



Dispatches from the Drug Wars: Ishmael Reed, Oscar Zeta Acosta, and the Viet Cong of America

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Weeks before the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) launched the Tet Offensive, setting the United States and its South Vietnamese allies back on their heels, John Steinbeck IV asserted in a *Washingtonian* article that some seventy-five percent of American combat soldiers were getting stoned on a regular basis (34). The feature article, "The Importance of Being Stoned in Vietnam," caused a stir when it arrived on newsstands in late 1967. It was the first time most Americans had heard of an alleged drug crisis in the armed forces, and it wouldn't be the last. The son of the Nobel Prize-winning novelist, Steinbeck had volunteered for the US Army in 1966 and served one tour in Vietnam, where he wrote for Armed Forces Radio and Television. The war had, Steinbeck admitted, transformed him from a hawkish conservative into "a veritable Turtle Dove" (Steinbeck IV and Steinbeck 109). He became a vocal critic of the war, converted to Buddhism, and, aided by his famous name, received invitations from news media to comment on US involvement in Southeast Asia. He described Vietnam as "that huge garden [the American teenager] has always dreamed of" (34), where cannabis is easier to find than "a package of Lucky

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Strikes" (33). The drug was not regulated by the local government, he added, or distributed through a central market: "It is simply a way of life" (34). It didn't take long for the naive American to realize that "for all intents and purposes the entire country is stoned."

Steinbeck's account of the Vietnamese drug trade, he later acknowledged, was overstated. He thought he could accelerate the withdrawal from Southeast Asia by exaggerating the prevalence of drug use among its soldiers. Instead he fueled domestic concerns about narcotics, their effect on the counterculture generation, and their role in the country's looming defeat in Vietnam. The image of stoned Americans in uniform raised fears of national decline. In the next four years, narcotics would be blamed for everything from declining morale among soldiers to the antiwar movement to the My Lai massacre.

Steinbeck's article suggests why. He describes how fighting while stoned alters one's senses so that war becomes beautiful, granting the soldier "a detached and esthetic vantage point" from which to observe the fighting (35). Steinbeck recalls how he and twenty of his comrades had gotten high on "Papa-san's grass" during a nighttime firefight. On a mountain overlooking the South China Sea, the men watched flares and machine-gun fire light the darkness around them, causing them to break into a chorus of "ohs and ahs." "A sigh of 'did you dig that?' whispered past the shuffling of grenades and ammunition," Steinbeck wrote. "The clatter of the machine guns was like a Stravinsky percussion interlude from 'La Sacre Du Printemps.' There isn't a psychedelic discotheque that can match the beauty of flares and bombs at night." This sensationalized account of soldiers oohing and aahing at the destruction surrounding them contributed to the emerging figure of the debauched Vietnam veteran and motivated a crackdown on illicit drug use in the armed forces, both in Southeast Asia and across the United States. Steinbeck's own story demonstrated for some how narcotics had derailed the war effort. Once a clean-cut Army volunteer fresh from basic training who, thanks to his famous father (himself hawkish on the war), had shaken hands with Lyndon Johnson in the Oval Office, he returned from Vietnam a dovish druggie.

Not every American soldier had been so transformed by his tour, though. Steinbeck writes of the "average soldier" who, like himself, matured from sober newcomer to streetwise stoner (34). He uses the term "average" to mean white. Whereas the white soldier returned from war a changed man, the black soldier, he suggests, needed no acclimation to Vietnamese drug culture. His black comrades "brought

