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Colonizing Cynicism in the Works of Rudyard Kipling

Ph.D. thesis

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Summary of Thesis

Goals

When Edward Said wrote his landmark *Orientalism* in 1973, he used Rudyard Kipling as an example of a prototypical colonizer. For decades, that had been the way Kipling was treated. However, since the 1980s, the critical trend has described ambivalences, contradictions, and anxieties in his work that, according to critics, suggest Kipling opposed the abuses of the British Empire, and that his deeply-felt affection for the colonized regions in general and India in particular made him an early proponent for the end of the oppressive, racist policies of the government. While it is true that he advocated for greater understanding of and care for subjects' religious and cultural values, it cannot be said that Kipling, in the political positions he expressed, ever challenged the validity and justness of the Empire. While he felt personal anxiety over the actions of the British in their colonies, it is clear from his personal communications and public stances that, for Kipling, any reduction in British power and influence over its colonies was anathema, and that his lifelong campaign against any measure of self-rule by India was in keeping with his own personal opinions about the fitness of non-Europeans to govern themselves. With this firmly in mind, this study reexamines the poems and stories of Rudyard Kipling written up to 1901, looking particularly at the slippages, ruptures, and elisions that mark his stories and poems about empire. Rather than finding contradiction or ambivalence, this study uses in particular the theories of Peter Sloterdijk (1987) and Slavoj Žižek (1989) to demonstrate that Kipling's texts function to preserve the humanistic, racializing ideology that underpins Britain's colonial practices. In doing so, I show that Kipling, even while his texts expose the abuses and representative slippages of the colony, not only do these not undermine the Empire, they reify and perpetuate it.

Rudyard Kipling's texts reinforce colonial hegemony and a particular ideology that perpetuates the colonial enterprise. The importance of geographical, anthropological, and political texts in validating and framing colonial imperialism has been well documented, and this dissertation proceeds from the idea that literary works of art play a similarly key role. The ideology of the former texts, built on a notion of totality of knowledge being available to and controlled by the colonizer, is endangered in the colony itself, where what Said (2003) calls the "human encounter" (45) threatens to destabilize the construction of colonial ideology in two main ways: demonstrating that race is malleable and penetrable, and by exposing that the colony, rather than being a means of advancing less-developed cultures along a positivist track, is a site of oppression and exploitation built on violence.

A question prompted my inquiry: how could a humanistic European subject who believes in rights of self-determination and the dignity of the human be a colonizer? My investigation began with an analysis of how colonial racial ideology separates the humanistic subject from the colonized. The model for this was formed using Aimé Césaire (1972), Frantz Fanon (2004, 2008), and Said (2003). The colonizer separates the colonized Other into a separate category not subject to the same natural rights, a silenced subaltern whose suffering and humanity are not signified. The creation of the Other in the formation of European subjectivity necessitates a certain distance from the Other. Upon close contact with the Other, which the colonizer risks in the colony, it is bound to be obvious that the principles used to justify the colonizing enterprise, as well as the racial construction that is the foundation of not only the colony but of white identity, is not only fallacious but hides a hideous truth: that one group of people that is not inherently opposed to another performs monstrous crimes against

them for the sake of profit and control. This argument was sparked by passages particularly in Said (2003), who writes about the importance of separating the colonizer from the colonized because the lived experience of the colony, and in particular contact with the colonized, is bound to unravel some of that ideology, and the ability to express a belief and behave otherwise—in a word, hypocrisy—is essential to continuing to perform colonizing work. I identify cynicism as self-aware hypocrisy one not only makes no effort to change but explains away using cognitive techniques, particularly by misattributing the anxiety this creates in the subject to other causes.

