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Giovanna Montenegro
gmontene@binghamton.edu

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Venezuelan Avant-Garde: María Calcaño's Erotic Poetry

Giovanna Montenegro

Abstract: This essay treats the Venezuelan avant-garde and its historical development through the poet María Calcaño (1906-1956). An analysis of Calcaño's work reveals how her erotic avant-gardism was excluded from male-dominated avant-garde literary circles in Venezuela in the 1920s and the 1930s. Rather than analyzing the Latin-American avant-garde as a product of European vanguardisms, I show how Calcaño's poetry draws upon women's physical and erotic experience to generate a new female-authored avant-garde poetic corpus. Calcaño therefore produces work that illustrates the poetic expression of women's identity in Venezuela. She is the first poet who breaks with poetic forms and uses popular genres, including songs, to create what would be a new canon of poetry that takes feminine identity as its central theme.

The Latin-American avant-garde has a particularly rich tradition that distinguishes itself from its European counterpart. However, some scholars have viewed Latin-American vanguardisms merely as belated responses to preceding European literary and artistic movements. This point of view ignores the specificity of the Latin-American avant-garde as an agent of renewal responsible for breaking with the colonial as well as the modern in order to usher in a new Latin-American post-modernity. María Calcaño's (1906-1956) erotic avant-gardism was not what one would expect from a Latin-American woman poet who lived in early-twentieth-century Venezuela—yet no other Venezuelan poet embraced an aesthetic which was based on a woman's sexual experience in her South-American landscape. Calcaño wrote far from Caracas's literary circles and Europhile modernist writers, but despite her isolation, she contributed to establishing an avant-garde corpus that was peculiarly Latin-American. She worked apart from the male-dominated avant-garde to create a body of work that spoke to Venezuelan women's identity and their erotic experience. Her publications include *Alas fatales* (*Fatal Wings*; 1935), *Canciones que oyeron mis últimas muñecas* (*Songs Heard by My Last Dolls*; 1956),

and *Entre la luna y los hombres* (*In Between the Moon and Men*; 1961). Unfortunately, the first volume was the only one published while Calcaño was alive. Nonetheless, female poets such as Calcaño wrote the first works in a new alternative canon of poetry that specifically explores feminine identity—a genre that has flourished in Venezuela within the last twenty years with the work of Miyó Vestriñi, Yolanda Pantín, Velia Bosch, and Mária Russotto.

One of the ways in which Calcaño created poetry that voiced women's desire is through her use of music. The literary critic Héctor Cuenca discusses the importance of the poetic project as song in Calcaño's third book of poetry, *Canciones que oyeron mis últimas muñecas*:

Calcaño arrived singing as if it were second nature. [. . .] She knew nothing of poetic disciplines or of literary rules; she knew nothing of the culture of the humanities; neither was she informed on contemporary poets nor of the guiding great poets of her time, [. . .] but she did know, fundamentally, how to sing. And this was her real knowledge: a desperate feel for verse; beyond all formalist pragmatics. (1956: 1-2)¹

Cuenca is not the only critic who remarked on Calcaño's use of song to voice her feminine experience. In fact in 1957, José Ramón Medina and René Durand, as reviewers of *Canciones que oyeron mis últimas muñecas*, both remark on this connection. Durand writes that “the entirety [of the work] forms a song that bursts spontaneously from the soul because it cannot be contained” (1957: 101). Medina refers to Calcaño as feeling the need to sing, that is, of continuing her poetic practice, within a domestic realm (1957: 143). Calcaño used her voice and love of music to write poetry that was uncomplicated in form, yet extremely intimate, which lends her work a raw power. Even though she only wrote three collections of poetry, she marked Latin-American literature as a woman writing within—yet simultaneously outside—the avant-garde. As she lifts her voice, she makes music from moments in the lives of Venezuelan women and their everyday physical experience.

