

**A Reflective Commentary for Sarah Carton's 'Raw'
EP and Three Subsequent Single Releases, 'Rise',
'2050' & 'Lemon'**

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Creation Module

Element 2b – Reflective Commentary

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Due to the emergence of the COVID-19 virus (Young, S. 2020), this year has been a challenging and surreal time for both major and independent artists alike, but one positive is how this has resulted in the creative rise of the DIY musician, becoming ever prominent in both the charts and on social media. From Kanye West's '*war against record contracts*' on Twitter (Ingham, T. 2020) to Charli XCX's Mercury Prize nominated '*lockdown*' album, '*How I'm Feeling Now*' (Siregar, C. 2020), there has been an evident shift in the music industry this year towards a more DIY and independent approach to both the making and releasing work. In this essay, I will be exploring how this shifting landscape of 2020 has impacted my own work as an artist, whilst discussing the objectives, super-objectives, measurements of success and execution of the six-track EP titled, '*Raw*' and three subsequent single releases, '*Rise*', '*2050*' and '*Lemon*'. Following an exploration of the methods and skills developed through the creation of the '*Raw*' EP, I will be evaluating how this impacted the singles, with a particular focus on the experimental use of sound bites and skits in both '*Lemon*' and '*2050*' and their subsequent creative campaign strategies.

My aim for this project was to create a six-track debut EP, titled '*Raw*', made up of four songs and two interludes blending electronic music production, vocals, experimental sound design, sound bites from daily life and spoken word poetry. Following recording and producing the EP, I aimed to use the developed sounds and mixing techniques from this process to write and produce a further three tracks to be released as singles, titled '*2050*', '*Rise*' and '*Lemon*'. All nine songs were to be developed as 2021 and early 2022 releases for myself as an artist under my own name, Sarah Carton. Due to a change in circumstance, with

the introduction to the new COVID-19 national lockdown for the month of November 2020 (Young, S. 2020), I decided to focus on building the music around press feedback for a single I released during the first UK lockdown, *'Beaches on the Thames'* (Carton, S. 2020), which When the Horn Blows described as finding a particular *'bedroom beats'* style (Adams, A. 2020). With the new restrictions meaning I would have to complete the project from my bedroom once again, with limited equipment and not being able to meet with other musicians to collaborate, I wanted to build on and encapsulate this *'bedroom beats'* lockdown style, whilst experimenting with new sounds as an artist. My aims for the project revolved around three core elements; firstly, I wanted to create work that built on my independent DIY *'bedroom'* musicianship that I could also build into my release campaigns, marketing them as *'lockdown'* tracks and fully embracing the *'anxiety, escapism and noise complaints from neighbours'* (Cragg, M. 2020) the challenge would bring. Secondly, I wanted to develop a personal and intimate EP that told a story, similarly to a *'concept album'* (Walter, B. 2001. p. 227) and which had a strong narrative running through the song-writing, production style and campaign aspects. Thirdly, I was keen to improve my recording and mixing techniques through this project, particularly with my own vocals, so I could work more independently on future work and acquire a better understanding of how to achieve my sound as an artist and producer. All of these elements tied into my super-objective of developing a collection of songs and campaigns that could help to propel me into the next stage of my career and solidify my identity as a self-producing artist to my fans and the wider music industry community. The ways I decided on measurements for success in these objectives varied from the EP to the singles, which each had their own individual aims and measurements for success.

The concept of the '*Raw*' EP was to explore the early in-between moments in a relationship and the confusion, longing and heartbreak that comes from not knowing where you stand. It aimed to act as an intimate window into this moment in one's life; following the journey of excitement when you first start dating someone, reflected in the opening number, '*Who Are You*', through to being torn between staying or leaving in '*Breathe Me*', then realising you're not being treated well in '*Fire*'. The premise here was that the songs were a mirror to the consuming thoughts the protagonist was experiencing whilst trying to get on with everyday life, to be explored through ambient experimental sound bites and skits, such as recordings from the London Underground in '*Breathe Me*' and kitchen appliance murmurs in '*RAW II*'. The interludes, '*RAW I*' and '*RAW II*', had the sub-concept of reflecting dusk and dawn and aimed to encapsulate moments of being unable to sleep during this time period. I aimed to measure the success of the EP by comparing elements of the songs to my previous lockdown release, '*Beaches on the Thames*', but also with a listening session for the project from start to finish to see if I could hear the narrative concept come through. A major challenge I had for this project was my lack of recording or playback equipment due to lockdown. With no mixing monitors at my disposal, a way in which I was looking to measure the success of my mix was to listen to the final tracks on three different pairs of headphones at three varying price points, comparing levels and the overall quality of the songs to commercial releases by reference artists. Another aim for the EP was to see if I could create a distinctive, intimate and dusky vocal tone through my recording technique and mixing, which I planned on comparing with some reference female vocalists such as Billie Eilish, Banks and Arlo Parks, to measure my success.

