

## *Child Poets and the Poetry of the Playground*

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As many teachers know, Randall Jarrell's *The Bat-Poet* is not only a touching, sensitively rendered fairy tale. It is also a very effective—and commonly employed—introduction to both the reading and writing of poetry. Besides suggesting Jarrell's complex and dialectical theory of poetry,<sup>1</sup> *The Bat-Poet* also touches on the competing impulses that might drive one to versify, the satisfying and unsatisfying reactions one's poetry might elicit, the social function of poetry, and even elements of craft. Though Jarrell's bat-poet is of uncertain age, it seems reasonable to read him as a child, or perhaps an adolescent. The bat-poet is a precocious student of poetry, and, though he once enrages his mentor, the mockingbird, by writing a somewhat ambivalent piece about him, the bat nonetheless composes the "right" kind of poetry, the poetry of the schoolhouse, or what I call official school poetry. He is one of the rare students Kenneth Koch remembers initially desiring for his first Teachers and Writers workshop, that is, a child "who already like[s] poetry" (274). The bat writes poems of which Myra Cohn Livingston would probably approve, "fine poetry" that exhibits phonological cohesion, that displays "the judicious use of rhythm, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, and other tools of the craft" (22, 256). In short, the bat represents the good student, one who accepts and works within the traditions of adult poetry. Certainly there are human children who, like the bat, strive to emulate the adult poets they encounter, but more common are those raconteurs, to borrow Iona Opie's term, who specialize in the sometimes bawdy playground poetry. These child poets serve to remind us of what children often do with language while outside grown-up supervision. As we will see, they reveal that children have a poetic tradition of their own, a carnivalesque tradition that signifies on adult culture, even while producing poetry that rewards repeat listenings. I argue that any comprehensive study of American children's poetry—and, more broadly, children's poetry in general—is ultimately insufficient insofar as it fails to acknowledge and consider playground poetry as poetry, as belonging to a rich poetic tradition.

Before addressing this tradition, we must first discuss “official school poetry,” the dominant mode of children’s poetry in the school, the kind of poetry written by adults and taught to children in the classroom. Charles Altieri writes that “A mode becomes dominant when it develops institutional power—both as a model for the ways in which agents represent themselves and, more important, as the basic example of what matters in reading and in attributing significance to what one reads” (8). No doubt official school poetry is dominant: championed in the schools and elevated in education textbooks, official school poetry—a *type* of poetry—has come to stand in for poetry *in its entirety*, both in the classroom and in literary criticism.<sup>2</sup> Robert Frost exemplifies official school poetry; however, all poetry belonging to this group need not resemble Frost’s work in theme or form. Rather, official school poetry is notable for its apparent teachability, its use of literary devices, its use of, in the words of Livingston, the “tools of the craft” (a phrase which makes poetry seem much more monolithic than it is). Frost’s poetry is eminently teachable, emblematic of the “life and death commitment to authentic linguistic enactment” James Applewhite writes of in “Poetry and Value” (473). Applewhite uses Frost’s work as an example of the “achievements” that should be “set apart [. . .] from lesser, slacker users of poetic language” (473).

Poems selected for classroom use are principally the least politically and formally vexing; they appear easily thematizable and interpretable, and thus are classroom friendly. Their politics is often difficult to excavate, even as they implicitly privilege the adult poetic tradition. Classroom practices (informed by problematic assumptions regarding poetic language) encourage misinformed readings of official school poems (most famously, the common notion that Frost’s ultimately dark “The Road Not Taken” is an inspirational poem, a reading that hinges upon an almost willful inattention to language).

In *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, Jed Rasula contends that poetry anthologies, and, by extension, current trends in poetry pedagogy, serve to turn otherwise exciting and powerful poetry into wax figures set upon a “waxen shrine” preserved for “an air-conditioned immortality” (2). He characterizes the wax museum mentality evidenced in the practice of anthologizing as a “carceral archipelago,” writing that his aim,

in elaborating this thesis of a poetry wax museum, is to suggest that the seemingly autonomous “voices and visions” of poets themselves have been underwritten by custodial sponsors who

have surreptitiously turned down the volume on certain voices, and simulated a voice-over for certain others. Nothing defines the situation more succinctly than the police phrase *protective custody*. (33)

Though he is discussing the canon of contemporary American poetry for adults, a stronger argument could be made for official school poetry for children. The custodians in this respect are the teachers, the adults needed to understand, to interpret, and indeed to produce poetry, whereas the museums are school approved textbooks and anthologies. Rasula reminds us of Michel de Certeau, who in *The Practice of Everyday Life* maintains, in Rasula's paraphrase, "The dominant modern institutions [. . .] are colonization, psychiatry, and pedagogy, which focus and bring into line the renegade tendencies of the masses, the unconscious, and the child" (31; emphasis added). Calling American poetry a "social 'imaginary,'" Rasula laments that

Poems have rarely circulated in America as cultural items, as *pragmata* of daily life. They appear, when they do, as exotic species, nurtured with devotion. So poems are not intrinsically distinct from museum specimens, curiosities in need of explanation, of reassuring placement. (31)

This certainly is the case with official school poetry for children. Of course, this mode of poetry will always have a place in the classroom, where adults often have good reasons for teaching what they teach—but it is important to regard children's culture *alongside* adult culture. However, as I have suggested, the poetry emerging from the cultures of childhood is too often overlooked, deemed "lesser," "slacker," as Applewhite might say. This poetry is "turned down" and "voiced over" by official school poetry and the critical conversation surrounding it, and it does in fact exist as *pragmata* of the child's daily life, as a body of work that children use and manipulate generally without adult intervention, "explanation," or "reassuring placement." This poetry is the poetry of the playground.

