

# ECOTRANSLATION: A JOURNEY INTO THE WILD THROUGH THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

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## Abstract

How and when are ecological values born? Which is the human perspective of the natural world and how is this conveyed through language? How are current environmental issues represented and subsequently transmitted through translation into new cultural spaces where other values prevail? As a cultural construct, ecology is an interdisciplinary aspect of environmental studies, which have gradually pervaded and affected various (if not every) domain in culture over the past fifty years. This same period has witnessed the development of translation studies and their subsequent shift towards the cultural studies. Considering that translation is in itself the epitome of cultural transference, and it is thus a crucial discipline in the realm of the ecological movement, this paper aims at looking into the complexities of transnational environmental relationships established by translation and exploring how established models can be torn down and rules can be rewritten through paradigm shifts generated by means of translation. Thus, we have structured our work in four main sections: ecological thought throughout history, the language of nature, ecocriticism, and ecotranslation. The latter, as a linguistic ecological practice, is illustrated by three case studies. Our objectives arise from the fact that we have surveyed much literature where, owing to different reasons including the historic period in which the translation was made, mistranslations have silenced the voice of nature. We believe that uniting ecology and translation may present a new approach to translating, contribute to foster debate on ecological issues, and eventually raise awareness and generate change.

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**Keywords:** Translation, ecocriticism, ecology, ecotranslation

## Introduction:

As a cultural construct, ecology is an interdisciplinary aspect of environmental studies. Similarly, translation is in itself the epitome of cultural transference. Over the past fifty years, and as a result of crucial

works such as Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring*<sup>29</sup>, which synthesized many environmental concerns existing in society at the time, environmental studies gained momentum and a certain perspective, pervading and affecting various (if not every) domain in culture. This same period has witnessed the development of translation studies and their subsequent shift towards the cultural studies. This paper aims at looking into the complexities of transnational environmental relationships established by translation – and its resulting work – and exploring how established models can be torn down and rules can be rewritten through paradigm shifts generated through language.

Environmental studies and translation studies are interdisciplinary, academic fields. When they come into contact, a series of unresolved matters intersect: How ecological values are deemed; which is the human perspective of the natural world and how this is conveyed through language, and how current environmental issues are represented and subsequently transmitted through translation into new cultural spaces where different notions about the environment prevail. Unlike what has occurred in other translation areas that center around the political relations and stances of translators and their critics – such as feminist, postcolonial, black or queer translation – there are virtually no works discussing the voice of nature and the way it may be silenced (or revealed and discovered) through translation.

Likewise, it is noteworthy that in spite of the political weight of environmental thinkers and the political correctness movement pervading other realms of culture, translation has not quite become an area of interest for ecology yet.

We believe that uniting ecology and translation – presumed divergent fields so far – may foster debate on ecological issues, contribute to raise awareness, and present a different way to tackle translation. Our objectives arise from the fact that we have surveyed much literature where mistranslations have silenced the voice of nature. We believe that translation may facilitate or hamper communication, and we trust that the best way to continue building bridges is learning the engineering and the architecture of language: Its structure and its beauty.

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<sup>29</sup> *Silent Spring* is a book written by Rachel Carson published in 1962 warning about the harmful effects of pesticides on the environment and blaming the chemical industry of the growing pollution. While many scientists dismissed it as unrealistic, others consider it the first serious work on ecology and it has become a classic on ecological awareness.

Those who supported the author were able to have the United States Department of Agriculture revise its policies on pesticides and ban DDT by law.

In 2006, *Silent Spring* ranked in the top 25 most influential scientific books of all times by the editors of *Discover Magazine*

## I. Ecological Thought throughout History

From the birth of Western civilization, we have been taught to understand that the role of *man* on earth was that of dominance over nature. In the Bible, when God adorns His creation with plants and animals, He grants Adam the power to name them: “So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field, and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Genesis 2:19). This anthropocentric vision – justified in the West by canonical texts such as the Bible – has accounted for the most diverse atrocities against nature. *Man* is thus invested with absolute and supreme power over his surroundings by express orders of the Creator.