It is the role of what I call the literature of colonizing cynicism to prepare the colonizer for this "human encounter" by providing a framework that invokes cognitive dissonance in the form of cynicism. This cognitive dissonance simultaneously acknowledges the oppression and hypocrisy of the colony and drives the colonizer to justify their own part in the running of the empire. In other words, cynicism is not just important for the White colonizer, it is essential. By closely examining the construction and deconstruction of racial and imperial ideology in Kipling's fiction and poetry, this study demonstrates the methods the author uses to depict colonizing ideology both through the characters' actions and the framework of the text. This thesis looks in particular at texts that Kipling wrote in India or directly afterwards, up to and including the writing of *Kim* in 1901, following a conventional division in Kipling's works that separates his writings about Empire from his later writings, focusing on coming-of-age and nautical life. These texts include the short story collections *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888), *The Phantom Rickshaw and Other Eerie Tales* (1888), *Wee Willie Winkie and Other Child Stories* (1888), *In Black and White* (1888), *Life's Handicap: Being Stories of Mine Own People* (1891), *The Jungle Books* (1894, 1895), the book of poetry *Departmental Ditties Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses* (1892), and the novels *The Light That Failed* (1890) and *Kim* (1901). Far from expressing only anxiety at the incompleteness and intersubjectivity of colonizing ideology, Kipling's "complex" texts cynically serve as a representative tool to shape the experiences of colonialists abroad in responding to the colonial encounter in a way that would lessen anxiety and enable their work in fulfilling the oppressive enterprise of the regime. Over the course of these texts, Kipling's representations of sources of colonial anxiety shift, as his work describes ever less destabilizing elements and frames them in increasingly solid and idealized structures. Thus, even as he becomes more deft in containing the potential for the dissolution of colonial anxiety with more complex strategies, Kipling moves away from fully exposing those threats at all and increasingly represents the colony not in terms of lived experience but as an ideological fantasy.

Methodology

Rudyard Kipling has long been a controversial figure in the postcolonial discussion of India and the British Empire. In the 1950s and 60s Kipling's writings were used as an example of the hegemonic British imperialist discourse. As such, the criticism of Kipling formed one of the bases of scholarship that would lead to the flourishing of postcolonial thought. Later, especially from the 1980s, this way of reading Kipling was challenged by those who found his texts to be the sites of slippages and ambiguities that seem to criticize and subvert colonial authority. These scholars either situate Kipling as an explicit critic of the Empire or as an ambiguous figure whose fractured self, divided between the Indian and the English, is played out in his creative work. This trend has continued to the present, though with a parallel line of criticism that questions to what extent Kipling ever actually critiques colonial practices. At

the turn of the century, David Gilmour's *The Long Recessional: The Imperial Life of Rudyard Kipling* (2002) returned to talking about Kipling as a colonizer first and foremost. My argument was strongly shaped by this book, which through close analysis of writing by and about Kipling demonstrates that Kipling was not actually ambivalent about the British presence in India, but fully believed in the colonizing role of the British there. Gilmour shows Kipling's identity and reception in the light of the rise and fall of the British Empire itself, describing his early role as "apostle of the Empire, the embodiment of imperial aspiration, and his later one as the prophet of national decline" (6). Gilmour rightly points out that Kipling refused to accept that the end of the Empire might mean anything other than the complete collapse of Britain and of Britain's former colonies.

My analysis of Kipling's Indian stories and poems forms the heart of the dissertation, though I also touch on his writings about Africa. As a starting point in understanding Rudyard Kipling's relationship to India, I am indebted to Charles Allen's *Kipling Sahib: India and the Making of Rudyard Kipling 1865-1900* (2007), which creates a complex portrait both of Kipling in place as well as his relationship with the population of the occupied land, nonwhite and white. It demonstrates, for example, that Kipling's experiences as a young man in the slums of Lahore led him to see many English civil servants as incompetent, brutish, and corrupt, a perspective that colored his writing. When Kipling seeks a scapegoat to hang the crimes of the Empire on, it is often the individual colonial agent. I identify this placing of blame as the misattribution that comes with cognitive dissonance: by placing the blame on individuals rather than the entire colonial system, Kipling gives the colonizing reader something else to ascribe their negative feelings to when they see the suffering in India. Thus, they do not have to face that their own actions contribute to the abuses they encounter every day. As a result of this, even the ethical colonial becomes a colonizer, shifting their beliefs to fully support the system they unconsciously know is causing awful suffering.

In this I identify a reflection of Albert Memmi's (2003) conception of the colonizer: "every colonizer must, in a certain measure, accept the mediocrity of colonial life and the men who thrive on it. It is also clear that every colonizer must adapt himself to his true situation and the human relationships resulting from it" (95). The internalization of the colonist/colonized dichotomy, not to mention its inevitable failings and contradictions, becomes an essential part of the identity of everyone involved.