As its production is not monitored by authority figures, poetry of the playground is often vulgar, violent, and, I might add, uproariously funny: it embodies "the renegade tendencies of [. . .] the unconscious, and the child" that Rasula mentions (31). If official school poetry is a museum piece, archived in air-conditioned anthologies for students, then playground poetry is the graffiti on the museum walls, the notes penned on the anthology's cover. Its very nature makes it unlikely

that playground poetry would be domesticated by being anthologized for children, as opposed to being collected by folklorists. (Iona and Peter Opie's *I Saw Esau: A Schoolchild's Pocket Book* is a notable exception.)<sup>3</sup> From the point of view of most adults, playground poetry is uncanny. The poems are not "frightening," nor do they generate the "dread and horror" that Freud associates with *unheimlich* ("The 'Uncanny'" 339). However, in many ways they are "disturbing, suspect, [and] strange," all qualities that Anthony Vidler attributes to the uncanny (23). Vidler writes that the uncanny

might be characterized as the quintessential bourgeois kind of fear: one carefully bounded by the limits of real material security and the pleasure principle afforded by a terror that was, artistically at least, kept well under control. (4)

This fear is the result of "a yet unfinished history that pits the homely, the domestic, the nostalgic, against their ever-threatening, always invading and often subversive 'opposites'" (13). Playground poetry operates as one of these subversive opposites. It dismantles nostalgic notions of the innocent, obedient, and controllable child, and thus, in my experience, tends to disturb adults, as it implies sexualized, complicated child-agents able to control their world through linguistic play and sometimes violent, antiauthoritarian imagery.

Playground poetry, as an oral tradition, vexes privileging notions of the individual, authorial genius, while simultaneously complementing the adult, largely literary, poetic tradition(s). In *Poetry as Discourse*, Antony Easthope argues that "Bourgeois poetic discourse now has no real audience" (161). He claims that most people, rather than turning to poetry, instead turn to "such genuinely contemporary media as cinema, television and popular song in its many varieties" (161). He may be right. But the poetry of the playground exists outside of the "Bourgeois poetic discourse" Easthope discusses. It is folk-poetry, aligned with "nursery rhymes, the lore of schoolchildren, ballad, industrial folk song and even, more recently, the football chant" (Easthope 65). The poetry of the playground exists in the space between original composition and received oral tradition. The poems are public property. Like the nursery rhymes of Mother Goose, no one child "owns" these poems; they belong to each child equally, and each child retains the right to alter and revise the poems as s/he sees fit, as context and mood dictate. There are no "great authors," white male or otherwise. Rather, there is a *community* of author/performers. As Iona Opie writes in *People in the Playground*,

The expression most likely to mislead an adult enquirer is “I made it up.” To a child this is the direct equivalent of “It came into my head” and has no connection with creativity. [. . .] The phrase “I made it up” is so universal in this context that all doubts of juvenile honesty must be suppressed. Probably memory is the same as creation in a child’s mind. (3–4)

The authors are anonymous, yet the authors are everywhere.

In *Knock at a Star*, a popular poetry anthology for children, X. J. and Dorothy Kennedy quip that “After Shakespeare, Anonymous may be the second best poet in our language. At least, he or she wrote more good poems than most poets who sign what they write” (6). By pairing “Anonymous” with Shakespeare, the Kennedys elide the folk and communal nature of anonymous poetry, rewriting the oral, folk tradition in terms of literate traditions. The poem that inspires this comment, “Algy,” while clever, certainly lacks the material force of many—if not most—of the American playground poems collected by folklorists in the last thirty years:

Algy met a bear  
The bear met Algy.  
The bear was bulgy,  
The bulge was Algy. (6)

The other examples they give of “the second best poet in our language” are equally clever, though oddly nonrepresentative of the kinds of verse compiled in *Greasy Grimy Gopher Guts* or *One Potato, Two Potato*. Many of the poems collected in these texts similarly deal with death. However, they frequently do so much more graphically, employing startling, often upsetting imagery coupled with a great degree of rhythmic, musical play, though certainly they share with “Algy” the impulse to play with language on the morphological and syntactical level. Later in the book, the Kennedys provide an example of a jump-rope rhyme, asking the child reader whether s/he can “write a new one,” reminding him or her, “Don’t forget to try it out on the playground,” implicitly inscribing a distinction between verse appropriate for the classroom and that appropriate for the playground:

Teddy bear, teddy bear, turn around,  
Teddy bear, teddy bear, touch the ground,  
Teddy bear, teddy bear, show your shoe,  
Teddy bear, teddy bear, out go you! (151)

Francelia Butler includes this rhyme in *Skipping around the World* (though without the inversion in the final line), and calls it “One of the best known of the action or agility rhymes” (119). It is odd that the Kennedys select this verse from all those available, because, as Butler reminds us, “Teddy Bear” is an agility rhyme, employed to provoke body movements and showcase jumping prowess rather than to flaunt wit and lyrical inventiveness.

If we compare “Teddy Bear” to the majority of the pieces included in Butler’s *Skipping Around the World*, we suspect immediately that concerns about publishing holdups and parental reaction might have played a role in the Kennedys’ selection. The Kennedys’ choice avoids many of the themes and much of the spirit that predominate in playground rhyme, themes that recall Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin’s theories have proved useful in the literary analysis of children’s texts because children’s literature is often marked by what John Stephens has called “a playfulness which situates itself in positions of nonconformity” (121). He continues, noting that the carnivalesque in children’s literature “expresses opposition to authoritarianism and seriousness, and is often manifested as parody of prevailing literary forms and genres, or as literature in non-canonical forms. Its discourse is often idiomatic, and rich in a play of signifiers” (121). Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith’s *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* and Roald Dahl’s *Revoltin’ Rhymes* are perfect examples of this playful, carnivalesque literature. Joel Chaston has recently argued convincingly that L. Frank Baum’s *Oz* books similarly embody Bakhtin’s theories.<sup>4</sup> However, Stephens notes that though carnivalesque children’s literature frequently

mock[s] and challenge[s] authoritative figures and structures of the adult world—parents, teachers, political and religious institutions—and some of the (often traditionally male) values of society such as independence, individuality, and the activities of striving, aggression, and conquest, [it fails to] make extensive use of the abusive language or the insulting words or expression generally characteristic of the carnivalesque in its breaking of the norms of official speech. (122)

Stephens is correct when considering literature produced, published, and distributed by adults for children, but when we consider the oral traditions of children themselves, we see none of the hesitance to employ the language of the billingsgate evidenced in mainstream American children’s literature.