From Antiquity throughout the Middle Ages, extreme dogmatism contributed to preserving the *status quo* regarding environmental matters based on the premise of the Divine mandate which granted *man* control over the Earth – or at least the parts of it known to him. We may even argue that this zeal to conquer the world in the name of God was what eventually led to the voyages of discovery.

Nature always charmed human beings. As Adam in the Bible, explorers, artists and politicians became eager to label their discoveries. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a young naturalist called Alexander von Humboldt embarked on a five-year journey around Latin America in order to study and classify species unknown in Europe. His scientific method set the grounds for biogeography as it is known today. Influenced by Humboldt, Charles Darwin developed his own work in journeys in South America: He put forth his theories of population growth, the inevitable limitation of food supply and the survival of the fittest as mechanisms of natural selection and biological evolution.

Even though the 20th century brought about the dwindling of religious beliefs in favor of extreme existentialism, attacks against nature still found justification – this time in science – which came to take the place of religion. The revolution in thought of the 1960s gave birth to the ecological movement, which emerged as a social, collective cry in defense of the environment transcending national, religious and class boundaries.

In “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary,” Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1995) establishes two opposing ecological practices: Shallow ecology, which is mostly concerned with fighting “against pollution and resource depletion [whose central objective is] the health and affluence of people in the developed countries” (p. 3), and deep ecology, where the individual and the universe are a unit and where non-human life has intrinsic value beyond whatever use human

beings can make of it. Naess states that shallow ecology practices and beliefs are rooted in the anthropocentric vision which upholds the human/nature dichotomy based on individual qualities and differences such as reason, which grants human beings a superior status. On the other hand, his ecocentric vision does not distinguish between human beings and all other animal, vegetal and mineral beings. It does not recognize hierarchies between these entities as it believes that the same laws guide all existence on the face of the Earth. In this way, ecology as a science and ecology as a spiritual dimension are visions coexisting within the ecocentric philosophy.

### **The Language of Nature**

How do these perspectives affect our perception of our surroundings? Literary texts which grant the environment its own first-person voice are a negligible minority. By contrast, we usually hear the voice of nature through third-party narrators. Throughout the history of English-language literature, numberless authors have been captivated by nature's beauty, entranced by its wisdom and enchanted by its power.

When referring to nature, literary discourse generally makes use of description or descriptive narratives with profuse use of adjectives. Personification is perhaps the most widely used figure of speech, assigning the environment quasi-human or animalistic qualities. In descriptions, nature has been depicted as a human kindred spirit or a sanctuary for the individual, an entity which is indivisible from man, or as a belligerent space between its own elements, with the individual, or with society.

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, ecological concerns gave birth to the ecological dystopia or perverse ecological utopia in many postmodern novels. In these works, conflict arises as a consequence of environmental problems: Descriptions are harsh and the worlds created are the setting, be it urban or natural, where human beings suffer the consequences of the actions of their forefathers.

### **Ecocriticism**

The term ecocriticism was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" branching out from the cultural studies. It gained momentum in the 1970s and reemerged, as matter of course, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is defined in general terms as the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. As other movements within the cultural studies, ecocriticism aims to offer an ecological reading of literary texts to recuperate works overlooked in the past due to the lack of a consistent theoretical framework for their assessment. It also means to offer a theoretical corpus where new literary productions may be studied. The movement is a response to

modernity, which it deems deaf to the voice of the earth. It reflects the spirit of the time of liberationist movements which formed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Cheryll Glotfelty (1995) in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (p. xviii). This is a multidisciplinary movement by nature: As ecology itself, critics working today along these lines carry out research within the various areas that run through contemporary ecology and apply it to their literary readings. Ecocriticism ponders questions related to mimesis, the representation of nature, the role of the environment in plot development, the ecological (or antiecological) values of a literary work, the use of recurrent figures of speech or natural motifs and discourse characterization. Ecocriticism researches the cultural effects of green literary texts, be they canonical or not, on society, the interdisciplinary relationships these texts produce and the ideas that spring from these relationships in the Humanities.