The three singles each had varying aims and methods of gauging success. My intention for '*Rise*' was to create a track that could be a potential single for a future album of mine. I

planned to measure its success by sending the track to producers I have worked with on past tracks and session musicians I'd like to re-record some of the instrumental sections with, to see if they could hear the musical direction and desired sound come through and if they would consider it a single release for an album. My aim for '2050' was to create a song that could act as a call to arms for climate action and be the basis of an educational release campaign around rising sea levels. I aimed to produce this in a chilled-pop style to make it accessible and commercial in order to reach a wider audience. I also planned to enter '2050' into the British Music Collection's '*Climate. Sound. Change*' competition and sought to measure its success by the feedback received from this application. Finally, for '*Lemon*' I had the objective of composing and producing an alternative-pop track that included spoken word poetry, to be marketed as a summer release in 2021. I aimed to measure the success of this track by comparing it with my inspirations from the track, such as Josie Man's '*Just Me*', a track Wonderland Magazine describes as a '*bubble gum daydream*' (Byers, R. 2020). The track has early 2000's references with a specific target audience of millennials and also features voicemail recordings, inspired by artists such as Sampa the Great and Chance the Rapper. I therefore also intended to measure the success of '*Lemon*' by tracking if it had been featured in the press or playlists alongside influences such as Josie Man, or if the press picked up on the 2000's references, voicemail influences or '*bubble gum*' pop style of the song; though this would have to wait until the song's release in summer 2021.

One of my aims for this project was to include a short '*hidden track*' interlude (Cannon, J. 2020 pg. 414) in the '*Raw*' EP. This was originally due to feature at the end of the fourth song of the EP, '*Breathe Me*' and act as a short delicate interlude with piano and ethereal vocals, to help ease the transition between '*Breathe Me*' and '*Fire*', where there is a distinct shift in emotional tone and a movement from synth-based experimental instrumentals to a

more sombre, distorted piano. This plan was altered when recording the final interlude, '*RAW II*'. Originally set to be an experimental, dark and electronic ending to the EP, after toying with different sounds and recording techniques for the vocal of '*RAW II*', it began to feel more natural as a soft and intimate interlude, which happened to work perfectly with the piano instrumental I had previously recorded for the hidden track; thus, taking its place as the short, delicate, piano based interlude I had imagined. My original plan for '*RAW II*' was to create a dark and electronic alternative R&B interlude, based on layered and distorted vocals, taking inspiration from tracks such as '*Till Now*', the opening song on Banks' '*III*' album (BANKS. 2019). '*Till Now*' begins with a heavily autotuned vocal riff which is repeated throughout the 2 minute and 36 second album introduction. As the track builds, contrasting versions of this auto-tuned hook are built up, using harmonies with a range of '*distorted vocals*' and effects (Cliff, A. 2019). To achieve a similar style, I recorded vocals into Logic's EVOC 20 Vocoder (Sell, B. 2015) and created some autotuned takes, then experimented with a range of synthetic voices, stacking different harmonies on top of one another to create something reflective of the way in which Banks creates her '*auto-tune-heavy ballads*' (Cliff, A. 2019). In the end, however, the finished product created an ending to the EP that didn't capture the vulnerable lyrics behind '*RAW II*' or the overall narrative of the project. I decided that to better capture the feeling of dusk in '*RAW II*', as in '*RAW I*', where I had attempted to conceptualise the feeling of dawn; a gentle, close, crisp and vulnerable vocal recording better suited the track. This was tied into the concept that the song was being sung gently as if not to wake anyone up at night and was then intertwined within sound effects of kitchen appliances whirring, further building on both interludes conceptual design to invite the listener into the songwriters personal, intimate space; their home. Though not appropriate for '*RAW II*', my inspiration from Banks' '*Till Now*' and experimentation with the building of vocal repetitions did not go unused, as I then went back and built this into the opening track

of the EP, *'Who Are You'*, with this repeated and layered section replacing the original chorus I had recorded.