[with them] the implements, effects, and customs of what, for the most part, might have been a predominantly shabby environment . . . by the white soldier's standards," he writes. "As any narcotics agent or *Time-Life* staff writer will tell you when not asked," he continues, "the original marijuana traffic in America came out of the same parts of town that the colored boys have been caught in all their lives." While he describes Vietnam as alien to white bourgeois American culture, he casts it as familiar, even homelike, for the working-class black soldier raised in a "shabby environment" with all of the "implements, effects, and customs" associated with drug trafficking. Although Steinbeck distances himself from the narcotics agent who assumes that illicit drugs originate from black communities, he also ties blackness to crime, albeit with a liberal nod to "root causes." He reflects that "the Negro soldier's predilection for 'boo' is far more a matter of metropolitan geography than it is of color." Steinbeck acknowledges the structural forces that have barred black Americans from wealth accumulation—redlining, restrictive covenants, legal and extralegal violence—while assuming that such structural forces have conditioned black communities for criminal behavior. In an aside he mentions that cannabis first arrived in North America from Africa through the transatlantic slave trade, reinforcing the idea that narcotics are foreign to (white) American culture. Black soldiers and Vietnamese allies, in other words, introduced marijuana to (and thus subverted) good boys like Steinbeck.

Steinbeck was motivated to write "The Importance of Being Stoned in Vietnam" in part by his own run-in with the law. After returning to the United States, he was arrested in California on possession charges. The *Washingtonian* article was his way of calling attention to what he saw as the "ridiculous contradiction" that the United States condoned drugs in Southeast Asia that it criminalized at home—arresting veterans who had taken up the habit to manage the stress of combat (*In Touch* 71). Steinbeck succeeds in drawing out the contradictions inherent to how the state distinguishes between legal and illegal, safe and dangerous, and healthful and harmful substances. He remarks that all American soldiers carried a "survival kit" ("Importance" 58) containing dextroamphetamines and wonders what a PAVN soldier might think if he discovered these "dexies" and "peps" on a dead American soldier. "Who looks worse, and whose government is supplying whom, with what?" This selective criminalization of drugs—dextroamphetamine versus marijuana—suggests how the state has marshaled narcotics control as a mechanism for valuing some ways of being in the world and devaluing others, of

assuming the innocence of some and the criminality of others. The irony of Steinbeck's article is that he wrote it out of frustration with the government's harsh antidrug laws, but the image he advanced of the stoned GI encouraged a series of new draconian drug-control measures that would culminate in 1971 with Richard Nixon's declaration of a war on drugs.

Nixon's war on drugs did not end one war and begin another but reorganized an existing racial project around the figures of the criminal and the drug trafficker. The addicted white Vietnam veteran served as the imagined victim of the narcotics trade and offered Nixon a means by which he could tie the failures of the Vietnam War to a softness on crime and drugs, solving one war with another and ushering in a new era of permanent war. Harry Anslinger, the first commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics—a forerunner to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA)—had long connected narcotics to communism, suggesting in 1952 that “Red Chinese” had been bankrolling North Korean forces through the sale of drugs to the West and sabotaging American and UN soldiers by “making them narcotics addicts” (qtd. in “Red Chinese” M3). But as the United States and their allies lost ground in Vietnam and resistance to the war grew, the Cold War state shifted its focus from communists who might be drug traffickers to drug traffickers who might be communists.

The regulation of controlled substances allowed officials to continue defining some bodies, territories, and social formations as liberal and legitimate and others as illiberal and illegitimate. The determination of which drugs harmed and which drugs healed, Suzanne Reiss writes, “extended into the social and cultural life of the community and often provided the evidentiary basis for discrediting (or glorifying) people, states, cultural practices, political movements, and alternative systems of value” (11).¹ The state naturalized the vilification of Southeast Asians, Mexicans, black Americans, and Latinas/os through medical-scientific and legal language that hid the race-making work of its selective criminalization of substances and their means of distribution.