Just as the well-known author Teresa de la Parra (1889-1936), whose first novel, *Ifigenia*, was released in Paris in 1924, Calcaño's first book of poetry was published outside of Venezuela; her *Alas fatales* was released in Santiago de Chile in 1935. It is not coincidental that two women authors and instrumental figures in Venezuelan letters

published their work abroad at a time when the repression of creative expression, as well as the suppression of women's voices, was in full force. De la Parra's and Calcaño's Venezuela was not a welcoming place for artists and writers at all; rather, it was a place rendered insipid and colorless by the *caudillismo* of General Juan Vicente Gómez, who ruled the country from 1908 until his death in 1935. While a European-born modernity transformed most of Latin America in the early twentieth century, Venezuela remained stagnant under Gómez's authoritarian rule. Moreover, as the journalist María Teresa Castillo relates, "for Gómez, woman did not exist" (qtd. in Pantín and Torres 2003: 61). Women under Gómez were expected to be in charge of the household, and uphold traditional morals and domestic customs which dated back to the nineteenth century (Pantín and Torres 2003: 60). Calcaño's *Alas fatales*, and the femininity it expressed, marked an unprecedented shift in Venezuelan literature, although it took more than thirty years for Venezuelan critics to recognize the force of this avant-garde poetry volume.

De la Parra, who was a well-connected socialite familiar with the ways in which modernity changed life for women in European cities, had much better luck. While De la Parra was attacked by critics offended by her modernist interpretations of young immoral *criollas*,² her prose was recognized and she became a respected literary figure, receiving honorariums for lectures delivered throughout Latin America on the state of women's affairs in the region. Not surprisingly, this famous Venezuelan literary daughter chose to make Paris her home. Calcaño could not have come from a more different background than De la Parra: she wrote from the provinces, completed only an elementary school education, married at the age of fourteen, had six children by the time she was twenty-seven, and divorced young. Moreover, while De la Parra's novels quickly became part of the Venezuelan canon, Calcaño's avant-garde work was immediately forgotten following its publication—until the literary critic Cósimo Mandrillo exhumed it from its grave among forgotten Venezuelan literature. While the success level of both these innovators of Venezuelan women's literature diverged, the feeling and tone of their works are similar. As Durand said of Calcaño in 1957, "Yes, this is indeed very feminine poetry, very closely connected to the nostalgia of memory (think of Teresa De la Parra), and the delight of the stated memory" (1957: 101).

Yolanda Pantín and Ana Teresa Torres analyze the lives of Calcaño and Enriqueta Arvelo Larriva, who formed a provincial pair at odds with the cosmopolitan De la Parra, and contrast the former two female authors with the latter. The daughter of the Venezuelan ambassador to Berlin, De la Parra was born in Paris, spent a good part of her life in the French capital, and died in Madrid. In contrast, Arvelo Larriva wrote from Barinas, a small town in the Andes where, throughout her lifetime, she published poetry inspired by her natural surroundings:

[Calcaño and Arvelo Larriva are] female writers that break out from different corners of the national geography, from different sociocultural contexts, and that “come” from the margins towards a center that will wait a few decades to receive them. [. . .] Their [poetic] work *marks* Venezuelan literature, yet it also represents a *trace* of a subject marginalized to the nation, apart from [their] participation as household managers and producers of children for the fatherland. (Pantín and Torres 2003: 57)

Following Pantín and Torres, Calcaño’s and Arvelo Larriva’s work should be treated as articulating the regional by means of its rebellious form. Both authors used their marginal positions as women writing from the periphery of an already isolated nation to scream—as in Calcaño’s poem “Grito indomable.” This scream was also a feature of Arvelo Larriva’s work, as Elizabeth Gackstetter Nichols notes since, in the 1920s, she called other women to action and rebellion through pen and paper, thus unleashing a barbarous voice (2007: 5). Nichols sees Calcaño’s scream as part of a revolutionary female voice in Venezuelan poetry; she argues that “there is an expression of the poets’ anger in the use of a barbaric language [*lenguaje bárbaro*], in the shocking sexual images and in the themes of sadness and feminine desperation” (2003: 5). Indeed *bárbara*, the feminine form of the Spanish adjective for barbaric, has been applied to Venezuelan women’s poetry in recent critical literature,³ yet the term’s significance has changed, acquiring positive and empowering connotations. This use of the word derives from Rómulo Gallegos’s novel, *Doña Bárbara* (*Madame Barbara*; 1929), a classic of the Latin-American literary canon, in which Venezuela is depicted as barbaric and untamed. Ileana Rodríguez compares the use of the barbaric in De la Parra’s novel *Ifigenia* (1924) with Gallegos’s novel. While in *Ifigenia*, the nation represented in the novel is ugly, in *Doña Bárbara* “Gallegos’[s] adjectives apply to the nation, [the] plain[s], and

women. De la Parra uses ‘ugly’ in a different manner and applies the term to Venezuela and *mulatas*” (1994: 85). It can be said that Calcaño and Arvelo Larriva further transform the barbaric tradition in Venezuelan literature. Their poetry is women’s barbaric writing.