For the EP, I wanted to experiment with my vocal style as an artist, as well as with recording techniques and a mixing approach that could complement the raw, dusky and intimate delivery I had planned for the six tracks. While researching recording methods I looked into pros and cons of the proximity effect with directional mics (Shure. 2019) and how this can be used as a method to increase the lower frequencies of a vocal. I researched how the risk of singing too close to the mic could make the vocal muddy, *'losing the natural'* sound and how for a falsetto voice, *'suddenly getting exaggerated lows may not be desired'* (Magroove. 2019). Though I used the proximity effect with an exaggerated closeness to the mic, I was cautious not to overdo this and boost the low end so much that I would have to take out some low end in post, resulting in an unnatural sound. I used the proximity effect and then boosted the mid-levels and high ends with EQ for the lead vocals, with limited reverb, to try and mimic a warm, intimate and delicate vocal sound displayed by some of my reference artists, such as the way in which Billie Eilish balances *'her feathery vocals with deep, grisly bass'* (Anderson, S. 2019). Billie Eilish's influence was core for the development of *'On The Edge'*, where I juxtaposed wobbling, vibrating subs with this crisp and *'feathery'* vocal style, though I moved away from the mic for the recordings of the soprano riffs present in the intro and outro of the track, as they sounded too harsh when falsified with the proximity effect. These ethereal vocal moments were more inspired by the *'distinctive squeaks'* of Grimes' *'Oblivion'*, which I then *'drenched in reverb'* in a similar style to Boucher's (Ryce. A. 2012). I found the lead vocal mixing methods I was establishing for the EP, however pleasant, didn't resonate with the spoken word sections of tracks such as *'Fire'*. I listened to other spoken word artists including The Streets and Arlo Parks for reference on their mixes and decided

that a dryer sound, with even less reverb and a boost in the high-end frequencies with EQ, made these sections sit more comfortably in the mix, whilst stripping down the instrumentals to streamline the focus of those sections. Arlo Parks' *'dusky voice'* (Williams, J. 2020) was another inspiration for the vocal delivery and a stripped back mix for the EP. Jessica Williams from NME speaks about the way in which Parks is able to create a vocal tone where *'she quivers'* (Williams, J. 2020); this and the way in which Eilish *'sings, and then whispers, so quietly you have to adjust the volume to hear'* in *'Everything I Wanted'* (Blum, D. 2019), were my main inspirations for the interludes, *'RAW I'* and *'RAW II'*. The interludes were both seated in the conceptual vision of being sung in a bedroom over the course of one night, one during dusk and one during dawn, as self-soothing lullabies. In this case, the use of the proximity effect was charged with this conceptual intention, as it's discussed that some vocalists *'will often be closer to the microphone to give a warm tone to their voice'*, as *'it can be even be soothing'* (Magroove. 2019).

In the song I released earlier this year, *'Beaches on the Thames'* (Carton, S. 2020) I blended in sounds such as cars driving on a wet road and rain sounds, whilst my co-producer added an underground London tube sound. These were used as location establishing sounds and as a method to build a soundscape reflective of the noises surrounding me at the time of writing the track, during the first national lockdown. Due to one of my aims for the EP being to build on my work from this release and the styles used, I began to build a catalogue of sounds together through a mix of recording from my phone whilst travelling, to sourcing ambient sounds from wind chimes to bird song from LANDR's subscription-based royalty free sample library (Deahl, D. 2018). I wanted to merge the narrative concept I had established for the project with the sounds that had been surrounding me during this second lockdown, blending the idea of the *'concept album'* (Walter, B. 2001. p. 227) with a *'lockdown album'*

