affirmation that every narrative is a travel narrative, a spatial practice (Certeau 115). Certeau establishes a close relationship between narrative and spatial formation and bases his spatial dialectics on the distinction between two concepts: the place (*lieu*) and the space (*espace*). A place, for Certeau, consists of a logical order of spatial configurations, a particular ordering of positions. The place represents order, in which spatial elements are distributed under the logic of coexistence, situated, in their own logical location, but without autonomy; places, in other words, are dependent on a larger system, in which the place implies an affirmation of stability (117).

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<sup>3</sup> Caicedo uses a series of binaries in *Que viva la música* to structure the felt energy of a time when Colombia experienced an in-rush of global culture. As we will argue, these binaries include youth and maturity, the northern and southern parts of Cali, and rock and salsa music.

Space, on the other hand, is made up of at the intersection of moving elements and only exists within the context of speed and directional vectors along with temporal variables. Space is comprised of the sum of all of the movements that occur within the physical location, itself. Set against the example of place, space lacks the same stability or grounding that Certeau lends his theorization of place. Space, in other words, is a place put in practice (117).

According to this distinction, the geometric definition taken to the street by urban designers (place), is transformed in space by its users, or is radicalized and translated into space by pedestrians. Movement, and the act of occupying space, defines the mobile variables that make up urban space. Caicedo's characters in *Que viva la música*, for example, would fall under the purview of Certeau's urban space, an occupation that they undertake through their constant errancy. And given that the text is a *place* constituted of a system of signs (117), the narrator, María, creates *spaces* of meaning through the re-ordering and use of *place*.

It's not by chance, then, that the characters that we follow in *Que viva la música* spend practically all of their time lost in errancy. The act of dwelling in the city defines the way in which the characters re-signify both the urban space, Cali in this instance, and the young upper middle-class urban imaginary. Through city restrictions and urban ordering – what Certeau would refer to as Cali's structural place – Caicedo's narrative situates the relationship between the subject and place through the “privileged moment” mentioned above, as a physical occupation of certain places and the abandonment of others. The privileged moment is framed by the creation of new spaces, as the works characters resist urban referents that represent their childhood imaginary of urban Cali through errancy. Their “rumbo” marks nothing short of the physical displacement and radicalization of the spatial practice of the city.

According to Certeau, spatial narrative occurs in two ways: what he refers to as a “seeing” (*voir*), a fixed description of elements that occupy a space, and “going” (*aller*), or an appropriation of space through its very use (119). In *Que viva la música*, Caicedo narrates the city without giving a fixed description or totalizing panoramic view that would lend the character's position any sense of stability; he resists a “seeing” of the city. Indeed, the narrative is heavy on description of how María and her friends appropriate urban spaces in Cali, offering a view of a micro occupation, rather than the macro cityscape, or a “going” of the city. Caicedo's narrator is a walker, and she only offers a horizontal perspective of urban space, many times interrupting and subjectifying the city. And according to Certeau's logic, the narration offers a re-ordering of the city, rather than any official predetermined view (*space*), always giving partialities that resist the recognized, ordered, and coherent spatial totality.

From the perspective of María's occupation, we struggle to read the city as an organic totality, or at least according Kevin Lynch's notions of what reading a city might imply. In *The Image of the City*, he writes “Just as this printed page, if it is legible, can be visually grasped as a related pattern of recognizable symbols, so a legible city would be

one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern” (Lynch 3). Lynch’s totalizing pattern of urban space is entirely absent in *Que viva la música*, and, through María, we witness little more than the piecemeal and incomplete construction of the city, to the extent that the city becomes a character, itself, that we constantly attempt to encircle.

Without this stabilizing sense of an overall spatial pattern, we never conjure up a totalized map of Cali. And if we get any geographic image of the city, it comes from a grasping, unknowing, yet highly dynamic, narration of space. María and her friends as occupiers of Cali hop from place to place, many times going from the *Heimlich*, upper-middle class North to the grittier South, the errancy, all the while, pointing to an attempt to found a generational third space, further offering a map, or urban inscription, based in errancy and an “un-space” rather narration of place. Perhaps, Luis Ospina’s eulogy to Caicedo best captures this anxiety when he refers to the author in the second person: “Pasas del norte al sur, del rock a la salsa, de la marihuana a las pepas, de lo imaginario a lo real” (Ospina 3:30-3:50).

### **How to Buy a *Thrill***

Within the group of friends that we encounter in *Que viva la música*, each voice adds to a closed narrative space, making up a universe that is structured around a cyclical pattern of energy and youthfulness, represented, in the text, by the initial rush of drug use that is inevitably followed by an existential and physical comedown. And the narrative follows suit, as does the trajectory that the characters take through the city, giving to an overall descent into the “sur”, where the protagonist and her peers slowly lose control of their bodies, mood swings, and ability to control space, as joy and spatial exploration slowly give way to cognitive dissonance.

