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A Dream Come True: More than 50 years after Black students demanded faculty and student leadership roles at the University of Mississippi, students of color are still grappling with what it means to be included.

by
Kaylynn Steen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
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Approved by

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ABSTRACT

KAYLYNN STEEN: A Dream Come True: More than 50 years after Black students demanded faculty and student leadership roles at the University of Mississippi, students of color are still grappling with what it means to be included.
(Under the direction of Vanessa Gregory)

This thesis tells the story of University of Mississippi alumna Treasure Fisher's journey in the organization Column's Society, an organization known as the hosts and hostess of the University of Mississippi. Throughout Fisher's story, historical moments from the university's complex relationship with its Black students are weaved through in an attempt to provide context for some of the lingering racial issues at the university today. Fisher's story, these historical moments, and other anecdotal experiences from current and former Black students, faculty, and staff at the university challenges the reader to examine what representation does, and maybe should, mean to this campus and the broader society.

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A Dream Come True: More than 50 years after Black students demanded faculty and student leadership roles at the University of Mississippi, students of color are still grappling with what it means to be included.

The time seemed right. The top organizations on the University of Mississippi campus, like Columns Society and Ole Miss Ambassadors, look for students with experience and strong resumes. So as a junior, Treasure Fisher felt ready to take the next step and apply. Coming off the peak of Covid and two semesters defined by virtual meetings and masked events, Fisher was looking for ways to get reacclimated with her campus community. She had been rejected from Ambassadors, the university's tour guides for prospective students, the previous semester, so getting accepted into Columns would be the win she needed. "I see these people are in suits and ties and heels," Fisher said. "They're obviously BFFs with the Chancellor, right?"

Everyone has seen the students who make up the prestigious Columns Society, whether you realize it or not. They're the "official hosts and hostesses of the university" who greet and serve guests at the university's events, clad in navy blazers and gold name tags. Fisher saw joining the organization as a way to give back to the university that had benefited her.

She did not go into this journey blind. It can still feel like a monumental task for Black students like Fisher to achieve positions of prestige at the University of Mississippi. The first Black man to ever be admitted to this university, James Meredith, is immortalized in statue form at a central position on campus. The Meredith statue is intended as a symbol of progress and a monument to the Civil Rights icon who integrated the school in 1962. But it's also a constant reminder of the university's historically racist treatment of Black people. So, before she even applied to Columns, Fisher sought the perspectives of fellow Black students. "It's such an amazing

experience,” Fisher recalls being told. ““You should do it. Blah, blah, blah. Best thing on the university campus.’ I’m like okay, you know, I’ll go big or go home.”

The big question from the first Columns interview was easy: “Tell me your story.” The same story that motivated her to apply was the same story that got her into this organization. She took them through her love-at-first-sight moment with this campus. “When I came to Ole Miss my very first time, it was for the M.O.S.T. Conference,” Fisher recalls, referencing an event that hosts rising African American seniors during the summer. “And I honestly fell in love with the university. It wasn’t because of all the activities they had us doing, but it was because it was a really cool place.”

That was the easy part, though. Columns is a highly competitive organization, so Fisher’s second round interview brought the intensity. The interview took place in the Lyceum, and while this building is an emblem of the university, it is not a place that students frequent. It has an intimidating factor to it, a place filled with the highest levels of administration – and the building rioters surrounded when Meredith enrolled. Across from her sat a mixture of faculty, staff and current Columns members, some of the top decision makers not only for this organization but the university. This organization works closely with the chancellor, so these are truly the elite members on campus. “I guess that’s part of Columns because when you’re the host and the hostesses of the university, you’re going to be with a thousand people and you stand your ground and you rave about this university,” Fisher said. “You tell them your ‘why story’ if they ask, and you kind of have to build that connection with strangers.”

They called her back for one final interview and told her it would be casual, but Fisher was not falling for any tricks. She decided to still dress in a nice blouse and jeans, something in between

how she might dress for class and how Columns members are required to dress for events. Once again, they asked her to tell them why she chose Ole Miss, but this time they were recording. SURPRISE! She was greeted by current Columns members, in their full Columns attire. She made it! It was Fisher's dream come true, especially considering that she was one of only six Black students selected for the Columns Society Class of 2021.