(Siregar, C. 2020). An example of this can be heard in *'Breathe Me'*. For this track I intertwined sounds recorded from a journey on the jubilee line, mixed throughout the intro, outro, pre-chorus and in the bridge. The beeping of tube doors closing is used to punctuate a moment in-between the soprano vocal sections in the bridge, whilst sounds of the tube pulling away from the station are used in the build-up of the pre-chorus and the outro, replacing a typical swelling synthesizer and creating the mood of transition; grounding the song in the concept of the protagonist exploring these thoughts while on a tube journey. Some of my inspiration for the sounds used in the EP came from the track *'Where The Money Flows'* by Peter Cat Recording Co (Cat, P. 2020). *'Where The Money Flows'* uses ambient sounds such as bird noise, car horns, people talking far away and breathing, then blends them into an intricate soundscape alongside acoustic guitar, a xylophone loop and crisp, clean vocals. At the beginning of the track, bird song is transformed into a pulsing alarm synth. I used this as inspiration to utilize many of the ambient sounds in my own catalogue; for example, matching the bird song at the beginning of *'RAW I'* with the tempo of the track, to not only cement the concept of dawn, but to use the bird song as a musical layer in the intro, complimenting the lo-fi inspired piano and drums. Ways in which I built on the dusk and dawn concepts of the interludes, where including bird song and wind chimes in *'RAW I'* for dawn, and kitchen whirring sounds in *'RAW II'* for dusk. Both interludes included a vinyl crackle sound sourced from LANDR and I purposely kept in the usually edited out recording sounds such as rustling and keyboard noises by keeping the noise gate at a very low level. I used the sound of me pressing the space key to stop vocal recording at the end of *'RAW II'* to bring in the kitchen whirring sounds of the outro with a crossfade. This was used as a way to punctuate the end of the EP and add a personal DIY touch, representing the end of the recording session. This work in the EP featured in the singles. In *'Lemon'* I mixed old Blackberry Messenger sounds and MSN notification sounds into the track. This was to create

a sense of early 2000's nostalgia, as my target audience for this track is millennials, who would recognise these sounds. This also complimented the narrative of the track, as the protagonist is avoiding her ex-boyfriend who's leaving her messages and voicemails. One thing I'll be bearing in mind before the release of this track, is clearing these samples. I'd be looking to re-record sounds to replicate these notification sounds, or finding similar notification sounds from LANDR to replace them before the tracks final release.

'*Lemon*' is centred around themes of female empowerment, following a fictional narrative of a breakup during summer. The track lyrically bounces between moments of exasperation, liberation and joyful plays on phrases, such as the chorus where it's said she'd rather '*bleach her hair with lemon*' than cry over her partner leaving her; piggybacking on the famous '*I'm busy washing my hair*' phrase (Max, F. 2015). In the track's second spoken-word verse, the lyrics, '*now you're on my phone, say you're not sure what you've done*' and '*I won't read your theories*', explore how the protagonist is avoiding her ex-partner's attempts to contact her through messages and calls. I decided to mirror this concept in production, by incorporating message notification sounds and a voicemail clip in the track. I wanted this to sound authentic and relatable, so I asked a friend to leave me real voicemails whilst pretending to be a disgruntled ex-boyfriend who's being ignored. This voicemail makes up the bridge of the track, with a stripped back instrumental section before the final chorus. One core influence for this use of a voicemail was Sampa The Great, who begins her debut album with a '*voicemail from a concerned friend*' (M, Moore. 2020). It could be argued that voicemails are now over used, with a '*parental voicemail*' featuring in many contemporary hip-hop bodies of work, from Frank Ocean to Chance the Rapper, the latter being dubbed as owing this particular '*stylistic and conceptual debt*' to Kendrick Lamar (Weiss, J. 2013). Though now saturated in this genre, voicemail skits arguably not only provide '*important*

context for [...] work’ by exploring backstories to the track but can also be clever devices for the overall ‘*narrative framing*’ (Pearce, S. 2017) of the song and the direction in which you wish to take the audience. For example, Kendrick Lamar uses a voicemail from his mother asking when he plans to return at the end of ‘*Sherane aka Master Splinters Daughter*’, while the narrative of the track focuses on his ‘*riding around in pursuit of Sherane*’ (Pearce, S. 2017). The voicemail comes just as Kendrick arrives at Sherane’s house, to find her waiting with two men in black hoodies. The ominous reveal in the lyrics here, juxtaposed with the oblivious complaints of his parents over how long he’s been out, creates a cliff-hanger ending to the track, forcing the listener to ask questions and incentivises them to listen more to discover what happened with Kendrick and Sherane. Though there is now a commonality of voicemails in contemporary music, which some may argue takes away from the rawness and charm of their use, I believe on balance that skits such as voicemails can be a valuable tool in turning listeners into fans, as when these personal recordings are placed in songs it can provide a unique and intimate insight into the artists life. I am pleased with my use of this device in ‘*Lemon*’, as this could encourage a listener to relate to the song’s narrative and may inspire them to follow me as an artist to find out what happened in reality, as fans may have followed Kendrick to find out what truly happened with Sherane.