Though *carnival* regularly serves a repressive function in society—a steam valve of sorts—the performance of playground poems circumvents this repressive function. As we will see, the poems do employ carnivalesque images and hierarchical inversion, but children generally chant them outside the purview of watchful adults. Most adults, especially those monitoring schoolyards (and my students testify to this), chastise and reprimand children for chanting the more obscene and obviously sexual rhymes. Unlike, say, Mardi Gras, which operates as a sanctioned “time-out” (without the punitive connotation “time-out” has attracted for young people over the last decade or so), the recitation of playground poems—especially the very off-color rhymes—is rarely encouraged by adults (though exceptions do exist). Furthermore, these rhymes are not a once-a-year, strictly monitored release of tension. Of course, recess itself is a “time-out,” but playground poetry is not chanted exclusively during recess. These poems exist as an ever-present fact in the life of most children, be they chanters or listeners. De Certeau is useful in explaining the function of playground poetry. Following Foucault’s analysis of power in *Discipline and Punish*, de Certeau explores “how an entire society resists being reduced to [discipline, or, in French, *surveillance*].” He asks, “what popular procedures (also ‘miniscule’ and quotidian) manipulate the mechanism of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them” (xiv). I hold that playground poetry is one of these procedures, serving as one of “the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals[,]” like children, “already caught in the nets of ‘discipline’” (xiv).

Take, for example, this jump-rope rhyme collected by Butler in New York City, a rhyme I remember chanting as a child:

Abraham Lincoln  
 Was a good old soul.  
 He washed his face  
 In a toilet bowl.  
 He jumped out the window  
 With his dick in his hand,  
 And said, “Scuse me, ladies!  
 I’m Superman.”

Similarly, the two poems below, variants of the same motif, provide further examples of carnivalesque imagery and diction. Butler indicates that these two poems have been frequently chanted on U.S. play-

grounds between 1965–1988, though there is no reason to doubt they are still chanted today:

I fucked your mama  
Till she went blind.  
Her breath is bad  
But she sure can grind.

I hate to talk about your mama;  
She's a good old soul.  
She's got a ten-ton pussy  
And a rubber ass-hole.<sup>5</sup>

The differences between the Kennedys' selection and the three rhymes above are manifest. Bakhtin's theories of carnival laughter are helpful in teasing out the implications of these differences. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin argues that carnivalesque images "are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook" (3). The child poet implied by the Kennedys' selection is readily containable, is cute, is controllable by the adult: "Can you write a new one?" they ask the child, ordering, with an exclamation point, "Don't forget to try it out on the playground!" (151), to which we might add, "but not in the classroom!" The child poet/performer implied by the three rhymes above, however, is resistant, rebellious. S/he does not need an adult's encouragement, and in fact, the poems fly in the face of adult authority, be that adult a former Chief Executive of the U.S. or the even more powerful mother. S/he recalls the folk implied by Bakhtin's *Rabelais*—the folk that Michael Holquist characterizes as "blasphemous rather than adoring, cunning rather than intelligent; they are coarse, dirty, and rampantly physical, reveling in oceans of strong drink, poods of sausage, and endless coupling of bodies" (xix).

Furthermore, the poems illustrate a recurring theme in playground poetry. The poems evince a fundamental tension between the body and the mind, a tension designed to produce either laughter or disgust, perhaps both. This laughter—festive laughter, Bakhtin would call it—is not "an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event" (11). Rather, it is "universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants" (11):

Abraham Lincoln  
Was a good old soul.

He washed his face  
In a toilet bowl.

These four lines exemplify grotesque realism, which Bakhtin argues works by pitting exaltation and debasement against one another:

Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts). Such is the meaning of “upward” and “downward” in their cosmic aspect, while in their purely bodily aspect, which is not clearly distinct from the cosmic, the upper part is the face or the head and the lower part is the genital organs, the belly, and the buttocks. (21)

Abraham Lincoln, a figure most American schoolchildren are taught to revere, is debased. The child poet grants that Abe is “a good old soul,” even while debasing that “soul” by describing him “washing his face”—the “upward” or “cosmic aspect” of the character—in a “toilet bowl,” representing the lower, earthly, “purely bodily aspect” of the poem’s comic hero. Bakhtin argues that grotesque literature obeys the “peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (*à l’envers*), of the ‘turnabout,’ of the continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (11). These poems also obey that logic, sending the admired Abraham Lincoln hurtling out a window with his “dick in his hand” proclaiming hyperbolically, “I’m Superman,” foreshadowing his imminent—and embarrassing—fall.

Bakhtin notes that carnivalesque literature concerns unfettered “images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life” (18). Likewise, the “your mama” poems above debase the generally privileged mother, conflating, in the second example, the mother’s womb as a site of birth, of sexual activity, with the anus, site of defecation. The carnivalesque “degrades” which, to Bakhtin, means to “concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth” (21). If the face and head relate to the cosmic, the celestial, the spiritual, the child poet of “I fucked your mama” debases the mother by fucking her “Till she went blind,” rendering useless the eyes, the windows to the soul, the organs of control and observation, which to the child may seem panoptic in scope. The poet also comments on her bad breath: the

mouth, so ready with orders and admonitions (and, yes, with praise and love), is bodily. The child poet describes the head, site of the brain, originator of rules, as an offensive place, even as the lower stratum is celebrated: despite her bad breath, her blind eyes, her ability “to grind” more than compensates. The mother in the third example is distinguished by hyperbolic exaggeration of the lower stratum. She may be “a good old soul,” but that good soul is nothing compared to her “ten-ton pussy” and her “rubber ass-hole.”

