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Transnational Mediations

Negotiating Popular Culture between
Europe and the United States

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4 Jeans: From an American Icon to Dutch Denim

ANNEKE SMELIK and MAAIKE FEITSMA

“We all play a part in the history of jeans.” (Utrecht Centraal Museum)

The Dutch *ELLE Denim Bible* of Summer 2014 claims that the Netherlands should not only be proud of its tulips, cheese and football—or of its high culture equivalent of the Rijksmuseum and the Stedelijk Museum, or of a more popular version of its hash and whores—but also of an important export product “that is oddly overlooked”: the “ultra-Dutch specialty of denim” (Narinx 8).¹ There may well be quite a few readers, both in the Netherlands and elsewhere, who raise their eyebrows in mild surprise upon reading this statement by fashion journalist Cécile Narinx. Denim jeans are probably one of the most popular garments in the entire world—can denim then really be mentioned in the same breath as such treasured icons of Dutch culture like tulips and cheese? What’s more, jeans are generally regarded as an icon of American culture, while the spread of this garment across the whole world is often understood as part and parcel of global Americanization (cf. Miller, “Persons and Blue Jeans”; Conrads, Sullivan; Miller and Woodward, “Manifesto”). Random samples by cultural anthropologists Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward (cf. “Manifesto”, *Blue Jeans*) suggest that everywhere in the world (apart from South Asia and China) on any given day half of the population is wearing jeans. Jeans are thus unquestionably an icon of globalization.

Yet, in the past few years Dutch newspaper, magazine and web articles have asserted a connection between denim jeans and Dutch culture, as testified by headlines like “Dutch Blue” (Van Rossum); “Neth-

¹ All translations from Dutch sources in this chapter are ours; we thank Ralph de Rijke with help on the translation of parts of an earlier text in Dutch.

erlands Blue" (De Baan); "Netherlands, country of denim" (Lampe); "In the land of dung, fog and denim"; and "Denim jeans are the Dutch Mao-suit" (Van den Boom).² This raises the pressing question how an object symbolizing not only America, but also globalization, becomes associated with Dutch culture. The idea that jeans play a central role in Dutch fashion identity, and that the Dutch may actually be leaders within the denim industry, is a relatively recent one; we therefore call it a "myth in the making" (cf. Feitsma, *Nederlandse mode*). A 'myth' (in Roland Barthes' sense, cf. *Mythologies*), because we do not believe that a national fashion identity is really possible within an international market. In this chapter we explore the relation between national and transnational connotations of jeans in times of globalization; once an American icon, jeans have now become a global item with local meanings.

An American Icon

Book titles such as *Denim: An American Legend* (Finlayson), *Jeans: The Stuff of American History* (Van Damme), *Jeans: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (Sullivan), and *Denim: An American Story* (Little) illustrate how widely denim jeans are regarded as typically American. According to John Fiske, the 'American-ness' of jeans is the result of the cowboy mythology attached to them:

As the opening of the western frontier was a unique and definitive moment in American history, so jeans were seen as a unique and definitive American garment, possibly America's only contribution to the international fashion industry (4).

David Little claims that denim jeans also symbolize more abstract characteristics of American national identity: "strong, unpretentious, unadorned, informal, comfortable, classless, hard-working, reliable and consistent, improving with time" (*Vintage Denim* 11). Some ten years

² For reasons of readability we keep references to these popular sources to a minimum, especially since many of these sources have no author. At the end of the bibliography we have added the sources of Dutch articles from newspapers, magazines, and websites. More information on the sources and the methodology can be found in Feitsma, *Nederlandse mode*.

later, James Sullivan describes denim as an expression of "the national ethos [...] which, in the global era has infiltrated even the most far-flung cultures" (8). But jeans did not always signify an iconicity of Americana, as will become apparent in the following short sketch of the history of jeans.

Jeans as we know them today originated on the west coast of America in the mid-19th century, as wear-resistant pants made of a strong cloth of denim and fortified with nails, designed for miners, farmers, loggers and cowboys. Recent research by Sandra Curtis Comstock shows that until the 1930s jeans were not yet an icon of American culture, but rather a signifier for poverty and heavy physical labor, characteristic of the working class. Thus the pants initially had a rather negative image (cf. Finlayson 11, 15). In the words of Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen:

These were the clothes of hard laboring people. Loose and ill-fitting these pants were mass-produced for men separated from their homes, and from the clothing those homes had customarily produced. These pants held little promise for the men who wore them, save the promise that they would be ready for the next day's labors (110).

