

# The Populist Imaginary: David Ireland's *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* and *The Chosen*

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Benedict Anderson has argued that the modern nation-state, theorised as an “imagined community,” is founded on the rise of a secular media, a media that not only provides a universal form of communication but also provides the stories that provide the basis of everyday ritual and shared community. Further, the rise of secular media has had determining effects on modern forms of history and memory in their national articulation. For Anderson the “imagined community,” however, is more than a set of relationships marked by shared practice or ritual; it is also an “imagined community” carefully monitored by an array of public institutions, be they governmental, bureaucratic or commercial. In other words, there is an enormous level of official concern in producing the “imagined community.” Against this understanding of the modern nation-state, we need to take into consideration Andreas Huyssen’s suggestion that the significance of the nation-state diminishes in a postmodern era in which cultural dynamics change the relationship between the global and the local. In *Twilight Memories*, Huyssen argues that in “an age of emerging supranational structures, the problem of national identity is increasingly discussed in terms of cultural or collective memory rather than in terms of the assumed identity of nation and state” (5). In the context of the contestation over Australian history, but arguing a similar transformation in the alliance of identity to the recovery of lost or omitted cultural and collective memories, Chris Healy argues for a post-nationalist opportunity in which we occupy “a landscape of memories not as a homeless place for lost souls but a ground from which new

flights of historical imagination might depart and to which they might return differently” (6).

I argue that in the shift from processes of state-nationalist identities to post-nationalist ones there emerges an opportunity for the re-figuration of a populist imaginary and an associated populist politics. By populist imaginary, I refer to a form of nostalgia, underwritten by processes of reminiscence and anecdote, which creates a sense of the past that imagines a social and political order that at once simplifies and “restores” a way of life based in community or collectivity in the face of the changing understanding of the relationship between the national and the global. Occasionally, this populist imaginary finds manifestation in political activity.

Currently the term populism generally refers to a form of political opportunism that can be described as lowest-common-denominator popularism and for the most part seems to be poll driven. This is, however, a departure from traditional understandings of populism. Traditionally, populism is associated with a certain form of nationalism or collectivity, a form of identification which assumes an essentialised and unchanging national or communal identity. Thus populism appears to be conservative, but it is a conservatism that can be embraced by both left and right politics. Such populism speaks to and for a “heartland” that feels betrayed by both government and private enterprise, especially financial institutions. An early example is the platform enunciated by the People’s Party in the US in 1892. The platform declares a distrust of centralised federal government and a perception that the government has surrendered American interests into the hands of European capitalists. In other words, the local and the national are betrayed to global capitalism and it is felt that the people are in danger of being disempowered. The preamble to the outline of party principles reads:

We realize that, while we have political independence, our financial and industrial independence is yet to be attained by restoring to our country the Constitutional control and exercise of the function necessary to people’s government which functions have been surrendered by our public servants to corporate monopolies. The influence of European moneychangers has been more potent in shaping legislation than the voice of the American people. Executive power and patronage have been used to corrupt our legislatives and defeat the will of the people, and plutocracy has thereby

been enthroned upon the ruins of democracy. To restore the government intended by the fathers, and for the welfare and prosperity of this and future generations, we demand the reestablishment of an economic and financial system which shall make us masters of our own affairs and independent of European control. (n. pag.)

In contemporary Australia, one might feel as if the One Nation Party is a direct descendant of such concerns. In 1997 Pauline Hanson's Support Movement suggested that Australians have become subject to the authority of a "class of raceless, placeless cosmopolitan elites" (qtd. in Bennett, Research Note 8). Here the People's Party platform, Pauline Hanson's pronouncements, and Huyssen's theorisation of post-nationalist sentiment underscore the problematic of the relationship between identity and community and also, importantly, the relationship between community and authority, an authority increasingly seen in global terms.

This problem is central to David Ireland's political critique of Australian society and culture. In so far as his work addresses perceived injustices in governmental, bureaucratic and industrial structures and processes, generally, Ireland's novels have a populist dimension. For Ireland the relationship between individual and community is a means to challenge the ways organisations put in place systems that forget, ignore or override the human. Added to the mix is Ireland's use of a diversity of voices which express different and often contradictory desires for individual freedom and social responsibility, and which, as a consequence, challenge the function of the national as an essence that resolves or holds in abeyance these contradictions.