By every measure, Fisher is the wildest dreams of the Black students that came before her and laid the foundation for representation. She chose the university, and the university chose her — a Black woman, to be a model student, a testament of how the university builds up future leaders. Black students at the University of Mississippi today can serve not only as members of this university but as representatives to its most elite donors. They can serve as president of the Associated Student Body, acting as a liaison between the student body and administration. They can be editor-in-chief of the *Daily Mississippian* and tell the stories that were once unheard at this university. They can represent the university as ambassadors, recruiting the next generation of student leaders. But Fisher's experiences, and those of her peers, show that time has not fully erased the exploitative and painful racial dynamics that defined this school for more than a century.

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Everyone focuses on February 24, 1970 when 89 Black students were arrested at the University of Mississippi after protesting at Fulton Chapel, but the Black Student Union's protests had begun before that afternoon. It was not even their first encounter with law enforcement during their protests. Before this incident, several BSU members presented then Chancellor Porter Fortune with a list of 27 demands to address representation on campus. They were asking for the

most basic level of representation at the university, including a Black studies program that would highlight “the contributions of black people in the fields of literature, history, the fine arts, etc,” recruitment of Black athletes “with a sustained effort to keep them here,” and an increase in Black employment “other than janitors, cafeteria workers, and groundsmen.” When BSU protestors demanded the hiring of Black employees beyond janitors, cafeteria workers and groundsmen, they were resisting the menial roles that Black people were usually relegated to in Mississippi and at the university. In 1970, it was seen as a threat for a group of Black students to come marching to the chancellor’s home, not even his office, with a list of demands. Law enforcement treated the action as such. According to the [Daily Journal](#), Mississippi Highway Patrol Officers were “perched” on the third floor of Farley Hall with guns aimed towards the students.

The events of that Tuesday afternoon in 1970 was the peak of frustrations at the lack of progress BSU members felt administration was making towards their demands. It was a day of steady escalation. They started in the cafeteria with 40 students spread out across the room to the sound of Eldridge Cleaver’s, a leader in the Black Panther Party, “Soul on Wax,” as reported by Ralph Eubanks in [The New Yorker](#). But they did not stop there. Taking things further, they bought a Confederate flag and burned it in the cafeteria, filing a complaint with Campus Security about racism afterwards. All of that was the opener to the main event, the Up With People concert protest. Eubanks reports that this was a “spur of the moment” plan. BSU members were seizing an opportunity to take a bold and public stand. In Eubanks’ piece, BSU member Kenneth Mayfield recalled a fellow member stating, “Step aside, we’ve already paid our dues—we’re going in,” as they walked in without paying the two-dollar admission fee. They could not have

chosen a better group to interrupt as Up With People, a non-profit organization built on the ideals of inclusion, invited them to join them on stage.

The possibility of arrest was not lost on them, and it was a sacrifice they were willing to make. If the police thought the arrests of the students at Fulton Chapel were going to put a stop to the protests for the day, they were wrong. Once the students were arrested at Fulton Chapel, protests arose on other parts of campus including Chancellor Fortune's home. In total, 89 Black students were arrested that evening with 49 being taken to the Lafayette County jail and 40 being taken to Mississippi's infamous prison, Parchman Farm Penitentiary. They were facing a cruel reality, but Mayfield told Eubanks his focus was the publicity they were gaining from this moment. While they were imprisoned for less than two days, they still had to face the consequences from the university. The majority of the students were placed on one-day suspensions and academic probation, but the eight students considered to be the leaders of the protest, including Dr. Donald Cole and Mayfield, were expelled.

The legacy of the BSU protests is complex. After Cole's expulsion from the university, he returned to earn his Ph.D in Mathematics in 1985. He has been a staple leader at the university and served as an administrator for the university since 1995. He is living in the legacy he sought after over fifty years ago. Still, there are gaps. According to the [Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning](#), African Americans make up 6.5 percent of the total faculty and 11.4 percent of the student body. That's not yet a reflection of the state's demographics, which are 38 percent Black. In addition, Black people are still overrepresented in janitorial, dining worker, and groundsman positions with Black people comprising 54.5% of the Service/Maintenance positions according to the UM November Employee Census Data for 2022-23 academic year.