### **Ecotranslation**

One of the matters most discussed in translation studies has been the issue of the translator’s invisibility. According to Lawrence Venuti (1998), invisibility refers to two different interrelated phenomena: the discursive effect, or the use of language that the translator makes, and a reading practice, or the way in which translations are received and valued. In line with this issue of the translator’s invisibility as a political agenda to establish Anglophone discourses in foreign cultures outside the United States and effacing foreign marks in the Anglophone world, Gideon Toury and Itamar Even-Zohar’s polysystems theory (1978-1997) maintains that literary systems function and evolve under a variety of social restrictions. Considering that a translation as a product struggles to become part of the target culture’s repertoire, and that this new work will build new paradigms, or modify existing ones, at the heart of ecotranslation lies the idea that, if Western thought has traditionally produced grave consequences upon nature, should ecological ideas gain predominance, there should be a positive impact upon the environment. In order for translators to effect such systemic changes, ecotranslation puts forth the adoption of three different approaches: Rereading and retranslating literary works where nature, having its own voice in the source text, was silenced in translation; translating works that present an ecological cosmovision and have not yet been translated; and translating via manipulation works that do not originally present an ecological vision with the aim of creating a new, now ecological, text. To

illustrate how these stances are implemented in actual translation practice, we will provide three case studies.

### **Retranslation**

The cultural studies have frequently made a point of rereading old texts in light of contemporary cosmovisions. In this sense, we propose selecting works to be retranslated in order to recuperate the lost voice of nature. New Zealand author Katherine Mansfield's work presents ample instances of natural accounts in her prose that pay homage to her native homeland. "At the Bay" (1912) offers a broad catalogue of adjectives for creating mood and atmosphere. The story opens with a description of dawn on the beach:

Very early morning. The sun was not yet risen and the whole of Crescent Bay was hidden under a white sea-mist. The big bush-covered hills at the back were smothered. You could not see where they ended and the paddocks and bungalows began. The sandy road was gone and the paddocks and the bungalows the other side of it; there was no white dunes covered with reddish grass beyond them; there was nothing to mark which was beach and where was the sea. A heavy dew had fallen. The grass was blue. Big drops hung on the bushes and just did not fall; the silvery, fluffy toi-toi was limp on its long stalks, and all the marigolds and the pinks in the bungalow gardens were bowed to the earth with wetness. Drenched were the cold fuchsias, round pearls of dew lay on the flat nasturtium leaves. It looked as though the sea had beaten up softly in the darkness, as though one immense wave had come rippling, rippling – how far? Perhaps if you had waked up in the middle of the night, you might have seen a big fish flicking in at the window and gone again. (Mansfield, 1983: 212)

Interestingly, this misty sunrise blurs the landscape and highlights the color palette. The humidity of the environment is reflected in lexical strings and semantic fields and the prevailing phonemic resource is the alliteration of liquid sounds which somehow mimic the movement of the sea.

Leonor Acevedo de Borges's translation also portrays a foggy, humid sunup, but different decisions in her translation take certain qualities away that may have otherwise been interesting to analyze from the point of view of ecocriticism:

De mañana, muy temprano. Aún no se había levantado el sol, y la bahía entera se escondía bajo una blanca niebla llegada del mar. Al fondo, las grandes colinas recubiertas de maleza, aparecían sumergidas. No se podía ver dónde acababan, dónde

empezaban las praderas y los *bungalows*. La carretera arenosa había desaparecido, con los *bungalows* y los pastos al otro lado; más allá, no se veían más que dunas blancas cubiertas de una hierba rojiza; nada indicaba qué era playa, ni dónde se encontraba el mar. Había caído un abundante rocío. La hierba era azul. Gruesas gotas colgaban de los matorrales, dispuestas a caer sin acabar de caer; el *toi-toi* plateado y flecudo pendía flojamente de sus largos tallos. La humedad inclinaba hasta la tierra todos los ranúnculos y claveles de los jardines. Estaban mojadas las frías fucsias. Redondas perlas de rocío descansaban en las hojas llanas de las capuchinas. Se hubiese dicho que el mar había venido a golpear dulcemente hasta allí, en las tinieblas, que una ola inmensa y única había venido a chapotear, a chapotear. . . ¿Hasta dónde? Quizás, al despertarse a mitad de la noche, se hubiera podido ver un pez gordo rozar bruscamente la ventana y huir. . . (Acevedo de Borges, 1982: 17)