This leads to my thesis: that the simulacrum of empire requires a construction of race that is fragile and vulnerable particularly in the colonized space itself, and that the production of, subversion of, and hybridization of these identities in their varied forms is described in Kipling's work in a way that, rather than weakening the resolve of the imperialist reader, arms them in a way that triggers cognitive dissonance and prepares them to continue their work in the face of the suffering and injustice of the colony. In responding to Gilmour, Charles Allen (2007) warns against "the misapprehension that an author's creation either as a character or as the narrator of a story is a reflection of himself or herself" (17). While it is true that one cannot unproblematically associate Kipling with his characters or narrators, my research shows that his narrators and narratives consistently create a cynical effect meant to be practiced by the reader in a similar way as it is expressed by the characters. As such, the characters and narrators of his stories are constructions that specifically position themselves in a way that best creates this effect of colonizing cynicism.

Although it has been questioned, I argue that, indeed, Kipling's writing is fundamentally shaped by the question of empire. For Kipling, the questions of empire never were about challenging the basic morality of the establishment, but rather about the best way

to perpetuate the colonial system. Much of Kipling's writing falls into the category Elleke Boehmer (2005) calls colonialist, which she defines as "literature written by and for colonizing Europeans about non-European lands dominated by them. It embodied the imperialists' point of view. Colonialist literature was informed by theories concerning the superiority of European culture and the rightness of empire" (3). Boehmer demonstrates that this does not mean that all colonialist works are uncritical of colonization, though the point of view—whether for or against—remains that of whiteness. Kipling's perspective is always that of the colonizer and, despite the empathy he expresses for the colonized cultures and countries, his narrators seldom divide themselves from their white imperial gaze. At times, his narrators come to confront flaws in this identity, though they are incapable of escaping it, and in fact their cognitive strategies serve to reinforce them against the threat contact with the Other embodies. This forms a fascinating ongoing struggle in Kipling's work: the need to legitimize what is unlegitimizable, and by it to defend a highly porous and unstable identity that needs to be inviolable for the colonial regime of truth to function.

As Bényei (2011) shows, Kipling's stories and poems demonstrate interesting inversions in terms of colonizer and colonized, even while they cannot separate themselves from this dichotomized dialectic. Crucially, though the roles become destabilized, the power in naming remains with the white man—this power cannot be separated from the ultimate hegemonic control he enjoys. It is this naming power that allows the white colonizer to continue to enforce the dichotomy between European and Other, colonizer and colonized. What is missing—silenced, even when acknowledged—is what Spivak (1999) calls "the native informant" (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 4). In the volume *In Black and White* (1888), Kipling tells half his stories in the voice of a native, but these stories are told in the form of a monologue to a colonizer. Thus, the text itself becomes the product of the colonizer who is implied to have written it down, and thus is doubly the construction of a colonizing ideological position: it is foremost a representation created by Kipling, not by the subaltern who continues to remain silenced, and it is also shaped through the experience of a colonizer receiving and reinterpreting the words of the colonized. The role of the implied reader is never to listen to the colonized, but rather to categorize the translated narrative into the terms of the colonizer and to learn new modes of signifying from it.

Structure

The first chapter, the introduction, explains the current scholarship about Kipling's relationship with imperialism and the British Empire, noting the ambivalence many find in his attitude, as he expressed both a deep and lasting affection for the British colonies, especially India, and yet in his personal writings and poetry often expresses a support of the colonial rule whose mismanagement and abuses he describes in his fiction. Using Gilmour (2002) as a basis, I show that Kipling's imperialistic views are by no means at odds with his love of the colonized place or with his understanding of the abuses that take place there.

The second chapter performs a study of postcolonial scholarship, demonstrating how the racial Other and the British subject position are formed discursively. I also explore scholarship on Victorian ideology, demonstrating how control of knowledge through the production of texts constructed the Orient and British authority over it. Then, I show the means by which colonizers lessen the anxiety incumbent upon them as a result of their recognition of intersubjectivity, misattributing this anxiety to individual, ignorant colonizers, to the natives' failure to be proper subjects of colonial order, and to the colonized space.