These rather extreme examples are not, to be sure, the most sensitive or lyrical pieces. Altieri holds that lyricism “is a term applicable to all attempts to use what literature can exemplify as a model for affirming in ostensibly secular forms predicates about the mind, person, and society that were the basic images of dignity and value in religious or ‘organic’ cultures” (13). These poems are not concerned with “images of dignity.” They are not designed for subtlety. In “Education by Poetry,” Frost writes, “Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, petty metaphors, ‘grace’ metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have” (36). These poems are not, however, concerned with the mind, but with the body. They are composed and performed with the aim of producing strong, *bodily* reaction: laughter, guffaws, gasps, groans, or, in the case of jump-rope rhymes, facilitating vigorous play. Schoolchildren sit at desks much of the day, are asked not to visit with neighbors, not to cut-up, not to laugh. Even the most natural of bodily functions requires a pass from the teacher, and children learn quickly about the taboos of flatulence. Thus, it is not surprising that the poems children perform in the playground center on taboo subjects. They problematize the mind/body split, unceasingly reminding us that we are physical, material, even as they revel in group play, exchange, and unrestrained noise. Unlike mainstream adult poetry, which is chiefly experienced in isolation, while reading in softly lit studies or in hushed recital halls or coffeehouses, the success of a playground rhyme hinges upon, as Sherman and Weisskopf write, “the audience’s reaction” (16), a direct, present reaction.

The poems above are obviously situated in the tradition of “playing the dozens,” a particularly carnivalesque activity Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discusses in *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates reminds us that the dozens, the toast, and Signifying Monkey tales have been “generally recorded from male poets, in predominately male settings such as barrooms, pool halls, and street corners.” Furthermore, as is so apparent in the poems above, they generally have “a phallogocentric bias” (54).

Thus, it might seem surprising that the playground poems we have discussed, and others like them, have been predominately composed and disseminated by young girls skipping rope, not in barrooms, but in playgrounds and on city streets. Gates notes that “Signifyin (g) itself can be, and is, undertaken with equal facility and effect by women as well as men,” referring us to storyteller Gloria Hall’s versions of the Signifying Monkey poems (54). The poems above, with their exaggeration of male pride, power, and desire, mock the patriarchy even as they contain sexist language. (Let’s recall, Lincoln is *not* Superman, and his inflated opinion of himself will, the poem suggests, earn him at the very least a nasty bump on the head.) It is curious that Gates does not discuss more extensively children’s skipping rhymes, as here the tradition is quite evident, quite firmly in the hands of girls: and not exclusively girls from an African American background.

The one skipping rhyme Gates discusses is a parody, a common type of playground rhyme. First recorded by Roger D. Abrahams in *Positively Black*, the rhyme reads,

Two, four, six, eight,  
 We ain’t gonna integrate.  
 Eight, six, four, two,  
 Bet you sons-of-bitches do. (2)

Luke Etta Hill, the East Texas teacher who collected the poem, “reported hearing some of her [third grade] students jumping to the rhyme” (2). All of the students were female. Abrahams maintains that through rhymes such as these “the great Civil Rights movement has become enshrined in the oral traditions of the young,” arguing that “the explosiveness of the verbal exchanges between whites and blacks during that time is somehow defused by relegating these sentiments to use in play” (2). However, Abrahams appears not to recognize the poem as parody, failing to note the probable source of the children’s rhyme, a source that exists outside of the world of playground poetry.

Gates maintains that the rhyme was written in response to another rhyme, one that was used to resist/mock the authority of the federal government. It is important to note that the source rhyme is not a playground rhyme. Unlike the skipping rhyme recorded by Abrahams, the source is a cheer, a rallying cry, one not exclusively intended for children, but, instead, one that involves both child and adult participants in a public sphere. The original rhyme, first recorded in Little Rock, Arkansas, September 1957, was chanted by both adults and chil-

dren, though the rhyme was led by Anglo-American, Central High cheerleaders, who, according to Gates, “chanted in the most threatening tones,”

Two, four, six, eight,  
We don’t want to integrate. (104)

Gates elaborates on the East Texas parody and its historical moment:

This rhyme repeats and then reverses a rhyme that was chanted by white racists during the problematical integration of a Little Rock, Arkansas, high school in 1957. Although I was a child, I vividly remember hearing this chant on the news and the circumstances that occasioned its use. Each morning during the initial days of this integration attempt, white adults and their children lined either side of the school walk and hurled vicious racial epithets at the black children attempting to attend this previously all-white public school and at the members of the National Guard who had been ordered by President Eisenhower to escort and protect these children. (103–04)

Gates argues that the East Texas rhyme “Signifies upon its racist antecedent,” which it does marvelously, and in carnivalesque fashion.

In her excellent memoir for children *Through My Eyes*, Ruby Bridges recalls a similar chant outside her New Orleans elementary school, another candidate for the East Texas source poem. Bridges, just starting first grade, was attempting to attend the recently desegregated William Frantz public school in November of 1960. She notes the “carnival” atmosphere in front of the school, writing, “There were barricades and people shouting and policemen everywhere. I thought maybe it was Mardi Gras, the carnival that takes place in New Orleans every year. Mardi Gras was always noisy” (16). She quotes from the November 15, 1960 issue of *The New York Times*,

Some 150 whites, mostly housewives and teenage youths, clustered along the sidewalks across from the William Frantz School when pupils marched in at 8:40 a.m. One youth chanted, “Two, four, six, eight, we don’t want to integrate; eight, six, four, two, we don’t want a chigeroo.” (Qtd. in Bridges 16)

Regardless of which of these cheers is the antecedent, the East Texas playground rhyme remains more interesting formally. Again, the two racist cheers are resistant, arguing against the power of the federal

government to legislate integration. However, the cheers are both monologic, whereas the parody is polyvocal, heteroglossic, repeating verbatim the first stanza of its racist precursor, and confronting it directly with “bet you sons-of-bitches do.” Thus, the second poem is dialogic, presenting two sides of the debate, though obviously privileging the second. The second voice directly opposes the sentiment of the first; just as the third line, “Eight, six, four, two,” perfectly reverses the first series of numbers. Unlike the reversal in the New Orleans source poem (“eight, six, four, two, / we don’t want a chigeroo”), the parody’s reversal accentuates the message of the poem, suggesting that although the logic of the first voice may be culturally dominant, the supposedly backward thinking of the second voice may *become* dominant, this possibility enhanced by the rough music of the last line: the staccato punch of the accented bilabial [b]’s adorned by the sibilant [s]’s and affricative [č] of *bitches*. As resistant as the probable source poems are, they nonetheless represent the dominant ideology of the community in which they were chanted. In the parody, although the order of the first is deemed numerically “correct” and linear, the inverted order of the second, created in resistance to the first, remains functional in terms of the jumping game *and* the formal restrictions of the poem’s rhyme scheme. Carnival allows the playful reimagining of the world, the reversal and dismantling of hierarchies; the East Texas playground rhyme formally and thematically demonstrates that these reversals can be viable.