It is no wonder that Calcaño issued her call to action from a provincial city known for its resilience. Maracaibo, in the western part of Venezuela, has always shown itself to be resistant to trends from Caracas. *Marabinos* or *maracuchos*, as residents of the city are called, are non-conformist and therefore tend to be innovators of different genres including *gaita* music, a type of Venezuelan folk music whose lyrics are often a form of social or political protest. They are also well known for their regional pride and distinctive speech, which varies linguistically from the more standard Venezuelan Spanish. Because of its geographical isolation, Maracaibo has had more historical contact with the Colombian peninsula, the Caribbean, and Europe than the rest of Venezuela. The city sits on the western side of a channel that connects the Gulf of Venezuela with Lake Maracaibo. At the same time, the Zulia region where Maracaibo is located played an important role in Venezuela’s eventual modernization, since it was the first area to experience the shift from an agricultural economy to an economy based on petroleum exports. Representative authors such as Ismael Urdaneta have explored the transformation of the idyllic Lake Maracaibo into a petroleum reservoir—for instance in his 1928 *Poemas de la musa libre (Poems of the Free Muse)* (Romero 2004). Calcaño, however, highlighted the sensation of her body in nature and her erotic relationships within her poetry. In consideration of the conditions surrounding her home city of Maracaibo, Calcaño can be said to occupy an unusual and compelling place within the regional and national history of Venezuelan literature, that is, Maracaibo becomes emblematic of Calcaño’s avant-gardism.

Calcaño did not associate with her literary contemporaries; she rather wrote apart from all groups, even ones based in Maracaibo like *Seremos (We Will Be)*, although she was affiliated by association with this particular movement because of her marriage to one of its members, Héctor Araujo Ortega. By tracing Calcaño’s development as parallel to the evolution of the Venezuelan avant-garde, it becomes possible to establish another, alternative history of the vanguard which takes into consideration matters of gender and regional difference. The literary critic Nelson Osorio dates the birth of the Venezuelan avant-garde to the mid-1920s (1982: 34). In many ways, the trajectory of the

vanguard in Venezuela remains similar that of the rest of Latin America during and after World War I—particularly in Chile, Argentina, Cuba, Peru, and Mexico (Osorio 1982: 41). The transatlantic critique of Latin America (that has by now become widely accepted) holds that its rupture with modernism constitutes an event whose arrival was bound to be delayed. For as Venezuelan writer José Gil Fortoul (1861-1943) argues, “trends tend to travel with a certain sluggishness,” especially those that link Europe and the Americas (qtd. in Osorio 1982: 33). Whether or not this is the case, and while critics and supporters alike used the epithet *vanguardista* to refer to the Latin-American avant-garde, all the movements under the umbrella of the avant-garde were not necessarily synonymous with a renewal of literary language or a radical break with the past. While Futurism was lauded across the continent for its significance—not only due to its ties to the well-known F. T. Marinetti, but also for promulgating a future that was to come—attitudes concerning the movement—as well as the rest of the avant-garde—ranged from an infatuation with the reactionary and sometimes openly fascist ideas put forth a decade earlier to a love of formal experimentation and rupture with modernist aesthetics.

The late Arturo Usler Pietri (1906-2001), a highly respected Venezuelan writer and critic, was at this time a twenty-year-old member of Maracaibo’s *Seremos*. In an article written in 1927, in the group’s short-lived literary magazine, *Índice (Index)*, Usler Pietri defends Futurism, which was by then outdated in both Europe and Latin America. He made Marinetti’s reactionary ideology, which combined a love of war with scorn for women, his own: “The inconceivable machine of tomorrow, beautiful and perfect over every virtue, will fill that void left by women in art and the world” (qtd. in Osorio 36). A year later, Usler Pietri recanted his statement in the only published issue of *válvula*, a journal of the emerging avant-garde, and upholds form as the most important revolutionary element; ironically, however, this posture can be considered almost reactionary. Even taking into account Usler Pietri’s retraction, the misogyny which too often characterizes avant-garde movements (the Italian Futurists and the Berlin dada group come to mind) stayed in place.⁴ As such, his position demonstrates that, in its attempt to find new forms of expression, the Latin-American avant-garde retained a conventional ideology which merely mirrored misogynist tendencies. Calcaño’s work is therefore a breath of fresh air amidst the Venezuelan

vanguard's rejection of women and the dismissal of their creative work.