This essay takes literally Nixon's 1971 declaration of war. Scholars such as Reiss, Kathleen Frydl, and Naomi Murakawa have shown how the drug wars took root at the same time as, and as a result of, the consolidation of the Cold War. The federal government did not take the lead on crime and drug control until 1965, when Johnson signed the Law Enforcement Assistance Act (LEAA) into law; in 1968, he authorized the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act. The wave of legislation that followed under Nixon built the modern

carceral state. This federalization of crime and narcotics control was achieved, I argue, through its militarization. Nixon mobilized the discourse of war (and the executive right therein) to transfer the regulation of crime and drugs from state and local governments to the federal domain. His administration did so by telling a story in which the nation—embodied by the addicted white soldier—was endangered by a “rising sickness in our land” that originated from, at once, Southeast Asia and American communities of color (“Special Message”). But black and Chicano writers such as Ishmael Reed and Oscar Zeta Acosta told a different story about the antidrug crackdown, showing how it had not racialized crime but *criminalized race*, effectively barring Southeast Asians and Americans of color from being law-abiding. To be black, brown, and poor in Nixon’s drug wars was, in Acosta’s words, to constitute “the Viet Cong of America” (200).

Bringing the War Home

Nixon’s war on drugs grew out of a broader law-and-order agenda that had won him the White House in 1968. That year, he and George Wallace, running on the right-wing American Independent Party ticket, collected a combined fifty-seven percent of the general-election vote by vowing to restore order to American streets. A Harris poll showed that eighty-one percent of Americans agreed with the statement that “law and order had broken down,” with most blaming “Negroes who start riots” and “Communists” (“81%” 31). Nixon had found a winning issue. Vesla Weaver, Christian Parenti, and Michelle Alexander have identified how law-and-order legislation allowed conservatives, who had been on the losing side of civil rights reform, to change the terms of the debate by seeking to reduce rising crime rates that they associated with black freedom struggles.² But Nixon’s success stemmed from how he catered his message to a liberal audience through the discourses of rights and reform. In a May 1968 treatise titled *Toward Freedom from Fear*, Nixon declared that “the first civil right of every American [is] the right to be protected in his home, business, and person from domestic violence,” a right that was, he added, “being traduced with accelerating frequency in every community in America” (13). With reference to Franklin Roosevelt’s four freedoms in the treatise’s title and the mainstream civil rights movement in its invocation of “the right to be protected . . . from violence,” Nixon insisted that enforcing law and order was the way to safeguard civil liberties. Unlike Wallace and Barry Goldwater, he sought to bring liberals on board and form a new consensus around crime control.

This consensus was slow in forming. It was not until Steinbeck's article stirred fears of drug addiction in Vietnam that the federal government began to get tough on crime and turn its attention to a new war at home. "The myth of the addicted army," Jeremy Kuzmarov writes, was a story conservatives and liberals could agree on: "It helped divert public attention from the policies that had produced and perpetuated the war in Vietnam, intensified public fears of the growth of the 1960s drug culture, and thus created an opportune political climate for an expansion of the federal drug war" (6). Though the rate of drug use among American soldiers in Southeast Asia was identical to that of men of the same age at home, it gave Nixon and other antidrug crusaders a focusing event through which to redefine the state's war on what they saw as illiberal social worlds. The communist shaded into the drug trafficker.

Steinbeck's "The Importance of Being Stoned in Vietnam" ran weeks ahead of the Tet Offensive, a devastating setback for the United States and its allies. It didn't take long for lawmakers to begin blaming drugs for a disaster of their own making in Southeast Asia. In March 1970, Senator Thomas Dodd, a Democrat from Connecticut, convened a congressional subcommittee hearing on drug use in the armed forces to which he invited veterans, National Liberal Front (NLF) defectors, medical officers, and journalists, most of whom agreed with his assessment that drugs had undermined the war effort in Southeast Asia. (Steinbeck was among his selected witnesses.) Sergeant Charles West, who had served in the company that had carried out the My Lai Massacre—in which American soldiers killed five hundred unarmed Vietnamese civilians in Quang Ngai—told the subcommittee that he had witnessed five of his comrades smoking marijuana the night before the mass killing. When Dodd asked him if this could have affected their behavior the following day, West said that he didn't know. So the senator answered for him, stating, "I think it did [influence their behavior]. . . . Our soldiers aren't murderers," he added (qtd. in Waters 3).