For the purposes of this article, I focus on *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* and *The Chosen* because their publication coincides with two clearly populist moments in Australian politics—the election of the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972, and the emergence of The One Nation Party, later the Pauline Hanson One Nation Party, in the 1990s. In both instances, it could be argued, the electoral successes of the parties at the time represented an expression of voter disillusionment, if not disenfranchisement. The Whitlam government, coming to power on the populist campaign "It's Time," could not sustain a populist economic agenda, expressed in the idea of "buying back the farm"—that agenda collapsed in the face of the disastrous Kemlahni loans affair. Similarly, the One Nation Party's success was quickly eroded through internal factional disputes and through the Liberal Party's recuperation of the populist sentiment to its own policy settings.

At this point I do not want to suggest that Ireland's work represents a shifting allegiance from a leftist populism to a rightist one. Populist expression can easily be given a leftist or rightist interpretation. Ireland's work operates within what I call a populist imaginary, one that reacts to the contemporary but also takes as a problematic a mythic or nostalgic "memory" that configures a past to which we might return as individuals or as a collective. Generally, the populist response is to call for a return to "traditional" values, although these are only articulated in terms of an abstract nationalism that once had apparent material existence. You know you are in a populist moment when what constitutes the nation and national identity occupies "political" debate. In the Australian context the requestioning/redefining of Australianness, at times, has been almost more important than the questioning of Australia's place in a globalising economy. Yet in 2004 Prime Minister John Howard asserted that the question of Australianness has been finally put to rest:

This country has put aside its sense of introspection and examination and [sic] its identity. There is no longer that perpetual seminar about Australia's cultural identity. We no longer agonise as to whether we're too close to the British, or too close to somebody else or whether we are Asian enough or European enough or whether we're going in the right direction so far as our sense of purpose is concerned because we are undeniably and unapologetically 100 per cent Australian. (n. pag.)

That said, one of the commonalities between *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* and *The Chosen* is the very question of Australianness and how it is continuously subject to redefinition in relation to other forces. One place Australianness achieves momentary concretisation is within populist frameworks. In the case of *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*, Ireland addresses the interrelationship between the local, national and the global, whereas in *The Chosen* he focuses on the local as a way of refiguring larger processes of identity formation.

In *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* populist discourse is diffuse, operating as a form of debate primarily through the characters of Far Away Places, a dreamer of pastoral alternatives to industrialism; the Samurai, something of an outsider in his belief in industrial utopianism; and the Great White Father, a fatalist who takes it upon himself to provide distractions and entertainment for his fellow workers. Kerry Goldsworthy notes that Ireland's "atomised" narrative style throughout his writing allows a multiplicity of characters whose voices and opinions unsettle any identification of a narratorial authority (26). While this also is true of

*The Chosen*, populist expression becomes more explicit through an out-of-character disquisition by the narrator Davis Blood, and thus the populist operates more clearly in *The Chosen* than in *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*. However, it is also important to draw attention to the fact that the expression of the populist is often countered in this novel by a gothic representation of social structures. Indeed, Goldsworthy goes so far as to describe *The Chosen* as a “dark pastoral,” a descriptor which also would not be out of place in describing *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*. While the significance of a populist sensibility lies in its valorisation of certain forms of collectivity, Goldsworthy points out that in *The Chosen*, if not throughout Ireland’s fiction, the social, the collective and the individual are not without a cruelty, often signified through gothic forms, functioning as a warning to not totally embrace populism’s utopian valence.