Calcaño's emancipation from the rules governing such literary movements as *Seremos* aided her in perfecting an idiosyncratic poetic form at the same time as it contributed to her work's invisibility. Exclusion from literary groups marked the careers of Venezuela's women poets, since creative groups with their predominantly male membership were unsympathetic to an aesthetic that asserted the feminine. Yet this gender divide actually allowed women poets like Arvelo Larriva and Calcaño, as well as later poets such as Elizabeth Schön (1921-2007) and Ida Gramcko (1924-1994), a certain freedom. Their poetry flourished in the peripheries which resulted in a growing corpus of women's writing. At the same time, only in the last twenty years has this literary canon been explored through feminist critique. What did these Venezuelan women poets write from the literary margins and humdrum of domesticity? They framed Venezuelan women's daily experiences, from household tasks and chores to a distinctly female expression of sexual desire, to their relationship with the natural landscape and the particularities of a Venezuelan feminine language.

Calcaño celebrates the power of the female body and its desire. She converts the lyrical subject into the voice of a woman expressing her daily encounters with passion and nature. While men are not absent from her poetry (she explicitly glorifies heterosexual intimacy), Calcaño focuses distinctly on women's physical, sexual, and social experiences. In Poem No. 38 of *Canciones que oyeron mis últimas muñecas* she rejoices in the erotic and her physical self, while simultaneously criticizing women's roles in Venezuelan culture:

Si vamos a la ciudad
no vayas a tomarme el brazo.
No quiero parecerme
a esas mujeres
que llevan hombres aburridos.
Sin doctores,
ni iglesias,
ni papeles,
nosotros nos casamos
por amor.
Vamos!,
como en el campo!
cogidos de las manos,

retozando...
 Como si fuera domingo!
 Como un par de campesinos.
 Como somos.
 Vamos!
 Que se rían de nosotros;
 pero que se rían
 con envidia...
 (Calcaño, No. 38, *Canciones, Obras completas* 1996: 1-21/line 152)⁵

In the poem's first lines, the female poetic subject urges her lover to forego the city for the erotic freedom of the country. A rebellious girl, she criticizes the socio-cultural norms of urban locales that turn women into the docile property of first her father and then her husband. The female subject represented by the poetic "I" refuses to transform herself into a Venezuelan semi-colonial woman, who for the sake of holding up the family's moral image in society, becomes a creature incapable of physically loving her husband outside of domestic interiors and the untouchable family home. Calcaño's lovers throw off the city's bourgeois institutions; the hospital, the church, and general bureaucracy (with endless stacks of paper) together represent a Venezuela in which love is tied to social hierarchies that dictate whom you can and cannot love based on class and race. Her female poetic subject stands outside of society and dares it to laugh—but only with envy. Ultimately, this "I" decides to forego society's rules that inhibit her from sexually experiencing her lover apart from an oppressive domesticity tied to urban capitalism and divorced from nature. The lovers' matrimony stands outside both ecclesiastical and civil law but nonetheless it is a union which nature legitimizes.