The conceptual premise around ‘*2050*’ was to write and produce a track that could work as a commercial alternative-pop single, whilst also acting as an educational tool around climate change and the threats of rising sea levels. Based on my continued research around the predicted 10-20 cm global sea level rise by 2050 and it’s ‘*far reaching consequences, out of scale to [...] modest change*’ (Clift, P. 2020. p. 271), the track aimed to be a political commentary around the lack of action taken by many world leaders. The song explores a failure to commit to a tougher line of legislation for corporations that profit from fracking,

such as major oil corporations who often *'control the public dialogue around climate change'* by funnelling *'billions of dollars into its defence, threatening to outpace climate action advocates'* invested in misleading advertising campaigns and their sponsoring of political parties (Holden, E. 2020). This research is alluded to in *'2050's* lyrics such as *'while your friends in corporations take the cash, call it a pity'* and the hook, *'ask me why I'm so scared to grow old in the city, half the cities underwater when the world turns 2050'*. To solidify the educational message into the track, I mixed in extracts from a climate change podcast by Nick Breeze, interviewing Professor Peter Wadhams, author of *'A Farewell to Ice: A Report from the Arctic'* and professor of Ocean Physics at the University of Cambridge (Wadhams, P. 2017). I used segments of this podcast within the track, such as Wadhams comparing climate change to COVID-19, referring to how they've both seen an *'exponential growth'* and how this *'has been the case for climate change but people haven't recognised it'* (Breeze, N. 2020). I then mixed these soundbites into the track, adding in recorded sounds of flowing water and bird song to represent the rising sea levels and the disastrous global impacts of this emergency on nature. As with the notification sounds in *'Lemon'*, I'll be reaching out to the producer of this podcast in an attempt to get these sections cleared before releasing the track and if not approved, I plan to write to other lecturers and experts to request using skits from their work on climate change. A way in which I planned on measuring the success for *'2050'*, in regard to both its commercial potential and educational purpose, was to use the song as the basis for my application for the British Music Collection's *'Climate. Sound. Change'* grant (Unsigned Guide. 2020). Though not chosen for one of the three grants available, I received some fantastic feedback that helped inspire some final changes to the track. Heather Blair from the British Music Collection stated that the panel *'were all excited by the accessible and catchy tone to the lyrics proposed'* and *'appreciated the consideration given to making all aspects of the release as sustainable'* (Blair, H. 2020). This feedback inspired me to add in

the electro-pop style synth pad, bring the drums in earlier and cut the podcast skits from five sections to three, helping to make the track more '*accessible and catchy*' as they had indicated. This also resulted in the track becoming more commercially appealing for radio, as these changes cut it down from 4 minutes 20 seconds, to 3 minutes 37 seconds in length.

Their appreciation for '*making all aspects of the release as sustainable*', refers to my inclusion of a plan for the roll out and marketing assets linked to this single. This included ensuring everyone that is working on the track works from home to reduce travel emissions, only using digital marketing assets to reduce paper waste, recording and editing the music video from home and scrapping merchandise, as studies show that just a '*0.5-lb t-shirt requires 700 gallons of water during processing*' (Pandit, P. 2020. p. 106).