Populist sensibility, then, is shadowed by the gothic. The relationship between the populist and the gothic is expressed through the complex interaction of memory and desire and how it functions to produce a nostalgic vision of community. For example, in *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*, the character Far Away Places imagines a place different from Puroil:

If only a man could get away. A small farm somewhere. A man could produce all he needed to eat, you’d never go near places like this, never be herded on to an assembly line or process and never muck in with people you hated. Other people. Keep to yourself. A few sheep, fruit trees, bit of a garden. Christ it was a glorious dream! It was freedom. Freedom? It was isolation and that was better. Feel of the wind on your face, the sun warming you, the grass growing the same as it had for millions of years. Mending the fences. Enough food for you and the dogs. A dream. (13)

The dream is one of what was and what might be and in that sense captures something of the populist. However, there is a coda which brings us back to a gothic version of the everyday, an everyday that diminishes human potential, suggesting that one cannot live the dream. Far Away continues:

A man wakes up one day, realizes the world was made for other people and knows he’s going to be at the arse end all his life. Nothing here for a man to live on. A pay packet stops you from dying, it doesn’t teach you to live. (13-14)

To a degree Far Away Places’ dream is always already undermined. We have been told that the populist and pastoral vision to which Far Away subscribes is already degraded:

The country towns had nothing to offer, no new cities were being developed or dams built in the country's dead centre; prisoners were allowed to drift jobless to the few large coastal cities from all over Australia as soon as they left school, to choose their place of detention. . . . There was an alternative. Without alternatives there can be no democracy. There was an infinite freedom of choice: they could starve sitting, standing, asleep or awake. . . . They weren't compelled by others to apply for any one place of labour, but they understood that once accepted for detention their boss or commandant had power over them just as great and far more immediate than the government of the country. (3)

This vision of the social is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century figuration of the nation divided: the modernist project of emancipation and democratisation has been blunted by industrial capitalism.

However, the Samurai occupies a different and somewhat isolated position in the novel. He is an industrial utopian believing that industry can deliver freedom and democracy. He sees the way that industry is organised as preventing the realisation of his utopian ideal. For example, the novel focuses on the technological transmogrification of the Puroil plant and how the upgrade produces niche specialisations but omits to establish communication between those specialisations. The right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing. The system produces the conditions of its own breakdown. As far as the Samurai is concerned, complexification produces relations of power between employer and employee that are reductive, exploitative and ultimately unsustainable.

The Samurai shares with the Great White Father an understanding of this relationship between employer and employee. But they have different responses. The Samurai pities his fellow workers but maintains a faith in the industrial, whereas the Great White Father is fatalistic, and offers distraction and entertainment rather than revolution and reform. The narrator reflects on the Great White Father's attitude to the workers:

Poor sods—thinking of the men herded inside the cyclone wire fence topped with tight barbed wire—they have to be told they are human. Where had they all got off track? Was it when they were children, forced to knuckle under in schools, made to leave their humanity outside the well-drilled classroom? . . . Why did they have to be taught again later that their humanity could be brought inside the classroom and the factory fence? Sooner or later

someone has to teach them freedom. . . . He was no frustrated missionary like the Samurai. He was teaching these poor wretches, trained to captivity, to make life bearable. It was a shameful and unblessed thing to take the scum of people and wicked condemned men to be the seed with which to plant a nation. (20)

The Samurai has the same insight but is suspicious of the Great White Father's solution:

he felt rising in himself all the pity he felt for his fellow prisoners. Granted they may have been conceived casually, brought up lazily, educated carelessly, but they were here. On earth. Why? To feed the appetite of industry and work to foolish regulation for the sake of a few free men in the world? And they kept ignorant of the fact they were slaves. . . .

It was cruel. They got no joy from their lives, only the respite of oblivion in alcohol, dreams in drugs, relief in sport or in the Great White Father's underground movement. . . . (70)

In effect, the Samurai presents a revolutionary populism in contrast to the Great White Father's nihilistic one, a sense of populist progress versus populist acceptance.

While it is not clear just who is the "author" of *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* (Far Away Places and the Samurai seem contenders), in effect we are presented with a diary or a chronicle of the workings of Puroil and the workers efforts to circumvent the inefficiencies and the inequalities of the company. *The Chosen* repeats the form. It is a chronicle in that it documents the histories or, more precisely, the stories of some fifty residents of the country town Lost River. However, these narratives are linked through the role of Davis Blood, commissioned by the town council to produce a tapestry that captures something of the history and character of fifty ratepayers selected at random. Against the history of these characters Davis reveals the story of his relationship with, and his longing for, a lost love, Yerrow. The weaving of these stories into the tapestry becomes not only an exercise in memory and community but also a populist foundational project. That is to say, the tapestry is not a historical record but a basis on which history and memory can be made, a mythic point of return. Davis's task is to

weave the listed names into a tapestry and have it done in a year.