Gates points out that the dozens (and Signifying in general) has less to do with “making fun of”—parodying to ridicule—than it has to do with simply “making fun,” that is, “the play of language itself” (68). Of course, not all playground rhymes participate so directly in the tradition of the dozens as those examined thus far, though many do comment on, lampoon, and parody the adult poetic tradition, playing with and objectifying preexisting texts, “making fun” *with* (not necessarily *of*) texts provided by adult culture. In “The Rejection of Closure,” Lyn Hejinian writes, “Children objectify language when they render it their plaything, in jokes, puns, and riddles, or in the glossolalic chants and rhymes” (278). It is the playground poet’s tendency to “objectify language,” to turn it into a “plaything,” specifically in regard to parodies, that I would like to turn to now. The East Texas parody discussed above demonstrates the playful objectification of language so common in playground poetry. And indeed, even the trio of “Good Old Soul” rhymes are parodies of a kind, recalling the

famous nursery rhyme “Old King Cole Was a Merry Old Soul,” extending the source poem’s rather tame critique of authority to carnivalesque heights—or, perhaps better, lows. The playfulness of playground rhymes is apparent, but what is not so apparent is the sophistication and coherence of playground parodies.

Parody is common in children’s poetry. Adults writing for children have commonly used the device, Lewis Carroll most famously and, arguably, most successfully. In *Knock at a Star*, the Kennedys discuss parodic poems, calling them “take-offs.” They tell their child readers that

Sometimes it’s fun, when you’re singing a song or saying a poem to make changes in it. Just for the nonsense of it, you substitute a word or two of your own for a word or two of the poet’s. [Then,] you’re well on your way to writing a take-off—also called a parody. (118)

As an example, the Kennedys cite Kenneth Koch’s well-known “Variation on a Theme by William Carlos Williams,” a playful parody of Williams’s “This is Just to Say.” Jack, the child protagonist of Sharon Creech’s verse novel *Love that Dog* (2001), also parodies a Williams poem, “The Red Wheelbarrow,” a poem often anthologized for children and commonly taught in the classroom:

I don’t understand  
the poem about  
the red wheelbarrow  
and the white chickens  
and why so much  
depends upon  
them.

If that is a poem  
about the red wheelbarrow  
and the white chickens  
then any words  
can be a poem.  
You’ve just got to  
make  
short  
lines. (3)

Creech's narrative challenges a failing in poetry pedagogy, one Carroll similarly challenges in his *Alice* books. Students are generally not provided an officially sanctioned space to feel frustrated, angry, or resentful toward works of official school poetry, especially, as Carroll points out, toward the more didactic pieces. Miss Stretchberry, the instructor in Creech's novel, provides her student with such an outlet, creating a sanctioned space to parody works that are normally presented as verbal icons to be revered. Furthermore, Miss Stretchberry crafts for Jack a space in which he can *play* with Williams's text's formal devices, and thereby voice his frustration creatively, productively. However, it is important to note that Jack's poem, as resistant as it is, is considerably less violent than Koch's famous parody, which approaches the level of violence so regularly found in playground poetry and its close cousin, the nursery rhyme.

Commenting on the lack of energetic and multivalent interaction between student and poem so common in the classroom, Jed Rasula writes,

Students are not often given affirmation that the meddlesome quality of a literary work should be preserved, let alone drawn out; rather, they are taught to "appreciate" literature, which easily translates into a directive to keep complaints private and squelch discomfort; or, in more authoritarian circumstances, given to understand that whatever they think can and may be used against them, and that it is better by far to recapitulate what has been sanctioned. (133)

Rasula concentrates on students' stifled resistant tendencies, omitting potentially playful responses, whereas Creech's parody foregrounds the interface between resistance and play, demonstrating a profound insight into the poetic tradition of the playground rhyme, and perhaps even into the poetic enterprise itself. Jack's poem can hardly be classified as carnivalesque, yet it does foreground the parodic, resistant, and playful impulse so often found in playground poetry, mocking Williams's piece even as it employs its dominant (albeit most obvious) formal trait. Creech understands the child's impulse to play with poetic tradition, whereas the Kennedys, in gently assuring the child that it is okay to compose parodies, come across as somewhat naive. If the vast number of rhyming parodies collected by folklorists is any indication, children hardly need to be encouraged to compose parodic poetry, and, as we shall see, the poems produced

are not always as affectionate as Koch's parody of Williams.

The most well known set of parodies in the canon of playground rhymes surely must be the many variations on Isaac Watts's hymn "Joy to the World." With these poems, playground poets join ranks with Lewis Carroll in using Watts's verse as a source for poetry. Like Carroll's parody "How Doth the Little Crocodile," these parodies are generally violent and involve death. The graphic violence in these parodies directly opposes Watts's own aspirations for his verse. Watts conceived his poetry as "a constant Furniture, for the Minds of Children, that they may have something to think about when alone," as an antidote to the "shocking and bloody histories, [and] wanton songs or amorous romances" they might encounter (qtd. in Styles 14). Though "Joy to the World" was not originally intended for a child audience, since its adoption as a common Christmas carol it has become associated with children and the increasingly child-centered holiday, which probably explains why child poets have adopted the hymn as a convenient scaffolding for their purposes.

Based on Psalm 96:11–13, the hymn's religious theme is in conflict with its schoolyard variations. The second verse of Watts's hymn reads,

Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!  
 Let men their songs employ;  
 While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains  
 Repeat the sounding joy,  
 Repeat the sounding joy,  
 Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.

Whereas "Joy to the World" describes the "fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains" resounding with joy at their Lord's arrival from above, the playground versions question the hierarchical values implied by the hymn. For example, one version reads,

Joy to the world, the school burned down,  
 And all the teachers died.  
 We're going to take the principal  
 And hang her from the toilet bowl  
 With a rope around her neck,  
 A rope around her neck,  
 A rope, a rope around her neck.  
 (Sherman and Weisskopf 113)

In Watts's version, the world "receive[s] her King" gladly, the "nations prove / the glories of His righteousness." Not so in the playground version, which inverts the normal power relationships between teacher and student, principal and class clown. Authority—whether King or principal—is not revered in the playground, and, using conventional carnivalesque imagery, the head, the site of the intellect, is noosed and hung surrealistically "from the toilet bowl." Of course, the parody's primary target is not Watts's verse, but instead school culture itself. Again, the child poet is making fun *with* Watts's hymn, not necessarily *of* it.