Calcaño's attention to nature as a place for erotic fulfillment is a frequent theme in her work. In "Madrugada" ("Dawn"), which appears in the volume *Alas fatales*, the poetic subject rises from her bed and experiences an intense sexual awakening that is likened to the birth of spring:

De madrugada
 la casa en sombra
 me desespera,
 y dejo el lecho
 pesado y triste
 y llego al patio
 como una alondra.
 Y es entonces

cuando la aurora
 prende en mis hombros
 su cabellera.
 ¡Me siento bella como ninguna!
 con un aliento de primavera
 sobre los labios,
 sobre los senos
 mal escondidos
 bajo la túnica.
 ¡Qué de belleza!
 ¡qué de frescura tiene mi cuerpo!,
 ¡cuando la aurora llega y me toma
 medio desnuda
 sobre la yerba!
 (“Madrugada,” *Alas fatales, Obras completas*, 1996: 1-21/94)⁶

The dawn is personified as an erotic agent that stimulates the body, engendering desire and aiding the female subject in experiencing erotic pleasure. A quality specific to Calcaño’s work is her combination of natural elements and a rebellious feminine “I” who remains unwilling to tame her desires. In “Grito indomable” (“Indomitable Scream”) the subject hangs on tenaciously to her subjectivity:

Cómo van a verme buena
 si me truena
 la vida en las venas.
 ¡Si toda canción
 se me enreda como una llamarada!,
 y vengo sin Dios
 y sin miedo...
 ¡Si tengo sangre insubordinada
 y no puedo mostrarme
 dócil como una criada,
 mientras tenga
 un recuerdo de horizonte
 un retazo de cielo
 y una cresta de monte!
 Ni tú ni el cielo
 ni nada
 podrán con mi grito indomable.
 (“Grito indomable,” *Alas fatales, Obras completas* 1996: 1-17/34)⁷

Calcaño associates liberty with nature and sees the insubordinate blood of the rebellious woman as responsible for her inability to adapt to a lifestyle that requires her to be “docile like a servant.” Here again,

Calcaño contrasts the oppressive domestic environment with the freedom of the sky, grass, and horizon.

Written in the first person, Calcaño's poems possess a certain sexual urgency, particularly when she uses an imperative tone that deliberately confuses whether the voice originates from Calcaño or a textual subject. In the poem "Ama..." ("Love..."), the subject screams her desire: "¡Mujer! ábrete el corazón / [. . .] / ¡Da tu vida a cien hombres! / ¡Qué te duela la herida! 'Woman! Open up your own heart / [. . .] / Give yourself to a hundred men / Let your wound ache!' (*Alas fatales, Obras completas* 1996: 1-6/85). Moreover, the poem's title "Ama" can be read as having a double meaning: as the imperative of "to love" or also as a noun that denotes a female owner or proprietor. For example, a housewife or mistress of the house is an "ama de casa." Calcaño commands this domestic "ama" to love when she states, "Ama... / Tuya es la alegría" 'Love / happiness is yours.' Similarly, in "El Deseo" ("Desire") she commands a male subject with the words: "Revélate gigante, / que en mi vida / tú cabes. [. . .] / Ábreme la vena, / abundante... / que la tengo estrecha!" 'Awaken giant / because you fit / into my life / [. . .] / Open up my vein / Abundant... / It's too tight!' (*Alas fatales, Obras completas* 1996: 1-3, 6-8/43). And in "Me ha de bastar la vida" ("Life Has to be Enough for Me"), she tells her lover: "¡Quémame duro, hondo!" 'Burn me hard, deep!' (*Alas fatales, Obras completas* 1996: 4/50).

Calcaño was the first Venezuelan poet to address taboo themes such as miscarriage—in "Desangre" ("The Bleeding")—and menstruation—"Primer espanto de la niña con la luna" ("A Girl's First Fright with the Moon"). Once again, she examines these peculiarly female experiences in relation to nature. In "Desangre," for example, the narrator laments the loss of her unborn child: "y esta mañana / se me vino del tronco / el hijo nuevo" 'and this morning / out of my trunk / came forth my new son' (1996: 4-6/77). As Calcaño develops the metaphor of a woman's body as a tree trunk, the subject expresses her wish to feel "toda pimpollada en cien brotes altos" 'about to erupt with a hundred buds' (1996: 15-16/77), but instead, in the last stanza, her body becomes a trunk sustaining withered branches. It is incapable of bearing fruit, which stands as a sign of her interrupted motherhood: "La raíz, lastimada. Los pezones, baldíos" 'The root, injured. The breasts, barren' (*Alas fatales, Obras completas* 1996: 17-18/77). According to Julio Miranda, while Calcaño portrays sexual experience in a positive light, she depicts the miscarriage in "Desangre" as a

mutilation of a woman's physical being. In his view, the experience constitutes "an absolute loss of the body" (1996: 12-13). This is an important counter-idea in Calcaño, whose work focuses on the exaltation of women's corporeal and erotic experiences.