When Charles Ross, the first Black faculty member to chair the history department, joined the faculty in 1995, Black Student Union members were fighting against different gameday traditions, including ending the use of the song “Dixie” at football games. The lyrics “I wish I was in Dixie” were sending an unwelcoming message to the university’s Black community. He recalls his colleagues urging him to come to a game so he could see for himself.

Ross explained that the Chancellor at the time, Dr. Robert Khayat, decided to no longer allow the Confederate flag to be an “informal symbol” at the university, an action that was number thirteen on BSU’s list of demands in 1970. Instead of outright banning the Confederate flag, sticks were banned at games for “safety purposes.” At Ross’s first Ole Miss game, he sensed a climate of retaliation.

“People now have flags everywhere in a row before you went to the game,” Ross said. “It was amazing. I mean, kids and little girls with confederate flag skirts, guys with shirts with confederate flags...or flags draped over tents. It was massive. It was very intimidating.”

Today the Confederate flag is officially unwelcome on campus, as is the former mascot, Colonel Reb and his imagery as a plantation owner, but the racial component of those old labor dynamics persist, Ross said, even if they’re less glaring. “You have these companies that set up tents for people, and a lot of times these companies have African-American males,” Ross said. “Or what people don’t see is, in the morning on Sunday, the physical plant people that come in and clean up the grove and the circle.” Ross added that many of those workers could probably trace their lineages directly back to enslaved ancestors who worked in Lafayette County.

Black people’s role at this university has constantly been evolving since its inception in 1848. Before the integration of the university, barely more than a decade earlier, the only way that

Black people were allowed to “function” on this campus was as laborers. Like much of the country, Black enslaved people built the University of Mississippi. All around campus, you can see the physical remnants of this history. The History Department currently offers the University of Mississippi Slavery Tour. Some of these sights such as the Confederate statue and cemetery, have obvious racial implications, but other iconic buildings, like the Lyceum, may come as more of a surprise. During the Civil War, the Lyceum served as a hospital for Union and Confederate soldiers. Some of the older buildings on campus, like the Croft Institute for International Studies, bear the fingerprints of enslaved children who made the bricks.

“The first group of students brought slaves with them to the university as a support mechanism to make their life better,” Ross said. “And so labor, I mean Black labor, built this school, so Black labor has always been a founding component of the school in the way in which it’s been a function, but it hasn’t been allowed to participate.”

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Unpaid labor with an expectation of unwavering dedication, Fisher quickly learned, is the Columns standard. Members meet every Thursday, for starters. And there are dozens of events to staff each semester. When Columns members work the weeklong graduation ceremonies hosted by the university, they are performing every task from pressing the elevator buttons for people to opening the doors to passing out programs – all in their navy blazer, slacks, and heels for the ladies. On football gamedays, they work the press box with some of the university’s most elite supporters, taking coats and handing out name tags. If someone offers a Columns member a tip, the tip must first be declined by the member. If the person insists on tipping, the money is donated to the university foundation.

For non-Black students, this may just feel like the hustle and bustle of being a college student. But Fisher bristled at the idea of working so hard without compensation. She said that when she complained about how Columns conflicted with work and obligations to other organizations, the organization's leadership made her feel guilty. "You guys don't want to serve your university that has given you this position?" she recalls being told. "No, I don't," she thought to herself. "Because my people have always done that. My people have always served."

She began growing seriously disillusioned with the Columns Society quickly after they began their duties, starting with graduation. Due to social distancing guidelines regarding COVID-19, the university's 2020 Commencement was moved to 2021 along with the regularly scheduled 2021 Commencement. Columns members are responsible for working every single graduation ceremony, and this year their workload was doubled with no accommodations. "What's on graduation?" Fisher said. "Mother's Day. You missed important things like Mother's Day. You couldn't really even go to the graduation because you're working Columns."