In the English text, the narrator points out that this morning “the sandy road [. . .] the paddocks and the bungalows the other side of it” are no longer visible. The three elements in this catalogue share the human intromission in the natural context. In her translation, Acevedo de Borges opts for “La carretera arenosa había desaparecido, con los *bungalows* y los pastos al otro lado”. Her choices take the strength away from the ubiquitous presence of nature and the dwindling of artificial constructions. Spanish interference may have made Acevedo de Borges translate “paddock” first as “prado” (meadow) and then as “pastos” (grass) due to phonetic closeness between the source and the target languages, as opposed to “corral” or “potrero”. The point at hand here is that in the source text nature makes those man-made constructions vanish, while in the translation mixing artificial constructions and natural landforms subtract personality, entity and power to nature as Mansfield saw it. Similarly, the flowers mentioned, “ranúnculos y claveles” (buttercups and carnations), present both phonological and semantic problems. The former comes to engross the alliteration problems discussed below whereas the latter, in the Spanish-speaking world is a flower with a mortuary connotation, as it is typically presented on caskets and coffins. As pointed out, the original text offers different alliterations of liquid sounds which evoke the murmur of the sea. Acevedo de Borges, opts for the repetition of the /f/ sound, in “frías fucsias”, and the liquid /r/ sound, in “Redondas perlas de rocío”, which, when combined, evoke the sound of a steam engine, rather than that of the waves. Finally, the choice of the verb “chapotear” (splash) to describe the rippling of the waves also silences the voice of nature since in two of its three meanings in Spanish, the term

indicates sounds produced by moving feet or hands in the water: once more the human hand becomes an uncalled-for presence. In that respect, perhaps the verb “rizar”, which does not recognize a human agent, may transmit the same image as the source. Ecocriticism offers the ecotranslator the tools to better understand the source text in ecological terms and assess the ecological underlying values of its target text. What happens between these two moments depends to a large extent on the political stance of the translator.

### **Translation**

Another strategy often adopted in contemporary cultural studies in unearthing texts overlooked in the past due to their seeming lack of canonical interest. In tune with this strategy, ecotranslation seeks undiscovered or lost works with ecological value to innovate the existing repertoire with new translated texts. Canadian author Charles G. D. Roberts was born in 1860 and grew up amidst the debate about Darwin’s theory of evolution which presented Nature as a senseless chaos. Roberts’ writings reflect a Darwinian vision of Nature: he wrote realistic animal fiction. The main characters are animals and the narrative is built from their point of view, not from that of the human observer who tells the story. Thus, animals have feelings of sadness, happiness or fear, and think, understand, and act accordingly.

“When Twilight Falls on the Stump Lots” (Roberts, 1902), published in Spanish as “Cuando en crepúsculo cae sobre los campos talados” (Badenes & Coisson, 2009) tells about the difficulties of a bear seeking food in the early spring. Hibernation has ended and upon awaking, the world around her is no longer the way she remembers it:

The winter had contributed but scanty snowfall to cover the bear in her sleep; and the March thaws, unseasonably early and ardent, had called her forth to activity weeks too soon. Then frosts had come with belated severity, sealing away the budding tubers, which are the bear’s chief dependence for spring diet; and worst of all, a long stretch of intervale meadow by the neighbouring river, which had once been rich in ground-nuts, had been ploughed up the previous spring and subjected to the producing of oats and corn. When she was feeling the pinch of meagre rations, and when the fat which a liberal autumn of blueberries had laid upon her ribs was getting as shrunken as the last snow in the thickets, she gave birth to two hairless and hungry little cubs. (Roberts, 1935: 276)

This third-person narrative identifies with the bear/protagonist of the story and narrates the mother’s anguish when she finds it difficult to provide



food for her offspring. Words suggesting the rigor of the environment such as “ardent”, “severity” and “meagre” are noticeable in the short story as, in true protoecological fashion, Roberts is careful to highlight that animal life changes when the human hand interferes with their environment.