Simultaneously, the representation of the colony as timeless and in a different time than the colonizing state, as well as the use of the ideology of sport and fair play, fix the colony and imperialistic work as immutable and eternal, separating the actions of the colonizer from the abuses of the colony.

The third chapter starts by explaining the strategies Kipling's texts employ to teach colonial cynicism, through which the gaps in imperial ideology are partially exposed and the anxiety this produces demonstrated. This effect represents the threat of the dissolution of imperial representation as disastrous to both colonial order and British subjectivity, and renewed adherence to the ideology as the means to prevent it. The following subchapters examine Kipling's volumes of fiction and poetry published during his work in India as a reporter and immediately after his departure, illustrating both how this coming cynicism is developed in varying forms and how Kipling's stories and poems shift from the 1890s from complex representations of colonial anxiety to children's coming-of-age stories and depictions of valorous and uncomplicated colonizers. Among the texts I read closely is "The Conversion of Aurelian McGoggin," in which the protagonist, an avowed atheist, loses his ability to speak at all in the colony, where any idea that would suggest the colonial order could be disturbed is impossible, and the existence of a God giving validation to the Empress must be represented as true. Another story, "The Mark of the Beast," represents the most disturbing of Kipling's stories for the colonizers, for its brutal depiction of colonizers torturing a leprous priest, in addition to its suggestion of unchristian supernatural power in the colonized space, proved deeply horrifying to contemporary British readers. The novella *The Man Who Would Be King* follows the dissolution of racial binary to a horrifying conclusion, as British colonizers who collapse the racial distinction between colonizer and colonized themselves lose their place in the entire signifying order, finding themselves unable to even name themselves without the ordering gaze of the British imperial system.

The Jungle Books demonstrate the shift to children's stories with less complex depictions of colonial relationships, as Mowgli's complete support by the jungle, which recognizes his inherent superiority and grants him the privilege of power, coupled with Mowgli's instinctive deference and loyalty to a white colonizer, construct a colonial fantasy of absolute boundaries where difference produces no slippages or disturbances. *Kim*, considered by many to be Kipling's best developed and most complex depiction of the colonial encounter, has been read either as an ideal colonial education that grants a future colonizer full knowledge of the colony or as a rich and loving depiction of a living India that overflows its ideological boundaries and undoes the racial significations of the British Raj. I examine how the threat of racial dissolution is conveyed beside its transgressive joy, and the novel constructs white identity so as to grant it the sole privilege of a racial fluidity that never takes away from the whiteness of the ruler.

The conclusion looks to the implications of this study on today's signifying order, demonstration that colonial cynicism has smoothly become neocolonial cynicism. I suggest that only by white subjects abandoning the privileged position that the exploitive system of global relationships grants can this system of abuse be brought to an end.

Findings

The subject's place in the hegemonic order becomes paramount as they face the prospect of its removal. We can see this anxiety in Kipling's characters' insistence to be represented which, though unconsciously, is fed by their acknowledgement of the position of their

nonwhite fellows. For example, the adventurer Carnehan insists to the narrator of “The Man Who Would Be King” look at him: “Keep looking at me, or maybe my words will go all to pieces.” Having been exposed to the effect of empire, he finds himself suddenly cut loose from the protective sphere of white identity and ideology.

Carnehan’s need to be looked at comes from the ambiguity that he has experienced in Kafiristan, where the division between colonizer and colonized broke down. The problem lies in the Englishmen’s systematic inability to categorize those they meet. Dravot repeatedly insists that the people of the hills are not only white, but English (“These men aren’t niggers; they’re English! Look at their eyes—look at their mouths. Look at the way they stand up. They sit on chairs in their own houses. They’re the Lost Tribes, or something like it, and they’ve grown to be English.”) and the two Englishmen name the chiefs after their relatives back home. The fact that the natives prove to be Freemasons further heightens the effect of this remarkable zone of indistinction, to use Giorgio Agamben’s term. There, the protective power of hegemony and the colonial identity is removed, and Dravot is reduced to a head in a bag, wearing a meaningless crown whose priceless gems Carnehan gains no profit from.