A sample of the lives of Lost River's present-day people, a kind of what-it-was-to-be-them, to go into the history of the town for as long as the wool and linen yarn, and the town, held together.

(7)

At issue then is not to memorialise what Lost River was but rather to lay the ground for future memories.

That this may be a nationalist issue is not lost on Ireland when he has Davis examine the tapestry of his own life. What is inescapable in the passage is, first, the metonymic link between the national and the individual and, second, an understanding that the ground on which memory is produced is loss. Davis tells us:

I looked into the part of me which contained a lifetime's interwoven desires, experiences and delayed decisions, and picked over a jumble of unacted desires and odd souvenirs. One was a postcard of the Reception Hall tapestry in Parliament House. Another was a baby's white sock, one of a pair my mother Lillian kept when my brother Jonathan was born dead. All those years ago. Any sadness should long since have been washed out of the white cotton. (4)

However, over the course of the novel the simple link between individual and national memory is problematised, not only because the tapestry is a mediated object coloured by Davis's impressions and choices, but also because foundational projects tend to draw on a populist imaginary, which in itself cannot provide an assured and shared value structure. Thus the project becomes increasingly impossible. When Davis first meets Duke Jensen, described as a rural jack-of-all trades for having worked as slaughterman, plasterer, fireman and one of the prospective contributor's to Davis's project, Duke's first words are "The past isn't what it used to be, mate" (311).

Here, Duke simplifies the issue addressed by Andreas Huyssen. As noted previously, the "imagined community" is carefully monitored by an array of public institutions, exemplified by, as Anderson recognises, the public monument or institutions like the Gallery or the Museum—and in the case of Ireland's fictional Lost River, the commemorative tapestry. However, because we now experience a globalised media, it becomes almost impossible, as Huyssen argues, to locate identity in large communities, so that necessarily there is a drift from the institution monitoring the imagined community (often perceived as a betrayal of that community) to a more populist expression of it. Davis Blood speculates:

There were times in Lost River when the streets were empty, as if the town had died. Also at night, with lights in the street, and in the blinded windows, a TV flicker here and there, but no sound.

Peculiar. I suppose there was life going on behind those blinds. Were they in touch, were they on the phone to other townspeople, or was it the Feynman effect, where they'd got too close to others during the day, and been hurled apart, to lodge safe and alone in their separate rooms? (197)

Implicit here is the potential demise of Lost River and hence the loss of any ground for future memories. The recovery of both is highly problematic, especially in such an archaic object as a tapestry. For a tapestry is a form of record that is pre-modern and exploits an older form of memory, one, which as Raphael Samuel reminds us, is primarily visual: "the art of memory, as it was practised in the ancient world, was a pictorial art, focusing not on words but on images" (viii).

This reliance on a pre-modern form of memorialisation is crucial to Davis's project. For the most part his reading of character is in terms of simile, as if likeness can concretise an impression, give veracity to a moment, render a picture of history. For example, Howie Gleet is described as "busy as a Pilliigo pocket platypus"; Lord Henry Ball has an expression of "alert seriousness, like a car passenger suspicious of the brakes"; or Leanne Fusby has "eyes that could get angry as a hot gun barrel." This invocation of the visual and its mnemonic power is important in Davis Blood's view of memory and history as significantly more populist than an official or disciplinary recording of a nation's history.

Directly after Duke Jensen's comment, Davis offers the following explication, one that needs to be quoted at length:

Way down beneath the concreted and proliferating super-structures of bureaucracy, unnoticed in the pronouncements, there is a world passed on from parents, relatives, neighbours and the past; a republic of deep custom where all are equal in being different from everyone else. In each town, often each suburb, sometimes every street, there's a republic of personal custom for each individual to live in, developed during a lifetime of rubbing along, fitting in, learning about each other, finding in which direction the itch of freedom, interest, and desire is eased. And further republics of local custom and history and relationships which can take a visitor years to discover and longer to understand. Republics . . . where the grey-headed often do the indoctrinating of the very young before anyone else can get to them.