Dodd had good reason to blame My Lai on drug use among enlisted men rather than command decisions. As a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he had been an advocate for the escalation of the war in Southeast Asia. Criminalizing narcotics allowed him to minimize his own role in creating the conditions for American war crimes. Dodd suggested that four out of every five American soldiers were smoking marijuana in Vietnam, with drugs "almost as available as candy bars" (qtd. in "Fresh" 32). He bolstered his claim that the massacre could be attributed to drugs by calling

on medical authorities. A doctor who had treated drug addiction in Vietnam testified to the violent effects of cannabis, telling the committee: “Contrary to many popular opinions held here in the States, the drug could cause people to become fearful, paranoid, extremely angry, and led, in a number of cases, to acts of murder, rape, and aggravated assault” (qtd. in Smith 14). The conclusion of the subcommittee hearing was that Vietnamese drug culture, not American men, was at fault for the My Lai massacre. Dodd suggested that Vietnamese had contaminated American soldiers with its “marijuana plague” and thus instigated violence against their own people (qtd. in “Fresh” 32). Dodd’s account of marijuana use in Vietnam was inconsistent, though. On one day of the hearing, he cast Vietnam as a nation of drug addicts. On another, he indicated that no NLF soldiers smoked marijuana due to a strict ban; instead, they used it to sabotage Americans’ health and undercut US efforts, one addict at a time. Dodd’s conflicting tale of Vietnamese drug culture—sometimes meant to illustrate Southeast Asians’ lack of self-control, sometimes their achievement of absolute control—reflects the incoherence of Asian racialization during the Vietnam War. Even as officials like Dodd described Vietnamese as drug addicts (as they earlier had Americans of Chinese descent), the competing narrative of the Asian American as model minority took hold, the idea having been introduced in 1966, a year after Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act into law.³ Flexible ideas about Asian criminality gave Dodd and others a way to reconcile one narrative with the other.

The story of the addicted soldier grew more sensational as state officials and news media turned their attention from marijuana to heroin. A year after Dodd organized the first hearing on marijuana use in the armed forces, in May 1971, Congressmen Michael Murphy (a Democrat from Connecticut) and Robert Steele (a Republican from Illinois) released a coauthored investigation of the narcotics trade in Southeast Asia, titled “The World Heroin Problem.” Based on anecdotal evidence, the congressmen alleged that between ten and fifteen percent of American personnel in Vietnam were hooked on low-cost, high-grade heroin that had been refined in Burmese and Laotian laboratories and marketed to American soldiers in South Vietnam (18). Looking to make their names (and win reelection), the first-term congressmen wrote editorials and did the rounds on television news. Steele contributed an account of their investigation to *Nation’s Business* in which he asserted that “a once-magnificent fighting machine” had “suffered heavy losses in discipline, morale, and effectiveness—not because of the enemy, but because of an in-

sidious white powder” (48). He faulted South Vietnamese officials for condoning and even facilitating the sale of heroin to Americans and recommended that the United States pull out of Southeast Asia if the local government did not curb drug trafficking. News media detailed the congressmen’s findings with excitement and alarm. The *Newsweek* columnist Stewart Alsop made the outrageous claim that their “horrifying new estimate” made heroin addiction among American soldiers “the worst horror to emerge out of the war—worse even than My Lai” (108). The agreement on the issue between two congressmen, one a conservative and one a liberal, also signaled the establishment of common ground on the war. Defining the use of hard drugs as a Southeast Asian custom enabled by crooked government officials, they agreed that Vietnam may be “unsaveable” and, indeed, an affliction on their own nation.