In another variation, the poet chants, "Joy to the world, my teacher's dead, / I chopped right off his head." The head and all it symbolizes is cut from the teacher, and, in mock sensitivity, the child poet assures us that we need not "worry 'bout the body [because] / I flushed it down the potty" (113). Sherman and Weisskopf note that this "caricatured, almost ritualized violence" is an embodiment of the child poets' "resentment over having their days structured and their freedom curtailed" by school officials and parents (103). Instead of "engaging in actual violence," most children release their frustrations through poems such as these, poems that employ consistent imagery and balanced form; as exemplified, for instance, in this two-stanza version, collected from an eleven-year-old girl and a nine-year-old boy:

Joy to the world, the teacher's dead,  
 We barbecued her head.  
 What happened to her body?  
 We flushed it down the potty.  
 And around and around it went,  
 And around and around it went,  
 And around and around and around it went.

Joy to the world, the school burned down,  
 And all the teachers are dead.  
 If you're looking for the principal,  
 He's hanging from the flagpole  
 With a rope around his neck,  
 With a rope around his neck,  
 With a rope, a rope around his neck.  
 (Sherman and Weisskopf 113)

Certainly this piece is not designed for adult ears, especially in these post-Columbine times. Its hyperbolic violence, however, might distract

most listeners from its sophisticated structure. The poem uses parallelism to interesting effect. Both stanzas refer to fire: in stanza one, the teacher's head is barbecued; in stanza two the school is torched. Just as the teacher's head is a metonym for the mind and the authority that insists children sit still and develop theirs, so too is the school that houses that authority. Both are subjected to fire, both destroyed by flame in a strangely bacchanalian sacrifice. More parallelism occurs in the third line of both stanzas. There the poet directly addresses the reader (or auditor), implicating us in the acts of rebellion, as if we are asking where the young rebels hid the teacher's body, as if we are looking for the principal, perhaps to do him in ourselves. But the most compelling symmetry concerns upward and downward movement, recalling the inverted cosmology of carnival. In the first stanza, the teacher's body is flushed *down* the toilet, is transformed into waste, while in the second the principal is strung *up*, taking the place of the flag, the symbol of freedom to which children are often encouraged to pledge their allegiance each morning. The school is burned down, converted to ash, while the principal, the ultimate (male) authority of school, is hoisted up, the Earth's downward pull putting an end to the students' "curtailed" freedom. The principal becomes a perverse flag of child-rule, maintaining his elevated status only as a corpse, devoid of intellect or spirit.

The "Joy to the World" parodies also demonstrate how playground poems are embodied through oral performance. Unlike official school poetry, which is frequently described using musical terminology and metaphors, playground poetry commonly incorporates music and melody. These poems are rooted in the oral tradition of the nursery rhyme, Mother Goose. They are not poems for the page. Rather, playground rhymes are often lyrical in the original sense of the word: musical, sung to the lyre. However, whether the poems are chanted or sung, they invariably involve body movement. Just as the bodies described in the poems are often contorted and exaggerated in hyperbolic fashion, the bodies of the performers are moving in time with the chant, dancing along with the melody. Playground poetry is embodied through melody, intricate clapping games, hand gestures, and elaborate jump-rope techniques. Again, the body has preeminence in these poems. Furthermore, sometimes the body movements are necessary to understand the literal meaning of the rhyme. Consider this poem a student of mine remembers chanting in Chicago:

Mama's in the kitchen burning that rice,  
 Daddy's on the corner shooting that dice,  
 Brother's in jail raising that hell,  
 Sister's on the corner selling fruit cocktail.

She reports that the rhyme is chanted, not sung, and the last three syllables are heavily accented, involving corresponding hand gestures that illuminate the last line's double entendre. Upon each word, the performer grips first the breasts, then the groin, then the buttocks: "fruit, cock, tail."

The last poem I will discuss is perhaps one of the most well-known playground rhymes, the infamous "Ms. Lucy" hand-clapping rhyme, which serves as an exemplar of the playfulness of playground poetry while suggesting another category of children's poetry, one we might call *domesticated playground poetry*, a mode of poetry existing in the borderlands between playground and official school poetry, as it is mediated more directly by the cultural norms of the adult world. Though domesticated playground poems most definitely employ elements of the carnivalesque discussed above, they do so only to a limit, and this limit is one set by the social codes of the culture in which they were produced:

Ms. Lucy had a steamboat, the steamboat had a bell.  
 Ms. Lucy went to heaven and the steamboat went  
 to . . .

*Hello* operator, please give me number nine,  
 And if you disconnect me I will chop off your . . .  
*Behind* the refrigerator, there was a piece of glass.  
 Ms. Lucy sat upon it and it went right up her . . .  
*Ask* me no more questions, I'll tell you no more lies.  
 The boys are in the bathroom pulling down their . . .  
*Flies* are in the meadow, the meadow's in the park.  
 The boys and girls are kissing in the  
 D.A.R.K. D.A.R.K. D.A.R.K. dark dark dark.  
 The dark is like a movie, a movie's like a show  
 A show is like the TV set, and that is all I know . . .  
 I know I know my mother, I know I know my pop  
 I know I know my sister with the 18-hour  
 18-hour 18-hour bra bra bra.

(Sherman and Weisskopf 33–34)<sup>6</sup>

"Ms. Lucy" foregrounds embodiment not only through the elaborate hand clapping that often accompanies performance, but also in its morphological play, which works as well on the page as off. This poem plays with language at the level of sentence and word simultaneously. It violates sentence boundaries, disrupting conventional narrative flow, even as it blurs the lines between one word and the next, calling attention to the materiality of word, the plasticity of language, using that plasticity to navigate the border between social acceptability and taboo.