It is in the midst of this cycle that we witness the “momento privilegiado” that María alludes to early in the work – she crosses the limit of her urban imaginary and begins a descent into the south. For María, this “crossing over” is part and parcel of the combined fascination and fear that an *un-heimlich* urban experience would afford her; it occurs beyond the paternal space of the known, or quantified place, facilitating her attempt to leave behind the hallmarks of her staid childhood. But her lack of a cognitive compass also exposes her social naivety. María and her friends quickly run up against their limits when they attempt to consume and re-order the unknown geography of the south of the city, leading to the moment in which the until now *Bildungsroman* comes off the rails, and our protagonist begins to fantasize about a return home. Textually, María’s shift, and quick realization that she cannot return home, runs parallel to the change in music that has been a constant in the novel up until this point. The spatial shift, and cognitive dissonance that gives way to María’s doubt, is paralleled by the increasing clash between salsa and rock rhythms as she travels south. This spatial, musical, and cognitive transformation and distortion highlights four principal

characteristics in the novel: 1) a clear indebtedness to the cinematic register, 2) an emphasis on the *thrill* emphasized by cyclical drug use in the work, 3) a re-elaboration of the structure of the *Bildungsroman*, 4) and social instability expressed through urban design.

First, the challenge of the spatial norms of the *place* is articulated through a semantics of cinema: constant movement, visual contrast, and speed. It is telling that the narrative cycles begin with the symbolic light of the new, beginning in morning and ending in spaces associated with darkness and nightlife (María becomes a “*mujer de la noche*” by the end of the novel). The characters that we follow attempt to break with the standard cycle set by the cinematic use of light and dark through drug use and a saturation of the senses through music but eventually succumb to the natural cycle, giving signs of the balance between the *thrill* and the unwieldy. Yet, the errancy undertaken by María and her cohort corresponds to the anchor of a specific time. The exodus from the paternal-known city is haunted by a groundswell of vertigo when the characters move from the stability of the known *place*, which they constantly challenge, to the dizziness of the experience of a new *space*. A triple contrast, then, is established in the novel’s economy of space: interior/exterior, light/darkness, and stability/vertigo, all underscored by the shift from Rock to Salsa and from north to south.

Second, the *thrill* does not come when the protagonist and her peers confront the reality (the Real for Ospina) with which they challenge the safe symbolic order of the north, but in the trajectory: the *thrill* does not come from practice of dwelling in space but from the very act of errancy. The characters insist on the trajectory as a means of experiencing a fleeting sense of (apparent) power over the danger that errancy, itself, presupposes. In *Thrills and Regression*, Michael Balint characterizes the *thrill* according to three basic concepts: (a) the presence of a perceived external danger; (b) the desire to voluntarily expose oneself to danger; (c) and the assurance that the subject can withstand the fear caused by the danger and will eventually be able to safely return home to stability (23). Balint’s characteristics are all present in María’s journey, where she is confronted with an exterior, represented by the at once unknown, threatening, and seductive city, precisely at the place where the cognitive map of the lettered city drops off. Yet at the same time she willingly pursues the excitement that dropping out of the lettered system implies, all under the pretense that she can safely return home. And her constant drug use presents a similar pattern, in which the comedown that would suggest a safe return home is threatened by the renewal of the cycle in a new binge.

Third, while the structure of the *Bildungsroman* is apparent in *Que viva la música*, María presents a case, in which her emotional development follows an unorthodox pattern or, arguably, is suspended altogether. While María leaves home, and challenges both the spatial norms of place and the symbolic law of home, she becomes trapped in her search for her own space, becoming hung up in the errant state of the non-place, trapped between the two performative archives of the north and the south. Caicedo’s

narrative describes the simultaneous fascination and terror produced by the dissolution of the subject, the vertigo that causes a crisis of identity, and the loss of social and familial referents. In one instance, for example María claims:

Y me invadió, repentinamente, la alegría; sólo que no era fresca ni me produjo movimientos ni morisquitas sino como una actitud de espera. Alegría de enfrentar ese nuevo día cruzando el Valle, mientras mis padres, al otro extremo, se irían levantando apenas, mirándose a las nuevas arrugas y a colocarse inmóviles, debajo del chorro de agua hirviendo (156).

María's simultaneous attempt to overthrow the paternal order and to seek a *thrill* presents one of the many paradoxes in her actions. While she refuses her parents comfortable lifestyle, she, also, fails to affirm a new sense of self, as the *Bildungsroman* structure would prescribe – in *Que viva la música*, we observe, quite to the contrary of a healthy evocation of a new citizen, María and her friends' systematic self-destruction.