The first step in developing from a sign of poverty to an all-American icon took place during the 1920s, when Americans looked back on their history with a different perspective. In these years the legendary Wild West was slowly disappearing, leading to nostalgia for the past of American pioneers and cowboys. The blood, sweat and tears were now forgotten and a romanticized image of the Wild West emerged in country music, Western literature, and especially in the genre of the Hollywood Western with tough cowboys conquering a Wild West (cf. Finlayson, Marsch and Trynka, Sullivan). The cowboy mythology created an American legend in movies and advertisements, slowly turning into an icon of American culture. By the end of the 1920s different companies advertised 'fashionable' cowboy clothing including shirts, boots, hats and jeans. Gradually, denim became acceptable for the 'average American,' although denim was still considered leisure dress and remained for most people connected to the working class (cf. Curtis Comstock).

In the 1950s there was yet another shift in the meaning of jeans: they became a symbol of rebellious youth culture that was opposed to the bourgeois values of American society, such as conformity and consum-

erism (cf. Ewen and Ewen, Davis, Finlayson). Film stars like Marlon Brando and James Dean and pop stars like Elvis Presley further boosted the liberating status of jeans (cf. Curtis Comstock). Today's iconic status was then only established in the 1950s, mostly because the film and pop music industries connoted jeans with a rebellious and sexual meaning (cf. Finlayson). No longer reserved for heroes like the cowboy, denim was now worn by anti-heroes like rockers and bikers. It is important to realize how the meaning of jeans—again—changed radically in a short period of time: “[W]hat had been a piece of Americana—blue jeans—became a rejection of Americana” (Ewen and Ewen 113). Jeans thus came to symbolize the emergent youth culture with its recalcitrant resistance against American values.

The diverse and contradictory meanings were further multiplied during the 1960s, when hippie culture used jeans as a means of expressing its rebellion against the established order, and also to indicate its ideal of a classless society. Jeans became signified as classless, unisex, anonymous and authentic, “the symbol of a revolution, of a world where everyone is equal and clothing no longer needs to express one's social position or gender” (Finlayson 27). In the 1960s jeans thus acquired new meanings of gender and class equality.

The ‘uniform of the counterculture’ was slowly accepted into mainstream culture, with the result that in the 1970s jeans became the most popular garment in the world. Importantly, they were seen as a symbol of ‘Americanness’ in Europe—the United States of America still being quite popular at that time because they remain associated with the liberation after the Second World War and more generally with wealth and freedom.

In the early 1970s, jeans also made it into the fashion world: Yves Saint Laurent was the first couturier to use denim for skirts, jackets and suits, giving this type of fabric new meanings of elegance, stylishness and fashionability. Of course, jeans—and denim clothes in general—still retained their rebellious and working class image, but they now turned into a fashion item as well (cf. Fiske). Consequently, the standard five pocket model was continuously changed in cut, color and decoration (cf. Ewen and Ewen, Davis). By the end of the 1970s, American fashion designers like Gloria Vanderbilt and Calvin Klein started producing jeans. Since the 1980s a designer label as well as specific cuts and trimmings even turned jeans into a status symbol, not in the least because of

the high prices (cf. Davis, Finlayson). Michiel Scheffer argues that in the second half of the 1990s jeans were revived “through the mobilization of a range of techniques and artifacts creating a new grammar of style. As a result, jeans today are a mass-customized product, mobilized as a fashion luxury item that is affordable to many” (129). In addition to the tendency towards fashionability, the focus returned to the alleged authenticity of jeans. Thus, the ‘original’ jeans made a comeback allowing brands like Levi's and Wrangler to boost the ‘American’ jeans (cf. Finlayson).