There are invisible schools: family, group, team, street, shop, factory, office, suburb. There are places of worship, secular worship too, temples of obligation, arenas of risk, risky corners, dangerous families. . . .

Order in these republics is not the work of government. Government is the ultimate stranger, the one least welcome. . . .

These are deepsea people, whose lives go on far below the storms at the surface of what passes for civilised, cultured or metropolitan life. For them, examination of their lives is momentary, infrequent, and usually distasteful. . . .

Deepsea people don't need the theologies, philosophies and other word games that occupy the educated. For them just to live is enough: to breathe, taste, laugh, feel, and enjoy the gentle pull and sway of the seafloor current. The deepsea is their landscape, their peace, their Eden, their inner map, and it lives in them, so that simply to be, or not to be, is the answer, not the question. . . .

Deepsea people have their own republics of information, rules, correctness, norms, holy words . . . and above all, speech patterns in which so much of them and their past is preserved. And these republics are the perfect buffer between individual and state. . . .

Those high above them find it difficult—since they themselves have abandoned community for higher things—to see what the deepsea people see in their lives, lived often in the comfort of beliefs their betters have abandoned but which still have utility for them. . . . The submerged knowledges of women, farmers, mechanics, derelicts, gardeners, carpenters, give meaning to the power that resides in and radiates from each individual. . . .

They have their own hierarchies of influence, power, knowledge and riches. . . . They have neither time nor inclination to enter their interior, the vast Australia within them, with its distances, illusions, silent voices and protean past. They have a community which is not open to, and often unknown to, those who see themselves on a higher level, closer to the surface of the illusory with-it world imagined in magazines, but who are peculiarly isolated and have no buffer between them and an empire-building state, in whose grip they are relatively helpless. (311-13)

Clearly, for Davis Blood, the significance of memory is one that is too important to be left to the modern nation-state.

As already noted, this re-emphasises the relation of identity to memory and place squarely in terms of the collective or cultural rather than the national. Davis Blood articulates a solution or at least a vision that escapes the limited views expressed by characters in *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*. In both novels the recovery of the forgotten and the role of memory are significant. The desire to restore what has been written out can invoke the wrath of the official or can be dismissed as fancifully nostalgic, a mode of memory that has a basis only in a degraded populist imaginary. Or as Fredric Jameson would have it, in postmodernity nostalgia dehistoricises and commodifies the past to the point of erasing any understanding of history and, by implication, any sense of the place of that history.

Against the figuring of populist elements of memory as nostalgic, David Lowenthal argues the case for the idea of reminiscence. Reminiscence is different from nostalgia and greater than the anecdotal. For Lowenthal nostalgia can be thought of as the recollection of lost opportunity, whereas reminiscence can be regarded as a dynamic process at the core of the relationship between place and memory that can function as a challenge to the official through reinstating a materiality that the official cannot completely ignore. The reminiscent is a mode of memory underlying the republic Davis Blood talks about; the reminiscent is a mode of knowledge that is communal and provides a foundation for a vital populist imaginary and its relation to the official. Within such a dynamic, place functions as a mnemonic that grounds a sense of identity, relationship and history.

Davis Blood's tapestry negotiates the official, the populist imaginary and the reminiscent. But he is aware, for all his effort to satisfy the desire of the members of the town council to produce something that concretises Lost River's history, that his labour may merely amount to a gesture, a mere pointing toward something intangible which escapes both the image and the word, regardless of the apparent simplicity of the lives of his informants. Whereas in *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* we see in the destruction of the Puroil an accidental if apocalyptic conclusion to history and an ultimate questioning of individual and communal agency, Davis Blood maintains a faith in the capacity of individuals and communities to story their own histories, thus providing the basis for some social, perhaps populist, dynamic. In contrast, the story of King Khan indicates that simplicity of one's own story can unsettle a communal one. On the one hand, his story appears to be an instance of the republic of difference

that Davis Blood believes in; on the other hand, his story transforms the idea of “the same-but-different” into a hierarchy of difference, thus problematising Blood’s vision.