Fisher said her feelings about being overworked weren't necessarily connected to being Black. But she also said that she always felt it was harder for her to move in certain spaces than it was for her white peers, and she compared her time in Columns with her experience as Vice President in Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, a historically Black sorority.

Like Columns, the standards of being a Delta are high. For Fisher, becoming a member of Delta was a more difficult task than becoming a Columns member. The organization requires a similar level of dedication and hardwork, and a certain measure of professionalism must be upheld. The difference came with the environment, filled with women sharing the same identities and values: Sisterhood. Scholarship. Service. Social Action. They also provided her with the support and

accommodations she needed to be successful within the organization. When her schedule did not allow her to make it to an event, they worked to make adjustments. “But in Delta, I’m Black. They’re Black. We’re all Black. So you can feel a sense of home. I will share some news in Delta that I wouldn’t share in Columns or like, I don’t know, it’s just, that’s just how I felt about it, you know?”

Besides the community within the organization, another major disconnect between the two experiences was the idea of service. For Delta, service events focus on impacting communities, whether that be through donation drives or hosting workshops on the importance of voting. She was actually serving her community in the way she initially set out to do from the very beginning, unlike through Columns. “For Delta we serve but we don’t hold doors, right?,” she said.

Fisher still struggles to characterize what felt uncomfortable about her time in Columns. She didn’t think people were intentionally discriminating against her, but she couldn’t point to a specific incident or something someone said. She just felt underappreciated. “And when I was giving my best, I still felt like I was at the bottom of the list, or I felt like I was there to meet a quota,” she said.

She wanted to be honest about how she felt but didn’t know how to approach a topic she feared would be difficult. Column’s Society staff advisor, Dr. Natasha Jeter, was reached out to for comment, but did not respond. “I’m not saying [Column’s Society leadership] have done something,” she said. “I’m saying it’s this institution, and the way y’all run things, that just inherently makes Black students feel like they’re not accepted.”

Other Black student leaders on campus also said they faced subtle, hard-to-articulate racial dynamics in campus organizations. **Out of 50 newly selected Ole Miss Ambassadors in 2022, only three were Black students.** When Alumna Taylor Hall joined Ole Miss Ambassadors in 2019, she found herself among just a few Black students in a high-pressure group interview to join the organization.

This group interview is conducted by the organization's leadership council made up of current ambassadors. The 2022 LC is made up of all white students, and in 2021, there was one Black student on the council. "Think about the unfortunate event where if [you're] in a room full of students that all know someone up there, but [you] don't," Hall said.

Recruiting for these organizations are oftentimes done on an **interpersonal level**. Through this informal recruitment, these students are not just being advertised to, but they are also receiving a wealth of information about the process to join the organization that provides them with at least a sense of comfort going into the process and, at most, an advantage. Some might simply call this networking, but for those who remain on the outside of the networks, outside of the margins, it looks more like gatekeeping. **Several Black students found that the burden is placed on them to try to break into the circle of involvement at the university and adapt to the culture that has been the standard for these organizations.**

"There is a Black org[anization] coalition. They're having a separate thing – B.I.P.S., Gospel Choir, E.S.T.E.E.M., M.O.S.T.... When it comes to that, that feels more targeted, and that does feel more intentional. That's why I'm not saying the university is doing all that they can do because if a Black coalition can do this, the university can do it too," Hall said.

When Black students have to adapt to be able to enter an organization, it can seem like only a certain mold of Black students are able to participate, Hall said, presenting a **dilemma for Black students trying** to express themselves in an authentic way. Hall didn't feel like this happened to her in Ambassadors, but she did feel that the traits that allowed her to navigate a predominantly white space excluded her from other predominantly Black spaces.

After participating in a majority Black organization during the summer of 2019, Hall felt unaccepted by some of the members due to how she expressed her blackness. She felt completely rejected by the people that she thought would provide her the most comfort in her authenticity as a Black student navigating a predominantly white institution. She questioned how Black students could unite in calling out some of the predominantly white organizations when things needed to be addressed within their own organizations. "It just all felt backwards," she said.