The poem is perplexing imagistically, almost surreal. Guided by shared morphological and phonological elements, it drifts from one setting to the next, one image cluster to another. But there is a strange sense that can be made of the poem. The images vacillate between two topics, sex and punishment, sometimes suggesting sex *is* punishment. Formally, the poem foregrounds its awareness of and begrudging respect for appropriateness, decorum. It takes its interest in sexuality and violence only so far, and then pulls back, testing the flexibility of rules, instead of flagrantly breaking them. The adult listener (or, perhaps, the snitch) is implied in the form. As Sherman and Weisskopf write, the poem has a certain "attraction for children: when caught by adults, those children can say in feigned innocence, 'We were just singing a song . . .'" (206).<sup>7</sup> In fact, the poem itself seems a symptom of the desire to transgress without transgressing.

Though it is the steamboat and not Ms. Lucy that goes to hell, the poem seems preoccupied with those issues that, conventionally, might land one there. The first two lines, with their almost arbitrary judgments on Lucy and the steamboat, suggest the seemingly arbitrary verdicts doled out by adult authority figures. Yet, within the logic of the poem, it is appropriate that the steamboat go to hell, with its phallic smoke stacks, its bell and clapper implying a sexuality that will be made overtly oedipal by the poem's end. Even the operator, responsible for correct connections, is vaguely sexual. I cannot help but recall Carl Sandburg's poem "Manual System," in which he describes Mary, a telephone operator who "has a thingamajig clamped on her ears / And sits all day taking plugs out and sticking plugs in" (1-2).

A tension in the poem exists between the desire to articulate sexual curiosity and a desire to censor that curiosity. The punishments themselves, which are never actually realized, thanks to morphological transformation, highlight the ambivalence. On the one hand, the poet sends the steamboat to hell, perhaps for being too steamy, and on the other, the poet threatens to punish the operator if s/he "disconnect[s]" the

speaker from whomever s/he is speaking to (perhaps a girlfriend or boyfriend?). The first might elicit (or at least symbolize) sexual desire, while the other holds the potential to disconnect it. Both are punished. The poem then moves from the painful image of Lucy sitting on a shard of glass (described in unabashedly sexual terms: "it went right up her . . .") to a voyeuristic look at boys "in the bathroom pulling down their. . . ." Here we have the most overtly sexual moment in the poem, one tied to the carnivalesque by its conflation of erotic desire with waste, the voyeuristic impulse to watch others urinate.

We might argue that many children do not, as they clap along to "Ms. Lucy," consider the thematic interrelationship of the various images, but certainly they understand their consistent tone, that they all belong in the same poem. As Francelia Butler reminds us,

Some adults are surprised, even shocked, to learn that many children's rhymes, including those for skipping, have an unmistakably sexual, sometimes even bawdy, element. In some, the bawdy aspect is too broad to appeal to refined tastes. I have heard children skipping such rhymes, totally unselfconsciously. Whether they understood in all cases the meaning of the rhymes is hard to tell. What is certain is that children, as they grow up, become secretly fascinated with erotic content. After all, what child has not wondered about what goes on between parents behind the closed doors of their bedroom. (53)

"Ms. Lucy" builds to this very thought, the mysteries within the parents' bedroom. We move from "boys and girls [. . .] kissing in the dark" to a curious chain of similes: "The dark is like a movie, a movie's like a show / A show is like a TV set, and that is all I know." But despite claims to the contrary, it seems that this is not all the speaker knows, for in line 14 we return again to a male and female pairing, the speaker's "mother" and "pop." This pairing and its placement in the poem suggests another kind of show a child might encounter in the dark, the Freudian Primal Scene. Thus, the voyeuristic impulse in lines 8 and 10, the scopophilic desire to see "The boys [. . .] in the bathroom" and "The boys and girls [. . .] kissing" is linked with the desire to know "what goes on between parents behind the closed doors of their bedroom."

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud calls this desire "uncanny," as it "arouses anxiety within [the child]" (624). With its neatly subverted

violent impulses, surrealistic dream-like imagery and shifts, its preoccupation with kissing in the dark and evocation of the mother and the father, this poem certainly fits Freud's description of the child's response to the primal scene, "a sexual excitation with which their understanding is unable to cope and which they also [. . .] repudiate because their parents are involved" (624). Laura Mulvey reminds us that Freud's discussion of scopophilia in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* revolves "around the voyeuristic activities of children, their desire to see and make sure of the private and the forbidden (curiosity about other people's genital and bodily functions, about the presence and absence of the penis and, retrospectively, about the primal scene)" (16). Indeed, if Mulvey is correct in noting that scopophilic pleasure hinges on the objectification of whomever is being watched, then the poem's preoccupation with the objectification of language itself resonates perfectly with the poem's theme, even down to the last image of the sister in her "18 hour bra." She is being spied upon.

The emphasis on "the dark" in lines 11 and 12 recalls Mulvey's argument that the voyeuristic pleasure of cinema (the "movie" in line 12) hinges on "the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen," a contrast that ultimately "helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation" (17). This darkness, this "voyeuristic separation," along with the formal pulling away from inappropriate language and issues, tempers the potentially traumatic experience of the primal scene. The violence, the "chop[ping]" and damnation, suggests an understanding of the violation involved in such spying, and perhaps a reckoning of the "primal" nature of sex, its potentially violent dimension. As Freud writes in his *Three Essays*, "If children [. . .] witness sexual intercourse between adults [. . .] they inevitably regard the sexual act as a sort of ill-treatment or act of subjugation: they view it, that is, in a sadistic sense" (62). This view helps explain the violent undercurrents in "Ms. Lucy." Furthermore, Freud's insight that children "usually seek a solution of the mystery [of their sadistic interpretation of sex] in some common activity concerned with the function of micturition or defaecation" provides a suitable explanation for mother and pop's link to the bathroom humor of "The boys are in the bathroom" (62).