Moving on from this project, I plan to make some small changes to the EP before releasing it in February 2021. Though I mixed the songs to the best of my ability with the limited equipment I had available to me over lockdown, now that London is moving into Tier 2 (Dex, R. 2020), I plan on booking a professional studio in London to mix the tracks on high quality mixing speakers and make some refinements to the EP with a more accurate reflection of the frequencies and sound. Going forward with the single releases, I am currently working on their launch campaigns and marketing plans, whilst I await a safer time to re-record the vocals and continue mixing the tracks in a professional studio setting (Young, S. 2020). I sent '*Rise*' to a fellow DIY producer and singer-songwriter I'd be keen to collaborate with to merge our two styles and they've agreed to work on the track. This has been a great measurement of success for the track and I'll be continuing to develop the song later next year in preparation for my first studio album which is planned for early 2022. For '*Lemon*', I have been in touch with a group of friends and a videographer about a summer themed music video shoot, currently planned for early May 2021. The shoot will be based

around the concept of a girl's school Physical Education class, with a playful energy and choreographed dance routines. '*Lemon*' is currently planned for a June 2021 release date. Based on the British Music Collection's feedback for '*2050*', I'm developing the sustainable roll out plan and marketing assets with the help of a videographer and graphic designer. '*2050*' will be released in Spring next year, alongside an educational, artistic and satirical DIY music video, recorded at home using a green screen with background visuals and CGI animations ranging from a PowerPoint presentation around rising sea levels to an actor dressed as Donald Trump setting fire to the Paris Climate agreement (McGrath, M. 2020). The video has been inspired by Jacob Collier's video for '*The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting On An Open Fire)*' (Collier, J. 2020), Charli XCX's '*Claws*' (Charli XCX. 2020) and Josie Man's '*Just Me*' (Man, J. 2020); all of which were recorded at home with a green screen during lockdown this year, featuring just the artists with animations and projected CGI video in the background. This style has been coined by many artists over the COVID-19 lockdown, with NME praising these '*CGI wonders available to remote tech-kind*' (Beaumont, M. 2020). Not only is this now an established '*lockdown music video*' style (Beaumont, M. 2020), it's also a budget friendly marketing solution for an independent artist like myself, with no studio or shoot costs other than the video animator's fee, a home studio light and the green screen frame itself.

To conclude, I believe that through this project I have mostly succeeded in what I had aimed to achieve and though still in the process of measuring the success of some objectives, am extremely pleased with the conceptual tone and DIY style of the nine songs recorded. Through my experimentation with a catalogue of ambient sounds and use of voicemails, notification sounds and podcast dialogue, I feel I have achieved by aim of creating a distinct collection of tracks, each including elements that could be seen as both conceptually coherent

and as reflection of the *'lockdown album'* style I had aimed to achieve. The sounds used built on the established style I had experimented with in *'Beaches on the Thames'* earlier this year; thus, achieving my goal of building on the press feedback I received from this track and developing this distinctive *'bedroom beats'* style. Through my exploration of the proximity effect, use of a vocoder synth, stacking harmonies and mixing techniques, I believe I am on my way to developing the distinctive dusky vocal sound and recording style I am looking for and will apply these skills to future recordings, whilst continuing to learn and develop new techniques in this field. For the singles, I have applied my learnings from the EP to each track in their own way. With the development of *'Rise'* and feedback I have had on this track from other producers, I am hopeful for the future of this track and feel I have achieved my aim of developing a strong song that could work as a leading single for a future album. *'Lemon'* has been a joy to work on, embracing the playful *'bubble gum'* tones of Josie Man (Byers, R. 2020), whilst incorporating voicemail and notification sounds as a nod to the signature experimental style of the *'Raw'* EP and referencing artists such as Sampa the Great and Kendrick Lamar. These learnings have also fed through to *'2050'*, with its explorative educational use of podcast skits and adoption of the catalogue sounds pulled together for the EP. Finally, with reference to my super-objective of *'creating a collection of songs and campaigns to propel me into the next stage of my career and solidify my identity as a self-producing artist'*, I believe that the strength of the concepts and style for both the EP and the singles have bled into every aspect of my current plans for their release campaigns. Though the truth of my success for this will become more apparent in time with the response to each release and fan engagement with the campaigns, building on the inspirations and methods deployed by many reference artists in regard to my conceptual objectives, DIY sound bites, *'lockdown music video'* (Beaumont, M. 2020) and *'lockdown album'* (Siregar, C. 2020) elements, I am hopeful that on release these songs will develop my fanbase and propel me

into the next stage of my career and that my DIY '*bedroom beats*' (Adams, A. 2020) approach will solidify my identity and style as the self-producing artist I aim to become.

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