For former orientation leader Esoterica Rayford, she found it to be important to find community with other Black orientation leaders. Te'Keyra Shelton, who served as an orientation leader during the same summer as Rayford, explained that orientation leaders often worked as partners, but **Black orientation leaders were rarely paired together**. Shelton explained an incident in which a fellow white orientation leader complained to their director that the Black orientation leaders were excluding the non-Black orientation leaders. "I just want to be around more people who I'm not on edge around or I'm not cautious on what they're going to say next or how they're going to feel about me," Shelton said. "You just feel so out of place. We make our place, but I felt like I was in my place when I was with the Black people."

The orientation leader who accused them, however, was guilty of the exact same "exclusion" if it could even be called that. People tend to find community with those who share common

identities, and basic human nature shouldn't be weaponized against people in the way that it's used against Black people. In response, the Black orientation leaders' quiet retaliation was drawing closer as a group and spending as much time together outside of their duties. But the question still remains: When did it become the responsibility of Black students to ensure the integration of on-campus organizations?

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As Fisher's frustrations grew with Columns, so did that of her peers. She watched as four members quit the organization in September of 2021 after she said they were told by leadership that they were "unnecessary." The number of Black Columns members dwindled from six to three. Fisher stayed, but her commitment to making this a positive experience died. This had been a major investment of her time, and while she was not exactly seeing the returns in the way that she hoped, quitting would have been just throwing it all away.

"I feel like I've come this far," she said. "Why quit now? I'll just deal with it. I've dealt with it all this other time."

In 2022, Fisher graduated and left Columns behind. She's now in nursing school at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. When asked if she would recommend Columns to other Black students, she considers the connections she made with the wealthy and powerful and how she now knows how to spark conversation with them. Part of her motivation for coming to the University of Mississippi in the first place was to have experiences she couldn't have at a Historically Black College and University. Before college, Fisher started at an all-Black private high school then transferred to a school that was about fifty percent Black. She thought it would be good to be around people who didn't look like her for college. "So would I recommend

someone do Columns? Yes, I would, simply because it's an experience that I could probably never get back," she said. "But could I live without the experience? Yes."

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So much of the hope around representation is linked to integration.

On a basic level, representation seems simple. Lauren Jones, Director of the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement at the University of Mississippi, explains representation as "being able to see attributes of yourself or resemblance of your lived experiences in the space in which you occupy." How this concept is applied to the goals of creating an inclusive environment for all students is a bit more complicated. While experiences may be impacted by shared identities, there is no one-size-fits-all for representation. "I think sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that it is being this collective identity. Yes, there are things that we all may agree upon, but how that plays out and how that comes to fruition looks different for each person," Jones said.

When Jones spoke of what an inclusive campus actually looks like, though, it went a bit deeper than her definition of representation. "When we think about what an inclusive space is, it's a space such which each person's lived experience is valued, and that they can really kind of be fully without any barriers to their success...that means the whole person can show up there and get hopefully what they need to be successful," she said.

The University of Mississippi implemented a five-year Diversity, Equity and Inclusion plan, Pathways to Equity, in January of 2021. Along with this institutional-wide plan, each academic college and school and each administrative division were responsible for creating their own

specific equity-in-action plan. Dr. EJ Edney, III, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion, calls these “entry points,” ways that curriculum, faculty, and students can be impacted by DEI efforts. This type of infrastructure for implementing policies and initiatives to further DEI efforts does not exist for registered student organizations. “I don’t want to lie and say there are concrete plans to do something comprehensive for all RSOs as part of the accreditation process, but I recognize that’s an opportunity, I think that the leadership right now are continually seeking those ways of making that a part of what it means to be an RSO and setting those expectations,” Edney said.