Kipling is more than a mouthpiece of imperial propaganda. His stories and poems demonstrate that he acknowledged and problematized anxieties about the role of the individual in the colonial enterprise, and that he did so in a way that served that enterprise. In Kipling’s work, the colonial individual—both white and nonwhite—was fundamentally changed by their exposure to and part in the colonizing discourse. For both colonizers and colonized in the works of Kipling, the personal experience with empire is shaped by both direct and internalized power. Whether this power is assumed, subverted, or outright rebelled against, it is monolithic, but the cracks in the ideology show. What Mary Louise Pratt (2004) calls “the contact zone” plays an essential role in Kipling’s works. It leaves the identities of many of those it touches permeated, exposed as hybrid and fluid. The identity of the colonizer is, as we see in the example of Lieutenant Golightly, dangerously fragile, and the function of power is revealed in moments when it recedes or fails altogether. When we do see that identity stripped the result is almost always a complete breakdown usually followed by death. The empire cannot be removed from the imperial without devastating consequences. On the frontier, identity and representation are bound together.

We must take care not to confuse ambiguity with ambivalence, while both are present and important in Kipling’s work. We can see his use of ambiguity to develop hybrid identities of his characters, both of whites in colonial settings and also of nonwhites. While the whites frequently fail to associate themselves consciously with those they nominally rule, Kipling’s representation subverts the separation between the two identities and crosses boundaries. A prime example is in *Kim*, in which the title character can assume identities easily, and he is able to speak with those of other ethnicities in their own languages and—on the surface—as equals, though this seeming closeness is deceptive.

This is not to say Kipling’s white characters shed their whiteness. Nonwhite identity, when adopted by Kipling’s white characters, is only a disguise, and they – despite their apparent skill in mimicking peoples of color – remain white in essence. In what may be the key example, *Kim* blends in perfectly with the Indians – or so we are told – but this “passing”, to borrow Nella Larsen’s (1929) term, is only to make him a better sahib, in order to improve the colonial administration of India. While *Kim* does learn valuable virtues, they are all (also) British virtues, and *Kim* becomes neither more Indian nor less white. On the other hand, the contact that occurs creates a crisis of representation, particularly in the final chapters taking

part on the border of India, in the liminal zone between the colonized space and the space beyond.

The use of ambivalence to seed cynicism in the reader can also be seen in a theme that appears in many of his stories: that strong men – and they are always men – do not know distinctions of race, class, or religion when they meet. This is best summed up in "The Ballad of East and West." On the surface, the poem demonstrates a relationship of mutual respect between the two enemies, but the words of Kamal to his son throw the poem's stated meaning into question. His son's life and death become controlled by both himself and to the Colonel's son. To further demonstrate his understanding of the imbalance in their relationship, Kamal sees his own destruction in the future of this arrangement: "Belike they will raise thee to Ressaldar when I am hanged in Peshawur." And it is the Colonel's son who speaks instead of Kamal's son—who never speaks at all—and defines the man of color's representation: "Last night ye had struck at a Border thief—to-night 't is a man of the Guides."

Kipling's ideological positioning of the reader redirects anxieties about the subject's role in oppression and the lived evidence belying racial essentialism and white supremacy. Even as it constructs cynicism, it points away from the ones whose words in actuality threaten the imperial system. The subaltern remains voiceless; when one does speak, it is in a voice formed by their hegemonic oppressor. Literally, all of the nonwhite people the reader experiences are speaking with Kipling's words. And the white colonizer's identity is likewise formed by their relationship with the empire, whose representation of them is as contradictory as it is inescapable. Empire shapes the characters both in their support of it and their resistance to it: to become outside the influence of its hegemony is to invite disaster, and so the threat of this must be contained by learning hypocrisy.

Conclusions

From the time he was born in India, Rudyard Kipling was raised in the belief that India in particular and the Empire in general is his birthright, and that the colonial system as administered by the British was inherently the only just and right means of governing the colonies. This attitude is not only represented but reproduced in his writing, both in his personal and political writings explicitly in support of imperial practices and in his stories and poetry. As has been shown, Kipling anticipates the anxiety felt by colonizers when lived experience in the colony exposes the gaps in colonial ideology, demonstrating that neither the humanistic justification for the Empire nor the racialized separation of people are absolute. This anxiety is used by his texts to frame ideology as a bulwark against the dissolution of the Empire and the subjectivity of the individual colonizer, the two of which are identified as linked and mutually dependent on each other. Thus, Kipling's texts represent that, despite the gaps, slippages, and incompleteness of colonizing ideology, colonizing ideology is the best and only means of protecting and strengthening both the Empire itself and the best interests of the colonizer in the colony.