Coverage of the congressmen’s investigation tended to focus on the connection they drew between heroin use in Vietnam and rising crime rates in the United States. Steele warned that, given the higher cost and lower grade of heroin available in North America, addicted veterans would turn to crime to sustain the high to which they had become accustomed while serving abroad. He imagined narcotics as an “epidemic” emerging from Asia and contaminating the United States through soldier-carriers. But he also suggested that drug addiction had been “spawned in the [American] ghetto” and had “hedgehopped to middle-class suburbs, colleges and high schools” (46). Murphy and Steele had visited nine nations in Southeast and Western Asia as part of their investigation for the House Foreign Affairs Committee. They did not visit American cities or research the domestic drug trade. In their interviews with news media, however, they stressed the continuities between the drug cultures of Asia and urban American communities from which narcotics “spawned.”

News writers reinforced this association between drugs, Southeast Asia, and American communities of color. Tom Buckley, citing the Murphy-Steele investigation, described how American soldiers bought heroin in Vietnam’s “scag alleys” and then noted that “most of the big cities in [the United States] have their scag alleys, too—usually in the fetid tenements that line the garbage-strewn streets of the ghettos, but more and more frequently in recent years in the middle-class suburbs and on the fringes of college campuses as well” (E1). One *New York Times* article featured an interview with a medical officer who stated, “Vietnam in many ways is a ghetto for the enlisted man. . . . The soldiers don’t want to be here [and] their living conditions are bad” so, he concludes, “[t]hey react the way they do in a ghetto.

They take drugs and try to forget” (qtd. in Reston 41). Like Steele’s own editorial, such articles eschewed the language of race, instead electing to talk about drugs in terms of regions of the world and so-called ghetto neighborhoods. Their effect was to characterize decolonizing Asian nations and domestic black and Latina/o communities as harboring and disseminating a kind of cultural contagion—drug use—assumed to be foreign to white “middle-class suburbs.” While liberal news media stressed the root causes of drug use (as an effort to “try to forget” one’s difficult circumstances), they naturalized an association between crime, Southeast Asia, and black America even as they suggested that Asian and black criminality was the result of colonialism and structural racism.

Through the story of narcotics arriving on the shores and in the suburbs of North America from Asia, Harlem, and East Los Angeles, conservative and liberal lawmakers, journalists, and medical scientists formed the racial categories of the drug trafficker and the criminal in ways that overlaid but hid their close association with existing racial identities. They criminalized Southeast Asians and black and Latina/o communities by assuming that anyone living in Vietnamese “scag alleys” and urban American ghettos must be a criminal or drug user, whether due to moral failings (the conservative narrative) or as a result of the conditions into which they were born (the liberal narrative). Such accounts consign Vietnamese and working-class American communities of color to what Lisa Cacho calls an “ineligibility” for rights within the liberal legal order (8). Those categorized as illegal aliens, gang members, and drug traffickers are, she writes, “criminal by being, unlawful by presence, and illegal by status.” They are unable to be lawful, whatever their behavior, which Cacho stresses “is always the absolute prerequisite for political rights, legal recognition, and resource distribution.” Criminalization obscures how liberalism founds rather than mends breaks in humanity. It renders nonhuman being understandable, if not deserved. This racial criminalization allowed one lieutenant general, in 1971, to argue before a congressional committee that the “riff-raff” serving in Vietnam were more inclined toward narcotics than the military’s more “careerist personnel” and that drug use in the armed forces would decline as fewer men entered through the draft (qtd. in United States 212). He suggested that black, Latino, and poor white soldiers were bound to shoot heroin and steal; they were criminals.

This was the environment in which Nixon declared his war on drugs in June 1971. In a briefing at the White House, he called drug abuse “America’s public enemy number one” and stated that, “in

order to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive” (“Remarks”). Nixon announced that he had, earlier that day, issued Executive Order 11599 to establish the new Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention (SAODAP), which would be located within the executive branch and coordinate his antidrug agenda across the federal government. In the briefing room he introduced its inaugural director, Jerome Jaffe, a University of Chicago researcher and a leading advocate for treating heroin addiction with methadone. Naming Jaffe, a medical doctor and distinguished academic, as the first executive drug czar, Nixon counterbalanced his more belligerent declarations with a discussion of the new SAODAP director’s initiatives on rehabilitation, research, and education.