In this all too short sketch of a history of over 150 years we can see how jeans have shifted their meanings, acquiring ever new layers of often contradictory connotations. According to John Fiske it is this very ambiguity that makes them so wildly popular. Furthermore, the popularity of jeans is often explained by functional characteristics, because they are comfortable, strong, usually cheap and easy to wash. However, Fiske argues that their functionality is only “the precondition of their popularity, but does not explain it” (1). He thinks that their ability to move across different social categories—gender, religion, nation, class—can only be explained by culture, that is, by the meanings that people ascribe to jeans. For Fiske jeans are a repository of meanings: “[T]hey are a resource bank of potential meanings” (5). Similarly, Finlayson writes that “Denim is—almost literally—a blank canvas: it signifies nothing in itself. The context is everything” (41). This blank property of ‘nothingness’ may explain why an all-American icon, denim jeans, can be appropriated throughout the world.

Global and Local Meanings

In fashion studies today there is a debate whether blue jeans still signify an American icon. Some argue that jeans will always pertain to their American roots:

All blue jeans, whether they are rough as the sidewalk or burnished to a hand as fine as cashmere, share an ‘Americana’ feel. They may be cut and sewn in Japan, Vietnam, or Hong Kong, using denim from Mexico, India, Italy, or Turkey and synthetic indigo dye from Germany or Brazil, wherever its origins, a pair of blue jeans embodies two centuries’ worth

of the myths and ideals of American culture. Jeans are the surviving relic of the western frontier. (Sullivan 3)

However, Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward outline quite an opposite view:

Americanisation is central to understanding the original global spread of denim, but there are many reasons for thinking that denim has now transcended its earlier history and has to be understood in relation to concepts of the global and the local, neither of which is particularly American. ("Manifesto" 343)

A few years later, when Miller and Woodward had launched their 'Global Denim' ethnography, Miller claims that,

It is [...] evident from ethnographies at different points in the world that jeans are no longer associated with Americanization, and some areas that are now adopting blue jeans have no idea denim was ever associated with the United States. ("Anthropology" 420)

Miller and Woodward argue that nowadays jeanswear no longer intrinsically refers to 'American-ness' (cf. *Global Denim* 18). We agree with Miller and Woodward that the distinction between the different dimensions of the global and the local within a process of globalization makes new, transnational or even national, meanings of a garment like jeans conceivable: "People are wearing jeans simultaneously for global and local reasons" (Miller and Woodward, "Manifesto" 337). Scheffer similarly argues: "The innovation pattern for postmodern jeans is truly global in its adoption by consumers, albeit with regional differences" (142). Such studies open up possibilities for alternative, non-American meanings of jeans, which leads us to the new fashion myth of Dutch Denim.

Dutch Denim: A New Fashion Myth

The internationally renowned trendspotting website WGSN calls Amsterdam "one of today's most exciting denim capitals" in a trend report a few years ago (Veld). And indeed, just a few years later, in May

2014 Amsterdam could boast its first "Amsterdam Denim Days," in the words of the organizers, "the event for fashion forward aficionados of denim." According to denim professionals the open-mindedness of Dutch culture, and the vibrant youth culture of Amsterdam, create an ideal place for designers within the creative industries (this information is based on interviews of Feitsma with Veenhoff and Hoitink; cf. Feitsma, *Nederlandse mode*). In recent years, journalists and fashion professionals thus claim a unique relationship between Amsterdam and denim without much motivation or argumentation. For example, *Sportswear International* refers to Amsterdam as "Denim City" (Dartmann). In the same article Karl-Heinz Müller, the general manager of Bread and Butter, the most important denim trade fair in Europe, is reported as saying that "an extreme denim culture holds sway here," which he and his team find so stimulating that they opened an office in Amsterdam even though the trade fair is held in Berlin (Dartmann). Dieter de Cock, the chief designer of Cold Method, describes the city as "jeans-centric" (Dartmann). British-born Jason Denham, who moved to Amsterdam with his then employer Pepe Jeans in the 1990s, goes a step further in an interview with *Proud*, a magazine in English for expats living in Amsterdam:

Immediately on arriving it dawned on me that this, finally, was the real denim capital of the world. Amsterdam is the personification of everything jeans represent. Unyielding, slightly rebellious, adventurous, firmly opinionated, never afraid to make a statement and always uniquely individual. From the very first day, I felt like I had come home. So I think it makes sense that many of the major modern denim brands are getting their start in Amsterdam or are moving here. This is the modern heart of the international denim industry. (Kops 10)