Fourth, the narrative structure of *Que viva la música* highlights social tensions as they are represented in urban design. Caicedo's Cali is strongly fragmented, separated into implicitly defined uses of the public consumption of space. And through upper-middle class María, the narration represents the violence of an inevitable clash between social strata, as she comes into contact with both the real and symbolic south in her search for a thrill in "la rumba" and "la noche". Here it is worth mentioning that a strong critical tradition, started, most notably, by Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer, has long considered the city a spatial ordering that is undergirded by the rationalization of social relations. And with this tradition in mind, the urbanist, Massimo Cacciari, claims that the city is "the stage, or the problem, of the rationalization of the production of social relations that follows the articulation of the means of production" (Cacciari 4, our translation). Through its design, the city geographically exposes its vertical relations of production through the appropriation of physical and symbolic capital; it highlights a geographic ordering, in which social order is readily visible. While social critique is unarguably not Caicedo's foremost concern, through María's trajectory, we read the apparent social ordering of 70s Cali. The fractured city is not as much a socio-economic commentary as it is testimony to the inevitable alienation originated in such a space, played out in *Que viva la música* through María's crisis of subjectivity, in which we witness the full extent of urban alienation.

In *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch defines the alienated city as spatial and symbolic terrain, in which its subjects cannot create a mental map, be it of the totalized urban space or of the subject's position there within. In keeping with Lynch's logic, the abandonment of alienation implies a practical overtaking of the subject's perceived space and the rearticulation of the city in which the subject creates a new cognitive map, in which he (or she) can dwell. While María seeks out Lynch's *rearticulation*, her urban

journey does not facilitate the constitution of a new social consciousness or of a positive reconstitution of urban space, nor does it imply her integration into the totality of the social structure, but more an unending errancy that fails to leave a lasting inscription on the city. The characters of *Que viva la música* do not ever interpret urban space as reflection, or symptom, of the social, but only as a border at which they seek a *thrill*. They fail to establish a connection between urban geography and a consciousness of imaginary relations that would link the subject to his (or her) *real* social conditions. For Fredric Jameson, at least, it is precisely this conjunction that allows “a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to the vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” (Jameson 51).<sup>4</sup> And Caicedo’s characters never fully capture the situational representation of their place within the social totality, but instead get caught up at the border of the clash between their upper-middle class affectations and Cali’s social and urban reality.

This border, at which María and her friends accompanied by gringo tourists and a set of affective signifiers unrecognizable to those in the south of the city, is the place in which traditional notions of the lettered city are challenged. Rather than an urban populace unified in aesthetic modernism, in the Cali of *Que viva la música*, we witness various forms of aesthetic experiences and registers that cause more discord than unification. The late-teens from the north of the city are not the only aesthetic citizens in cultural flux. While they may grapple with the wave of new cultural referents that came along with multinational investment during the late-*Frente Nacional*, the members of the south, in 70s Colombia, struggled with massive migration from the countryside to the city, leading to a largely failing urban infrastructure, as urban design failed to keep up with a rapidly growing populace that was unaccustomed to city life. This doubly destabilizing force, from one side – literally in the geographic sense –, the globally cosmopolitan, and from the other, the “unlettered” rural migrant, both destabilize the previously more legible and quantifiable city; or, as Marco Palacios puts it, “Se esfumó la hegemonía de la cultura letrada y elitista, laica o religiosa” (Palacios 321). María and her friends are not the only ones that challenge their parent’s norms; the city itself begins to resignify itself according to the rapidly shifting socioeconomic relations of the dynamic 1970s. The difference comes in the fact that María’s group, effectively, *slums it*, in search of a *thrill* that according the structure of *Bildungsroman* would typically lead to a

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<sup>4</sup> This “conjunction” corresponds to Jameson’s reading of the Althusserian definition of the concept of ideology. Yet, we owe the idea to reconceive and expand Althusser’s concept of ideology to Lynch’s geography to Jameson.



growing and maturing experience; but as the context and signs around them quickly change, they get lost in a suspended space between home and the unknown.

### Errant Narrations

In a rare moment of lucidity in the novel, one of María's friends, Rubén, stops in the middle of a salsa club to lament the fact that the moment and memory that he is experiencing in the rush of music and drugs is fleeting, which immediately leads him to call out for another song, followed, in keeping with the novel's rhythm, by another session of drug use: "...era que, como una estrella errante, le había venido una pizca de recuerdo: un trapo rojo que ondeaba a la luz reclamando otra canción" (137). Rubén is also an upper-middle class kid from the north of the city that does not get lost in drugs as much as he does in Salsa; and María identifies with his addiction to music, or the need to jump from one song to another in the sense that it resists being tied down to the logic of *place* put forth by the forms of logic that extends from both the presumably lettered north and the implied unlettered south.