The poem's attraction to children lies in its working through competing impulses, the desire to see, the desire to know, and the urge to repress those desires, to submerge them, just as the steamboat is sub-

merged. In this respect, the poem is unusual for a playground rhyme, as it is uninterested in unrestrained play, in carnivalesque reversal of hierarchy, the unabashed celebration of the body. It is cleaned up, sanitized. Whether it is sanitized for the child's benefit, or, more subversively, in order to test boundaries in the presence of adults, depends, I suppose, on the child performing the rhyme. Either way, this rhyme moves towards the classroom; it operates in two realms at once, can be performed near authority without much fear of punishment, whereas the other playground rhymes are meant exclusively for young ears.

As seen in the "Joy to the World" parodies, the spirit of playground poetry resists and playfully engages repressive elements of adult culture through the linguistic play of carnival. It inspires children to construct their own tradition, to compose their own poetry, to teach themselves. "Ms. Lucy," however, is more like the subversive poems of John Ciardi, Shel Silverstein, and the nonsense of Theodore Roethke, than other playground rhymes. The carnivalesque impulse of the poem operates within the framework of wider (adult) cultural norms of decorum and punishment/retribution for the violation of these norms.

Often, as children grow older, they neither maintain a taste for playground poetry nor develop a taste for official school poetry. Because teachers and other adults fail to tap into the playful spirit of playground poetry, there is no mechanism for bridging the distance between what appears to be outdoor freedom of expression and indoor repression.

Unlike adult verse, playground poetry is owned and reinvented by each new generation of children, and therein lies its power. Testifying to the fact that poetry is a heterogeneous discourse that operates in multiple registers and serves multiple purposes, playground poetry is worthy of consideration alongside the adult poetic traditions usually privileged in the classroom. Yet perhaps bringing playground poetry into the classroom would somehow diminish it, take away its charm and power. Or, perhaps bringing it into the classroom, the living room, perhaps treating playground poetry *as* poetry, talking about it with children, singing it alongside them, perhaps such a dialogue could lead both children and adults to an enriched understanding of poetry and the communities that produce it. It's worth the risk.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>For more on Jarrell's dialectical poetic, see Thomas Travisano's "Randall Jarrell's Poetics" and my own "'Levels and Opposites' in Randall Jarrell's *The Bat-Poet*."

<sup>2</sup>Though a considerable body of work surrounds playground poetry, it treats children's playground rhymes exclusively as folklore, and for the most part consists of collecting rhymes and annotating sources. One of the most notable early studies of children's poetry and song as folklore is Iona and Peter Opie's *I Saw Esau: Traditional Rhymes of Youth* (1947), followed by their equally important *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), the first book in a trilogy of texts including *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (1969) and *The Singing Game* (1985). These studies, generally ethnographic and anecdotal, do not consider the rhymes as poetry, as rich, complicated—if ribald and irreverent—poems that deserve analysis from a literary perspective. In *The People in the Playground* (1993), Iona Opie writes that in these books she and her husband "tried to demonstrate the quantity, diversity, and astonishing longevity of children's lore" (viii). However, the Opies only implicitly suggest the literary merit of the poetry of childhood, generally sidestepping its political dimension, which, as we will see when we discuss anti- and pro-integration rhymes, is considerable.

Francelia Butler's *Skipping Around the World: The Ritual Nature of Folk Rhymes* (1989) is another interesting work that amasses and annotates a great number of rhymes. *Skipping* is in the spirit of its predecessors: *Jump-Rope Rhymes* (1969), by Roger D. Abrahams; *One Potato, Two Potatoes: The Folklore of American Children* (1976), by Mary and Herbert Knapp; and Roger D. Abrahams and Lois Rankin's *Counting Out Rhymes* (1980). These texts implicitly question Romantic notions of the innocent child, pointing to the complicated social systems generated in children's play, emphasizing the child's desire to make sense out of (and often lampoon) so-called adult concerns like sex and violence. In *Jump-Rope Rhymes*, Abrahams articulates his dissatisfaction with the contemporary study of children's rhymes, specifically jumping rhymes: "Commentary on jumping rope has been done primarily by journalists and recreation experts," complaining that much of the commentary "has been of the 'isn't this cute' sort" (xix). He then remarks on the paucity of rigorous, historical, contextual investigations into "the ways in which [playground rhymes] fit[] into other patterns of play activity" (xix). In the years since Abrahams wrote these words, considerable work has been done in this area (notably by the Knapps). But most of the literature still operates in the presentational mode. Indeed, one of the latest books on children's rhyme as folklore, Josepha Sherman and T. K. F. Weisskopf's excellent *Greasy Grimy Gopher Guts: The Subversive Folklore of Childhood* (1995), resembles, like Butler's, an annotated anthology of collected rhymes and songs. Of the book-length studies concerning the oral folk-poetry of children, *Greasy Grimy Gopher Guts* and *One Potato, Two Potatoes* are the most useful and exhaustive treatments of the oral folk-poetry of contemporary U.S. children. Though my goal is not to treat these rhymes as folklore, I sympathize with Abrahams's critique, and seek in this essay to extend the parameters of the discourse surrounding playground rhymes—again, not as folklore, but as a dense poetic tradition consisting of equally dense and rewarding texts.

<sup>3</sup>The 1992 edition, marvelously illustrated by Maurice Sendak, is obviously designed to appeal to children.

<sup>4</sup>See Chaston, "Baum, Bakhtin, and Broadway."

<sup>5</sup>Though these two rhymes actually work well together as a two-stanza poem, they are, in fact, separate rhymes.

<sup>6</sup>Both my wife and I remember hearing the rhyme as “Miss Suzy,” though many of my students remember “Ms. Lucy.” Other versions outline the exploits of Ms. (or Miss) Helen, Lulu, Mary, Rosie, Sally, Suzanne, and even Johnny. Given the content of the poem, Ms. Lucy, with its pun on the word *loose*, is perhaps the most appropriate of the list. For a brief but enlightening history of the rhyme, see Sherman and Weisskopf 205–07.

<sup>7</sup>Some children might not appreciate the embedded profanities in “Ms. Lucy,” but I imagine those children are rare, and principally the production of the naive adult’s imagination. As Butler writes of skipping rhymes in general,

I have heard adults protest that children could not have made up most of these rhymes because they do not understand the sexual implications. However, since we know that children manifest erotic behavior from birth, there is reason to believe that many of them are fully aware and capable of imagining without any adult assistance the rhymes they are chanting. (57)

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