Such recent statements by international figures show the success of the denim industry in the Netherlands at large and in Amsterdam in particular. As we argued in the introduction to this chapter, Dutch media have eagerly jumped on the bandwagon of this fashion narrative with a boom of articles in the past few years. Coincidentally—or perhaps not so coincidentally—a successful exhibition entitled "Blue Jeans" was launched in the same period in the Centraal Museum of Utrecht (November 2012 till March 2013). Seemingly out of the blue, then, there is a recent association of jeans with Dutch culture. The persistence here of the national

within a transnational context is what we call a myth-in-the-making, understanding 'myth' in the semiotic sense of Roland Barthes (cf. *Mythologies*). Barthes explained that things and objects, like jeans, seldom have just one clear-cut meaning but carry many, often ambiguous, connotations. For Barthes popular culture, like fashion, naturalizes ideology; a myth is then a sign or meaning that comes across as natural and self-evident. He argued in *The Fashion System* that clothing derives its meaning from the ways in which it is articulated in the verbal and visual rhetoric of media. Fashion is first and foremost a sign system where meaning is encoded and can therefore be decoded. Such meanings are fundamentally unstable and forever shifting. Jean Baudrillard took this idea one step further in arguing that fashion is particularly adept at playing a game of free floating signifiers (cf. Baudrillard).

The new fashion narrative that the Netherlands is a denim country and Amsterdam is a denim capital is first and foremost an instance of ideological 'nation branding' or 'city branding' (cf. Feitsma, "Denim goes Dutch"). The myth is actually not so much shaped by the denim brands but rather by organizations with the aim of promoting the local and national creative economy. In that sense, the national should here be understood as a free-floating signifier, referring to a strategic and dynamic identity that can be renegotiated.

Although the original motives for the sudden rise of this myth are quite commercial, the myth of Dutch Denim could only be successful because it taps into specific characteristics of Dutch culture. Rather than featuring another instance of marketing blarney plucked out of thin air, this myth thus falls in line with existing ideas about Dutch identity. This also explains the ease with which this myth has been accepted and even promoted by the media.

The Netherlands, Country of Denim

The media put forward two main arguments for portraying the Netherlands as a distinctive denim jeans country and Amsterdam as a special capital of denim. The first, quantitative, argument is the fact that many jeans and jeans-related companies are located in the Netherlands, particularly in and around Amsterdam. The second argument is equally quantitative, but spills over into a cultural argument: the fact that the Dutch

are particularly fond of wearing jeans. According to denim experts and the media, not only do the Netherlands offer the right business conditions for entrepreneurs, but the growth and success of the denim sector is also due to a 'typically Dutch' culture of informal dress. A link is therefore made between the industry's practical concerns that facilitate an attractive business climate and a general perception of Dutch fashion culture.

The first argument to sustain the myth of Dutch Denim entails that Amsterdam has the greatest density of denim companies in the world, including not only Dutch companies like G-Star, Blue Blood, Tripper and Kyuchi, but also headquarters of international brands like Pepe Jeans, Hilfiger Denim and even Levi's. It should be noted that this claim concerns not just the city of Amsterdam, but the larger metropolitan area of Amsterdam. While it has been difficult to obtain and verify any hard figures that substantiate this claim, the media have not hesitated to frequently and emphatically depict Amsterdam as a capital of denim and the Netherlands as an international center of denim (cf. Lampe; Stamköt). One daily newspaper writes that "the country is being swamped by denim" (Van den Boom), while another claims that the Netherlands plays "no small role in the denim world" (Baks); and yet another writes that the Netherlands "has grown into a genuine jeans country" (Van Rossum). This growth is attributed principally to favorable business conditions and advantageous tax arrangements for international companies located in the Netherlands (cf. Feitsma, *Nederlandse mode*; Duineveld and Scheffer 343). The denim industry has also been actively promoted by the trade association *Modint*, the fashion event *Modefabriek*, the strategic internationalization program *DutchDFA*, and the platform for the Dutch denim industry *House of Denim*.