King Khan in part inherits the image of the bushman, having led an itinerant work-life before settling in Lost River. He is tough but mild-mannered unless provoked. The name echoes the significance of the giant ape King Kong, and signals the threat of difference. King Khan is figured as something of a natural athlete and fighter:

The King, with a look like a crack of a stock whip, would take a second to weigh his opponent’s height accurately, and his reach, and begin to fight lyrically, the onlookers fascinated by the sprung rhythm of the punches, usually straight as the line of sight, and the reflexes, sharp as a wagtail’s. (432)

In his story, King tells of his heritage, and for the first time questions of race and ethnicity enter the equation of community. To understand how his story acts as a counter to Davis Blood’s vision, it is important to quote at length. He tells us:

“I have an old feeling . . . that I’d like to have been one of the first black farmers, but I haven’t got what it takes. Like the town too much, being near people, being an employee, the grog and the pub. It’d be good to own land and rent it out; is that being a parasite, like Dad said the whites were? Over the other side of the puddle in America, the Oonala, the Sioux nation, I read in the papers, are farmers now and go to school and look like everyone else. We will, eventually, when all this dies down. I’m not having my kids running round the bush with nulla-nullas. I know I’ve run away from the spirit things, but the stories I know are all white stories. You have to be honest what made you.

“So. I’m me first, a voter second, part-Aboriginal third, plus Afghan and white. The stone and slate, I feel, is just a matter of rearranging the old rocks, not destroying. . . . I feel a kind of loyalty to the old culture; it was primitive and complicated at the same time, it fitted us and the land. No cities, no written records . . . nothing permanent, only boundaries and ritual. And the sharing was compulsory. I reckon that part was invented so no one could get above the rest . . . but the white ways are stronger. . . . Staying equal means staying poor. . . . I’ll take these ways any time. . . .

“Funny being able to think with the black and the white parts of me. Maybe I fight with the Afghan bit. We whites

evolved ways to feed large numbers of people. I can't ever go back. I'm sort of, what is it, exile from three lots of homes. I'm a stranger to the bush. This is the country that knows me, with shops and streets. . . . I'd be a liar to say I believed in the Rainbow Snake. . . . And if blacks were bosses I wouldn't take too kindly to being told as a white that I must retain my religion and observe sacred sites." (433-35)

In describing himself as first an individual and second a citizen, King Khan locates precisely within a European tradition of the modern nation-state and in doing so reinscribes the imaginary community that Anderson identifies as linking individual to national identity.

However, in hierarchising difference which appears to privilege blackness, King locates himself in one of those republics that resist the dominant. This is complicated further in his speculation that, while he thinks with "the black and the white parts," he fights with the Afghan part, and it is his fighting ability that affords him any respect in Lost River. Thus, at any moment the hierarchy of difference is continually negotiated but always within the framework of the dominant. And to complicate things further, he says that, when he fights:

"Funny how, when the chips are down, the black in me comes out, and I feel this Gubba's shoulderblades are on the thin skin of bitumen that separates all of us from the sacred soil of my people, and I'm acting kind of in an official capacity." (436)

Khan's story, while emphasising difference, remains emblematic of Davis Blood's republican thesis. Membership of any republic, although grounded in individualism, may not be too far away from some assertion of national identity; but membership of any republic grounded in individualism may compromise a sense of national identity through cultural and collective assemblages or alliances that articulate difference. And the foundation of any future memory or history is unsettled by such a paradox.

To a degree what Ireland achieves in *The Chosen* and *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* is best described in Chris Healy's reflection on his work *From the Ruins of Colonialism*: "a gesture towards learning to inhabit landscapes of memory which are, in part, landscapes littered with ruins; some archaic and others nightmarish, some quaint simulations and others desperate echoes" (6). *The Chosen* and *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* attempt to negotiate national and collective identity through a necessary investigation of the interrelationship between history, memory and the populist imaginary. The novels privilege

pre-modern forms of recording the past and the everyday—the diary, the tapestry—but in doing so they risk being dismissed as nostalgic. Nevertheless they succeed in demonstrating the significance of individual and collective storying, understood as both a form of reminiscence and, as I have argued, an expression of the populist imaginary. Thus, the felt presence of the populist imaginary must be understood as indicative of a return to, and a new iteration of, a foundational moment, suggesting that the question of national or collective identity can never be totally settled, and that identity is always a pattern of recurrence. As such, we await its moment in an ever present next time.

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