Aware of the way in which actual translation decisions produce a determining effect upon readers and their relationship with nature, our 2009 translation sought to reflect the harshness of the surroundings and the animal despair.

Las nevadas escasas del invierno apenas habían contribuido a cobijar a la osa en su sueño; y los deshielos de marzo, inoportunamente tempranos y tórridos la llamaron a sus actividades demasiado pronto. Luego, las heladas llegaron con rigor tardío y congelaron los brotes de los tubérculos, que son el alimento principal en la dieta del oso durante la primavera. Además, un tramo largo de pradera junto al río cercano, que alguna vez había sido rico en nueces, había sido arado y sometido a la producción de avena y maíz la primavera anterior. Cuando sintió el peso de las raciones escasas y cuando la grasa que un otoño abundante en moras había acumulado sobre sus costillas comenzaba a desaparecer como la última nieve en los matorrales, dio a luz a dos cachorros pequeños, pelados y hambrientos. (Badenes & Coisson, 2009: 82-83).

At different points in the narrative, the personification of nature may be noted: It does not cover (“cobija”), but comes unseasonably (“inoportuna”) and with severity (“rigor”). In our translation, we preserved the idea of an animal diet instead of opting for a more general and impersonal term such as “food”. Similarly, the human hand forces (“somete”) the meadow to produce oats and corn in an instance of cruel intromission against the beings that feed on the natural bounty it offers. We found particularly important to preserve the image of giving birth (“dar a luz”) instead of bearing (“parir”) the cubs, even when in Spanish the former is restricted to humans. The choice of this text responds to the fact that Roberts’s prose transcends a mere description of the natural landscape and expresses the living relationships of natural elements represented as an autonomous world beyond human existence, and in many cases, instead of human existence.

In consonance with polysystems theory, we believe that translations occupy a peripheral position, as in the case of *Voces del norte*, but they may sometimes acquire a more influential role and gradually begin to perform a primary function in the system by making new forms and models become part of a repertoire.

## Translation via manipulation

In the 21st century, there is a broader awareness of the translator's subjective presence in every translation. The politicization of translation is the sign of the times and the new yardstick to judge dominant culture. Just as a group of translators has not long ago appropriated the right to question source texts from a feminist perspective to intervene and carry out changes when the text they translate diverts from their political positions, ecotranslation proposes the manipulation of texts according to its own agenda. Considering the political impact of language, we propose the overt intervention of texts in translation.

In the tension between dominant and dominated cultures, between languages, and among the varieties and genres within the same language, it is assumed that power games are more easily represented in translation than in any other form of communication. As Theo Hermans (1986) indicates in *The Manipulation of Literature*, any translation implies some form of manipulation of the source text from the point of view of the target literature. This act may be intentional – but isn't any translation an intentional action? – or it may occur due to the different pressures exerted by linguistic, literary, and cultural codes. The search for dynamic equivalents presupposes a manipulation of the source text by putting into practice translation techniques which imply modifications with the aim of ensuring the accessibility of the translated version.

If we consider that in the polysystem, literary systems tend to flux from central to peripheral positions by interacting with other literary systems, we may conclude that ecotranslation may open up spaces for alternative cultures, literatures and ideologies which resist the hegemonic vision in which *man* is superior to nature. When an ecotranslated work enters the system, an ecological view may seep into dominant ideology and break existing social restrictions which may translate into new behaviors that leave behind antiecological practices. In this sense, ecotranslation contributes to the *production* and *reproduction* of an ecological ideology, seeing these terms in Van Dijk's view: "ideologies are (re)produced as well as (re)constructed by social practices. [...] "just as groups are reproduced (also) by getting or recruiting new members, also ideologies are reproduced by getting new 'users'" (1998: 228). This (re)produced ecological ideology will affect the form in which we conceive, relate to and write about the natural world.