The second argument supporting the claim that the Netherlands is a leading jeans country runs that the Dutch buy a lot of jeans and wear them often and in any circumstances. In Dutch newspapers we can read that "Dutch people are the biggest jeans fans in the world"; that "No population is so addicted to wearing jeans as the Dutch"; that "Nowhere else do you see so many blue jeans on the street"; and that the number of jeans per head of the population is higher in the Netherlands than anywhere else in the world (cf. Feitsma, *Nederlandse mode*).

Within a global context it is, however, quite questionable whether the Dutch do indeed own the highest number of jeans per person. Re-

search carried out by Ruigrok Netpanel in 2008 indicates that the average Dutch person owns 5,4 pairs of jeans; while research by Cotton Incorporated in 2005 shows that the average American owns 8,3 pairs (cf. Miller and Woodward, "Manifesto" 337).

Whether or not the Dutch actually are the owners of the most pairs of jeans per head of the population worldwide, it is striking that the media have uncritically, even eagerly, adopted this idea. Evidently it fits readily into existing perceptions of Dutch fashion culture. It is interesting to note here that both arguments for the myth of Dutch Denim are at first quantitative, but at second sight appear cultural. The first argument—the large number of jeans and jeans-related companies in the metropolitan area of Amsterdam—is attributed not just to practical aspects (such as an attractive business climate) but also to a lively 'denim culture' that fits in with the rebellious youth culture of Amsterdam (cf. De Leeuw, *Jong!*). The second—Dutch consumers possess the largest number of jeans and wear jeans exceptionally often—is related to Dutch fashion culture. Both claims then are in fact cultural rather than quantitative. They revert back to a perceived 'typically Dutch' attitude to fashion, producing a seamless fit between jeans culture and Dutch fashion sensibilities.

Dutch Fashion Culture

In the Dutch media the new fashion narrative of Dutch Denim is explained by the idea of a specific Dutch attitude towards clothing. The Dutch fashion mentality is supposedly characterized by an aversion to ostentation and a preference for sobriety, functionality and moderation (cf. Feitsma, *Nederlandse mode*). Denim in general and jeans in particular symbolize precisely such an unpretentious, comfortable and informal way of dressing. They also signify egalitarianism, which is another characteristic of Dutch society (cf. De Leeuw, *Jong!*). In the new myth of Dutch Denim we can thus recognize an uninterrupted link with an older, already naturalized, narrative about Dutch fashion culture. In our view this goes a long way towards explaining the ease with which this national fashion myth in the making has been so quickly and uncritically adopted by Dutch media, and has been so widely accepted by its readers.

To give an example: in 2012 the cover of a weekend magazine of the renowned national newspaper *De Volkskrant* showed the back pocket of a pair of denim jeans, accompanied by the title "Blue Blood: The Netherlands is the most important jeans country in the world" (cf. Feitsma, *Nederlandse mode*). The choice of the phrase "blue blood" is significant, because it refers to several things at once: to the blue color of denim; to the Dutch jeans brand 'Blue Blood'; and to the idea that denim culture is in Dutch people's veins. In the article the fashion journalist writes "that jeans brands do particularly well here because jeans are such a good fit with the Dutch fashion mentality, which is remarkably casual" (Lampe). Similarly, a fashion journalist of the quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* writes: "But the [success of jeans] must also be seen as part of our practical, casual fashion culture. Evidently we do it so well, wearing jeans, that others are inspired" (Van Rossum). Journalists thus explicitly refer to the informal and relaxed clothing culture in the Netherlands as one of the reasons for the success of Dutch Denim.

This particular aspect of Dutch fashion culture is also mentioned by denim professionals like Mariette Hoitink of HTNK Fashion Recruitment and Consultancy, James Veenhoff of the "House of Denim," and Harry Bijl of the trade association Mitex (cf. Feitsma, *Nederlandse mode*). Elsewhere, in an interview with the free daily *Spits*, Veenhoff says: "We have an informal style, even at work. We have little hierarchy, so you see people in jeans at the office and at weddings; even mayors [wear jeans]" (Stamkot). In another interview with *Spits*, Veenhoff says: "In our culture a homeless person under a bridge may be wearing jeans, but so might the prime minister" (Hol). We can read similar comments in other media, for instance: "In the Netherlands we've reached the point where jeans are as likely to be worn in the theatre loge as in the retirement home"; and "In the anti-authoritarian 1970s [...] denim permeated everywhere; now nobody thinks it's a problem to wear jeans to the Royal Concert Hall". Stylist Bastiaan van Schaijk has called denim jeans "easy, democratic clothing. Call it our Dutch Mao suit" (Van den Boom). Denim or fashion professionals thus present the popularity of denim jeans as an immediate consequence of the nation's informal clothing culture.