The reality is not every student will be aware of or utilize the resources the CICCE has to offer, but for the students who do reach out to the CICCE, Jones starts by just listening. While it can look like a traditional advisor role, she explains that it is not as systematic as maybe academic advising would be where they are going over specific questions. Different students need different support. Sometimes it might require calling on other colleagues that are better equipped to handle a particular situation. Students, like Fisher and Hall, may be struggling with understanding what they are experiencing, so the CICCE’s support may come through helping them articulate their feelings in order to move forward with a plan. “The reality is sometimes that college is kind of like a microcosm of the world in many ways. Some of the things you experience, you might experience beyond this space, but what are the tools, what are the resources that can best equip you to manage those situations?” she said.

Walter Benn Michaels, English Professor at the University of Chicago, lays out three ways representation is not working at the University of Mississippi. On the most basic front, the university is simply not representative with only an 11% Black student population even though

the state is 38% Black. Secondly, for the few Black students who make it to the university and the fewer who get to join these prestigious organizations on campus, their experiences are still being shaped negatively by their race. Finally, their existence as “diverse students” in these organizations does not fundamentally change the most problematic nature of these organizations. “From the outside, it is more of a surprise that there are a bunch of Black kids in Columns than it is a surprise that they are having a hard time. Mississippi is Mississippi. It is famous for being what it is,” Michaels said.

Michaels main concern with a focus on representation is what it truly means for the larger society. Do Black students being afforded the opportunities to be members of the Columns Society, Ole Miss Ambassadors, or Ole Miss Orientation Leaders mean anything for the Black student population on campus or even for Black people as a whole? Is society getting closer to the ideals of equity by these individual accomplishments?

That is the question that has been guiding me throughout this story — a question I feel like I have gone around in circles asking myself and others. To be honest, I am still not sure. Here is what I do know. I know that it means something to me that James Meredith was the first Black student at this university, and because of his sacrifices, I do not need security to escort me across campus. I know it means something to me to be invited into the Chancellor’s office to voice my concerns and not have rifles pointed at me like BSU members in the 1970s. Like Fisher, I am a Black student at this university that got a spot in one of the university's prestigious organizations, and also like Fisher, I have felt the complicated mixture of joy and dissatisfaction as I navigate this predominantly white institution. But Michaels might be right, too. Those rare moments do not mean much to young Black people outside of the 11% at the University of Mississippi, and

that's a tough pill for me to swallow. Like Fisher was sold the dream of servant leadership through Columns, so many of us are sold the dream of what these four years can mean beyond our own experience. What does it mean if that dream is misguided?

As much as our collective, shared identity can unite or inspire us towards change, we do not have to let it limit our experiences. I have dreams of what I want the world to look like and how I can be a part of making those changes. But not every Black student wants to save the world or change the way in which organizations operate on campus, nor should they feel obligated to. Some students just want to experience the dream this university claims to offer. I think that desire is enough of a justification for why this university should strive for representation. For that reason, I am thankful for Jones, Edney, and all the people on this campus dedicated to Black students, all students, having good experiences at this university. Edney spoke of his hatred for the negative way people view Mississippi and its citizens and how his love for this state motivates his work. It means something for him to be at his alma mater, in a position that did not exist when he was a student at the university, creating experiences for students that he never got. Fisher entered the Column's Society hopeful for the experience and what it had to offer her, what she had seen it offer to other students. She deserved to have her desires met. She deserved to walk into a Columns meeting and feel like she belonged, like she could see herself in her peers. She did not get that, and that definitely meant something to her.

INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

Ashmore, Brandon: Student, Associated Student Body Senator 2021-2022

Blanchard, Cameron: Student, Columns Society Member 2021-2022

Davis, Roger: Staff, Inclusive Excellence & Engagement Director, University of Mississippi

Edney, EJ: Staff, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion, University of Mississippi

Fisher, Treasure: Student, Columns Society Member 2021-2022

Hall, Taylor: Student, Ole Miss Ambassador 2019-2022

Hughes, Krystle: Student, Associated Student Body Senator 2021-2022

Jones, Lauren: Director of the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement, University of Mississippi

Michaels, Walter Benn: Faculty, University of Chicago

Rayford, Esoterica: Student, Ole Miss Orientation Leader 2020-2021

Ross, Charles: Faculty, University of Mississippi

Shelton, Te'Keyra: Student, Ole Miss Orientation Leader 2020-2021

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