The legislation that Nixon outlined built on the Law Enforcement Assistance Act of 1965, the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, and Nixon’s own Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970, which established the five modern classifications of controlled substances and authorized the use of no-knock search warrants. But the antidrug agenda Nixon laid out in 1971 was new in its scale, in its centralization within the federal government, and in its militarized methods for controlling the flow, sale, and use of narcotics in and outside the United States. To federalize the drug wars—a move that, he admitted, contradicted his commitment to states’ rights—Nixon needed to tell a convincing and urgent story about the threat of narcotics to the nation. The woes of the addicted soldier, dramatized in congressional hearings and on television news that summer, gave him that story. Though Nixon’s remarks are remembered for his vow to “wage a new, all-out offensive” on drugs, he devoted the longest segment of the briefing to drug use in the armed forces. The Vietnam War “has brought to our attention the fact that a number of young Americans have become addicts as they serve abroad, whether in Vietnam, or Europe, or other places,” he stated. “That is why this offensive deals with the problem there, in Europe, and will then go on to deal with the problem throughout America.” Nixon imagined illicit drugs as the most dangerous of the nation’s *foreign* enemies, necessitating that his administration turn its attention (and vast military resources) from the Asian communist to the black and Latino drug trafficker. It was the figure of the addicted soldier through whom he connected one war to the next.

Dispatches from the Drug Wars

As news media delivered sensational accounts of heroin use in American cities and among American soldiers, Nixon exercised his executive right as commander in chief to federalize narcotics control. Drugs were, he argued, as grave a threat to the United States as an invading army landing on its shores and must be turned back with all of the country's military might. But he also distanced his antidrug crusade from that of real war by naming the state's antagonist as a thing—drugs—rather than a specific government or organization. His administration imagined the war on drugs as a new and urgent form of national defense that, like anticommunism before it, necessitated continuous non-war to secure the nation from illiberal, unfree beliefs and behaviors. Nixon and his team suggested that his declaration of war on narcotics was figurative—rhetoric meant to stress the seriousness with which he would take on the drug trade—while acting with the license of a wartime administration in combating and containing alleged drug traffickers.

This blurring of war and defense is reflected in a narrow understanding of war in American literature and culture. Notwithstanding vast military state-building since World War II, war narratives for most Americans continue to mean stories about combat soldiers engaged in discrete battles for land and resources with foreign foes. In reconsidering the genre of the American war novel, John Carlos Rowe proposes that we instead consider the literature of “organized state violence” in order to address those wars that the state would rather dismiss as mere conflicts, hostilities, riots, or negligible small wars (813). “The governing assumption of this approach,” he writes, “is that warfare brings to the historical and existential surface long-simmering conflicts, whose importance literature often identifies in advance of actual warfare and in some cases excavates from the ruins of war” (814). Rowe draws attention to how the state's governance of what does and doesn't constitute war has also defined the boundaries of war literature. He contends that detaching the latter from official accounts of state violence allows us to recognize the degree to which war animates national life. As Mary Dudziak asks, reflecting on the state's articulation of war as a discrete event even as it wages war without end, “How might American history look if we understood wartime and peacetime as cultural features, as self-made categories, as constructs?” (17). How might it look if we set aside the government's construction of official time? What if we treated the war on drugs as a war rather than an analogy? Examining such novels as

Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* and Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*—two narratives that confront the criminalization of blackness and brownness in American cities—as war novels, I argue, reveals the drug wars as a new stage in an old war.

Reed has long criticized the book, film, and television industries for selling images of black crime to white audiences. After the election of George H. W. Bush in 1988, he slammed news networks for turning stories of black violence and drug addiction into big business and thus giving credence to the message of Lee Atwater's infamous Willie Horton ads. "The only difference between white pathology and black pathology," he concluded, "is that white pathology is underreported" ("Black" 597–98). In a 2010 *Boston Globe* editorial, he condemned Harvard and other universities for teaching the 2002–08 television show *The Wire*, which, he argued, exoticizes black Baltimore communities for the entertainment of white liberals.