It is questionable, however, whether this informal dress culture can be claimed as 'typically Dutch.' The informal clothing style—pullovers, jeans, weekend shirts, and trousers or shorts (also for women)—that

more and more people started adopting in the Netherlands beginning in the late 1950s, comes originally from the U.S., where this style had been popular since the 1940s (cf. De Leeuw, “Van spijkerbroek tot cocktailjurk”). An American influence is therefore at play, which makes the picture more complicated. The American informal clothing style was perhaps adopted more quickly than in other European countries, because it was in keeping with Dutch fashion sensibilities of egalitarianism and dressing down. Despite any such historical nuance, the dominant theme in the media is that “Everyone wears them [jeans] everywhere” (Lampe). Both denim professionals and fashion journalists agree that jeans are particularly popular amongst the Dutch because they are egalitarian, practical, long-lasting and affordable (cf. Lampe, Van den Boom).

The myth of Dutch Denim thus taps into pre-existing and widely accepted ideas of Dutch fashion culture. Consequently, denim jeans—as an originally American garment—can be given a particular local—Dutch—meaning. This is all the more fascinating, because the characteristics that are ascribed to jeans in the Netherlands—informal, cheap, egalitarian, functional and sober—are much the same as in the United States where they are believed to symbolize the American character as argued above (cf. Little, *Vintage Denim*; Sullivan). In other words, what is typically American in one part of the world counts as typically Dutch in another, revealing the mobile and shifting relationship between the national and transnational through imitation, reception, and appropriation. By collapsing both narratives into one, the non-typical characteristics which would otherwise have projected an American image are now ‘Dutchified,’ merging into a prevailing myth of Dutch fashion culture.

The shifting process of meaning in different contexts reveals the mythical, that is ideological, character of the new fashion narrative of Dutch Denim. The corresponding meaning of jeans in the United States and in the Netherlands as characteristic of either an American or Dutch culture reveals the importance of an ideology of ‘the national’ in times of globalization. The fact that the myth of Dutch Denim has been adopted wholesale by the media and eagerly accepted by consumers, merely signifies that the myth has been able to hide its ideological agenda. But let us not forget that the myth of the Netherlands as a denim country, and Amsterdam as a denim capital, is a construction that was put in place by the fashion industry and city councils. It is a question of

city branding and of nation branding that is ultimately aimed at improving the creative fashion industry in the Netherlands.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have unraveled how an icon of American culture, of Americanization, and of globalization, has also come to signify Dutch fashion culture and even Dutch identity. With the assistance and support of trade organizations, design institutes, Amsterdam’s municipal services, and brand stories, the media have facilitated a new fashion narrative to promote nation branding—the Netherlands as a denim country—and city branding—Amsterdam as a denim capital. The initial motives for this new myth of Dutch Denim are no doubt commercial, but it could take off so swiftly and smoothly because it is rooted in prevailing myths about Dutch fashion culture as sober, functional, informal and egalitarian. Its constant repetition in the media has anchored the new fashion myth in the collective imagination.

The myth-in-the-making of Dutch Denim suggests an image of the Netherlands as an egalitarian country where everyone wears jeans, from the Prime Minister to a homeless person, and on many occasions, from a relaxing day at home to the office or even the opera. Some years ago, the crown princess—now Queen—Máxima made a fashion statement by wearing a trendy denim outfit on Queen’s Day. Indeed, even the Royal Family occasionally taps into the myth of Dutch fashion culture as functional, informal, and egalitarian.

Yet, the ideology of this myth could only settle in because its commercial motives are denied, its original American roots glossed over, and reliable statistics on the density of denim companies and the number of denim jeans per head of the Dutch population are not available. Or, to put it more positively, American blue jeans have been negotiated through acts of local appropriation and creative reworking by Dutch designers, journalists and consumers. The cultural encounter of an American icon within a specific European context has thus led to the emergence and success of Dutch Denim.

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