As Gyan Prakash claims, urban space should be thought in terms of its use and occupation (Prakash 9). The city is more a protean event that bears the weight of human action than predetermined physical reality. To this we can add Lefebvre's theorization in *Production de l'espace* where he argues that the city consists of a practice of occupation. The urban dweller constantly re-elaborates the city through the trajectory of his (or her) routines and rhythms, all the while creating his (or her) own cognitive map of the urban design.

*Que viva la música* marks a clear attempt to complicate the city as construction of spatial signifiers, disturbing notions of both the lettered and unlettered city. Caicedo's characters look more for displacement and seek out a precise lack of a cognitive map, at first in search of a *thrill*, and later through the actual absence of a compass when the lack of space becomes *their new space*. María celebrates the lack of a symbolic and spatial anchor at the end of the novel, referring directly to the reader: "No accedas ni al arrepentimiento ni a la envidia ni al arribismo social. Es preferible bajar, *desclasarse*; alcanzar al término de una carrera que no conoció el esplendor, la anónima decadencia" (189; our emphasis). María's rebellion is one that resists as much a situation in space as a social classification, or a resistance of the socioeconomic order of the city. Yet, a close reading of María's motivations and large lack of ideology draws attention to the paradoxes in Caicedo's characters, on the hunt for a *thrill* that do not ever successfully leave their mark on the city through successful urban occupation, but instead continue to live a high that allows them to retreat and, to a large extent, ignore the city beyond their use of it as a space of fantasy.

In María's errant journeys, we read a triple lack of political articulation: 1) The failure to develop as a social citizen – the novel begins, for example, when María leaves her reading group to "salir de rumba"; or, as she claims ironically, "Leía mis libros, y

recuerdo íntimamente las tres reuniones que hicimos para leer *El Capital*. [...] Tres mañanas fueron, las de las reuniones, y yo le juro que lo comprendí todo, íntegro, la cultura de mi tierra.” 2) A resistance to integrate into the social structures reflected in the narrative semantics of the *Bildungsroman*: María thinks aloud during a harsh come down:

Nunca permitas que te vuelvan persona mayor, hombre respetable. [...] Aunque tengas los ojos en la nuca y se te empiecen a caer los dientes. Tus padres te tuvieron. Que te padres te alimenten siempre, y págalos con mala moneda. A mí qué. Jamás ahorres. Nunca te vuelvas una persona seria. Haz de la irreflexión y de la contradicción tu norma de conducta. Elimina las treguas, recoge tu amor en el daño, el exceso y la tembladera (188).

3) The refusal to leave a lasting inscription on the city, or a failure, on María’s behalf, to recognize her place within the socioeconomic articulation of the urban *place*.

Distancing himself from the most readily available aesthetics of urban subjectivity – the classic *flâneur* and the detective – Caicedo offers a character in María that is neither a meticulous observer of shifting urban life, nor a subject that attempts to flesh out reason in the city’s esoteric darkness. What Caicedo presents in *Que viva la música* is a downward spiral in which we read a progressive rhetoric of excess that undoes rather than affirms our urban subject in a moment of social flux. Through María, we do not read a coherent and rational urban space, be it through her articulation or otherwise, but the dissolution of the young urban traveler that is caught in errancy between competing sets of performative codes.

To the extent that language articulates its underlying social logic, Caicedo’s voice successfully captures these politically resistant Caleños and the social instability of both the migrant inflected south and the increasingly unlettered north, mirrored by Caicedo’s insistence on a colloquiality that undermines high communicative registers. Juan Duchesne-Winter claims, for instance, “Visto desde la perspectiva modernizadora que domina su entorno hispanoparlante, el virtuosismo lingüístico de Caicedo no contribuye a la técnica literaria, sino que la *arruina*, como el adolescente que se “daña” cuidadosamente la cara al sacarse las espinillas, o al perforar o tatuar su pie” (10; his emphasis). Through his play in language and space, the questions that Caicedo presents are: Is errancy a political act in itself or just a privilege of the upper-middle class youth? And to what extent do forced migration and urban errancy represent contrasting dimensions of a socio-economically unviable society? While we can hardly trust María’s ethical judgment by the end of the novel, some of her final ramblings, at least, complicate obvious answers:

Vivimos el momento de más significado en la historia de la humanidad, y es primera vez que se ha exigido tanto de los culimbos. Mi opinión modesta, viéndoles las caras, las bocas, de las ojeras, es que ellos, mis amigos, han cumplido. Somos la nota melosa que gemió el violín. Se reían del bugalú y mira ahora qué (187).

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