Olive Senior is a Jamaican writer of humble origins born in 1941. In spite of the fact that she currently lives in Canada, her award-winning work always makes reference to rural and natural surroundings in Jamaica. Her stories revolve around a continuum of race, color and class, and nature is

presented as the backdrop in the struggles of her characters. Because of its ecological value, her work “Bright Thursdays” may be worth ecotranslating:

The houses were perched precariously up the hillsides with slippery paths leading to them from the road, and if anyone bothered to climb to the top of the hills, all they would see was more mountains. Because it was so hilly, the area seemed constantly to be in a dark blue haze, broken only by the occasional hibiscus or croton and the streams of brightly coloured birds dashing through the foliage. They were hemmed in by the mountains on all sides and Laura liked it, because all her life was spent in space that was enclosed and finite, protecting her from what dangers she did not even know. (Senior, 1986: 45)

Even though there is an organic image that evokes in the reader the idea of veins and arteries, these respond to the human hand embodied in roads and paths. A human narrator describes the scene underlining the ubiquity of the steep landscape she inhabits which is only interrupted by intrusions of natural beauty. Hints of nature as a sanctuary are worth noting as it protects the protagonists from external hazards.

Las covachas estaban construidas con descaro en las laderas de las colinas. Desde el camino se dirigía hacia ellas una maraña de senderos resbaladizos, y si algún humano se molestaba en trepar a la cima de las sierras, lo único que podía ver eran más montañas. Las profusas pendientes hacían que la silueta del área se vistiera de una bruma azur vehemente que solo se atrevían a interrumpir aquí y allí el ardiente anaranjado de las cayenas o el intenso esmeralda de los crotones y el torrente de pájaros tornasolados que trajinaban con afán por el follaje. Para donde se mirara, los abrazaban montañas, y a Laura le daba gusto porque había pasado toda su vida en un espacio limitado y contenido que la protegía de peligros que ni siquiera podía imaginar. (Badenes & Coisson, unpublished)

In this version, we have manipulated the text in different instances in order to draw attention to the idea of nature as a maternal nurturer, as a being whose existence is independent from humans, as a precious gem, and as a hardworking system in harmony with itself. Meanwhile, we have underlined the daring insolence of human intrusion in this environment. In our version, the “houses perched precariously” are but shanties built shamelessly by man. We have stressed the idea that artificial constructions such as the roads and the houses provide chaos and conflict. Additionally, the vague “anyone” becomes in our translation “any human being” (“algún humano”) and,

incorporating semantic fields and lexical strings, we have been able to transmit the notion that humans bother (“molestar”) and that the natural environment is a jewel (“azur,” “esmeralda”). In turn, color has been added to several nouns so as to create visual images which may enhance the beauty of nature. Finally, nature has been personified throughout the excerpt with verbs such as embrace (“abrazar”), move (“trajinar”), and the like.

The motivations behind this work lie on the belief that through translated literature we can raise ecological awareness and produce changes in society. The translator appropriates the source text in order to rewrite it as a legitimate tool according to the translator’s political agenda.

## **Conclusion**

### **Final comments, or new beginnings**

Cultural studies have provided the academia with the understanding that throughout the history of literature there have been innumerable voices which were silenced simply because they lacked entity within the establishment. Just as for centuries we have taken the existence of Nature for granted, disregarding the care that we owe to it, we have interpreted translation as an existing reality which is nothing but a means to an end.

Much has been written about our environment in Anglophone literature, and perhaps there may be those who expect a natural response on the part of our surroundings before they start to take action, but this is not the aim of ecocriticism. It is up to ecocriticism to elucidate the vision that human beings have of nature. When we certainly understand our position, we may take stands to better represent the environment.

We have pointed out that in the past, different translation practices, either mistakenly or purposefully, misunderstood the voice of nature. These once invisible translators can become political subjects today in a world that expects us to state our intentions, take responsibility, and assume a political position in our work.

Meanings are built, but also rebuilt, and just as we reforest barren ground, through translation we may also construct or restore ecological thought. We know the visions of nature are numberless as we have tried to reflect on these pages, but we are convinced that ecotranslation may make amends to many woes that centuries of history have caused to Western thought. Recuperating the voice of nature is the road less travelled that we may begin to walk together.

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