With this reading in mind, it behooves us to revisit other texts that have been suggested as anti-colonial, such as the canonical *Heart of Darkness* (1902) or *A Passage to India* (1924). While these texts demonstrate the anxiety that threatens the colonizer in the colony, such as the famous threat of nonsense noise in the latter novel written about in detail by Bhabha (1994), it is important to separate whether these serve to undermine the imperial symbolic order or reinforce it. Another look at *Heart of Darkness* reveals that the ending

seems to suggest that it is not the colony itself that has “darkened” London, but rather that the cynicism of the colonizing agent has spread to that city as a result of Marlowe’s experiences in the Congo. The lie Marlowe tells regarding the death of Kurtz illustrates the cynicism he has brought back from the colony and has, through his actions, passed on to Kurtz’s fiancée.

Publications pertaining to the dissertation's topic

- “Kipling’s Colonizing Cynicism in ‘On the City Wall,’” under consideration for publication as a chapter in a book through HUSSE.
- “The Dissolution of Race and Self in Kipling’s *The Man Who Would Be King*,” under consideration at *FOCUS: Papers in English Literary and Cultural Studies*.
- “Preventing Collapse of Race in *Kim*,” forthcoming in *Eger Journal of English Studies*.
- Review of Elleke Boehmer’s *Postcolonial Poetics*, forthcoming in *Americana: E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary*.

Other academic publications

- Unspeakable Anxieties in Weird Fiction*, a book. Forthcoming from the University of Szeged Press.
- “‘Growing grey and brittle.’ The Horror of Abjection in H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Colour Out of Space,’” an essay. A chapter in the book *Posthumanism in Fantastic Fiction*, ed. Anna Kérchy. July 2018. Szeged: Americana eBooks.
- “‘Hey, Ras. ... Is It You, Destroyer? Rinehart?’: The Ideological Choice Between Rinehart and Ras in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” an essay. *Americana: E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary* 12 (2).
- “Hungary and Hungarians in the Writings of Robert E. Howard,” an essay forthcoming in *Robert E. Howard: Two-Gun Raconteur*.
- “I Was a Man before I Was a King: An Exploration of Conan’s Kingship through the Political Writings of Giorgio Agamben,” an essay, forthcoming in *The Dark Man: The Journal of Robert E. Howard Studies*.
- “‘Against the Complacency of an Orthodox Sun-Dweller’: The Lovecraft Circle and the ‘Weird Class,’” an essay. A chapter in the book *The Unique Legacy of Weird Tales*, ed. Justin Everett and Jeffrey Shanks. October 2015. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

List of conference presentations

- “Enchantment and Reenchantment in the Graphic Novel *Lullaby*.” Cultural Texts and Contexts in the English Speaking World conference. March 22, 2019.
- “Kipling’s Colonizing Cynicism in ‘On the City Wall.’” Hungarian Society for the Study of English. February 1, 2019.
- “Caesar in Africa: The Ideological Conflict over Death in Julius Caesar and Contemporary Political Crises.” Jágónak Shakespeare Conference, October 5 2017.
- “The Destabilization of Identity in Kipling’s ‘Fuzzy-Wuzzy.’” HUSSE Conference in Eger, January 2017.
- “‘I’m Tired as Hell Working for the Other Man’: Robert E. Howard, Industry, and Individualism.” Analytical essay for PCA/ACA Conference, Washington, DC. April 28, 2013.
- “‘I Was a Man before I Was King’: An Examination of Conan’s Kingship.” PCA/ACA Conference, Boston, MA. April 12, 2012.
- “Hungary and Hungarians in the Works of Robert E. Howard.” PCA/ACA Conference, San Antonio, TX. April 21, 2011.

“‘The Future is Here’: The Evolution of Science Fiction and Technology in the Fiction of William Gibson.” Rocky Mountain MLA Conference, Reno, NV. Oct 10, 2008

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