Rather than demanding inclusion in vanguard groups such as *Seremos*, which reinstitute misogyny through their reverence for form, Calcaño became a true *vanguardista* by singing of women's erotic experiences and expressing their desire. Her pairing of the body with nature, along with her rejection of social institutions that expected women's subservience, marks her not only as a clever author, but as one who was an innovator with regard to the poetic genre. Calcaño's position in the Venezuelan avant-garde at first appears to be a replication of women's marginalized position in European avant-garde movements. Yet rather than subjecting her aesthetic program to that of her male contemporaries, Calcaño used popular forms such as the song to create poetry that was ahead of its time. Her transformation of women's lives into a formal yet still feminine language paved the way for a new generation of women poets—Vestrini, Pantín, Bosch, and Russotto—who would keep voicing their barbaric *gritos indomables*.

NOTES

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. In addition, all quotations of Calcaño's poems are from the 1996 *Obras completas (Collected Works)*. María Eugenia Bravo and Cósimo Mandrillo have also published a 2008 anthology of Calcaño's works, *Obra poética completa, María Calcaño*.

² The word "criollas" refers to the female descendants of Europeans born in the ex-colonies.

³ See Mágina Russotto's *Bárbaras e ilustradas*, and Yolanda Pantín's article, "Entrar en lo bárbaro. Una lectura de la poesía venezolana de mujeres."

⁴ Italian Futurism was a movement that was misogynist in its rhetoric, style and societal attitudes. Aggression, virility, scorn for women, an apotheosis for violence and war characterized the movement led by the Italian Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and his *Futurist Manifesto* (1909). French *femme fatale* and poetess, Valentine de Saint-Point, the companion of Ricciotto Canudo (an Italian associate of the Futurists based in Paris) responded to Marinetti's demands by drawing up her *Manifesto della donna futurista (Manifesto of the Woman Futurist; 1912)*. Saint-Point's provocative work expresses her excitement about her own version of a homogenous society, one populated by superwomen. Yet the position of women in avant-garde movements has nonetheless been marginalized, or at best, tolerated by members of various groups. Often, the only point of entry for women artists were their status as lovers of a prominent male member. This was the case with Calcaño, Saint-Point, and the Berlin Dada artist Hanna Höch. Höch, who was the only woman in the group, was accepted because of her relationship with Raoul Hausmann (see Maud Lavin's *Cut With the*

Kitchen Knife: The Photomontages of Hanna Höch). Avant-Garde movements, therefore, provided the acceptable umbrella of a male-dominated counter culture. These women artists needed such shelter in order to engage in artistic discourse that would break from bourgeois notions of femininity and masculinity. By adhering to a male aesthetic standard, they could propose feminist theoretical changes and work within their movements to discredit the male artistic credo that they were supposed to follow.

⁵ Translation of Poem No. 38: If we go to the city / do not take me by the arm / I do not want to look / like those women / who lead bored men / Without doctors / nor churches / nor papers / we marry / for love.

Let's go! / like in the fields! / holding our hands / frolicking... / As if it were Sunday! / As if we were a pair of peasants / As we are now. / Let's go! / Let them laugh at us / but let them laugh / with envy...

⁶ Translation of "Dawn": At dawn / the house in shadows / makes me despair, / and I leave the bed— / heavy and sad / and come to the patio / like a skylark. / And it is then / when the daybreak / sets alight its head of hair / on my shoulders.

I feel beautiful like no other! / with a breath of spring / on the lips / on the breasts / sparsely hidden / below my robe.

Such splendor! / Such freshness my body has! / When the dawn arrives and takes me / half naked / upon the grass!

⁷ Translation of "Indomitable Scream": How will they see me as good / When life in my veins / Thunders / When every song / Tangles up like a sudden blaze / And I come without God / And without fear...

When I have insubordinate blood / And I can't pretend to be / Docile like a servant, / While I have / a memory of a horizon, / a remnant of sky, / and a crest of weeds! / Neither you nor the sky / Nothing / Will stand my indomitable scream.

See also "'Intranquila, Poseedora': An Introduction to Venezuelan Poetess María Calcaño" (Montenegro 2006).

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