But Reed first articulated his criticism of state and media narratives of black crime years earlier amid Nixon's antidrug crusade. In his 1970 essay "Neo-HooDoo" (later collected as "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto") he attributes war and antiblack racism to Western universalism, monotheism, and rationalism. The West, he suggests, believes in a "CopGod" that can "'subdue' the world" through acts of normative violence (42). This God, he adds, "is why we are in Vietnam." Reed identifies an alternative in the form of Neo-HooDoo, a "Lost American Church" of black cultural forms and religious beliefs derived from West African, Haitian, and South American voodoo traditions. Unlike Christianity, which he described as restrictive and static, Reed's Neo-HooDooism is diverse in its "styles and moods" and exists in a state of continuous formation. In a 1973 interview, he states that "the laws of so-called Western logic" have led to a limited awareness of the natural world ("Conversation" 12). The methods of white scientists and detectives do "not apply to the world we are finding more and more," he argues. "All kinds of things don't do what Western logic say phenomenon is supposed to do."

Reed's third novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, stages his Neo-HooDooist beliefs in the figure of a black scientist-detective, PaPa LaBas. As President Warren Harding takes office in 1921, an outbreak of Jes Grew—a virus that leaves its carriers with the uncontrollable urge to sing, dance, and "wobble jiggle" (211)—engulfs the nation, landing first in New Orleans and then moving north toward New York City. LaBas, a Harlem houngan, tracks the outbreak as it nears the city, seeking to locate the sacred Book of Thoth from which it is believed to originate. He is not alone. A secret organization known as the

Atonist Path has instructed its military wing, the Wallflower Order, to find and burn the book. The Atonist Path is committed to Western rationalism, Christian monotheism, and white racial dominance and has carried out a centuries-long struggle to censor countervailing knowledge. In 1988 Henry Louis Gates Jr. described Reed's novel as a revisionist riff on the African American literary tradition that satirizes the idea of an "'always already' black signified" (218). Scholars since have followed Gates's lead, examining how Reed resignifies such genres as the detective novel, science fiction, and Harlem Renaissance modernism. When considered in the context of the Vietnam War and the drug wars, the novel also, I suggest, reveals the racial violence of liberal universalism. Likening the US invasion of Haiti to its invasion of Vietnam decades later, Reed draws attention to how liberal knowledge has rationalized war as an act of freeing the universal human from the irrational nonhuman—whether the barbarian, the communist, or the drug trafficker.

The novel, though set during the brief Harding administration, acknowledges its Nixon-era origins. It ends in 1971 with a one-hundred-year-old (but somehow unaged) LaBas delivering a guest lecture on the Harlem Renaissance at a New York-area university. With a nod to Arna Bontemps's novel *Black Thunder* (1936), a fictionalization of the 1800 Richmond slave rebellion, he concludes, "Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around" (218). Telling the students of the Jes Grew outbreak and the war in Haiti, he suggests that the 1920s have come back around. Western states have long sought to govern the meaning of the rational and the free, he argues: "This explains why Holy Wars have been launched against Haiti under the cover of 'bringing stability to the Caribbean.' 1 such war lasted longer than Vietnam. But you don't hear much about it because the action was against niggers" (213–14). LaBas asserts that wars fought against Haitians and Vietnamese have been dismissed as non-wars—as efforts to stabilize unstable regions—through accounts of the Caribbean and Southeast Asia as illiberal, irrational social worlds. The US invasion and military occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 has been left out of official histories for categorical reasons; it was not a real war but an instrument for "bringing stability" to the country. It was not a real war because "the action was against niggers." LaBas's transhistorical account of the wars in Haiti and Vietnam suggests how war has functioned as an instrument of racialization through which the liberal state defines the boundaries of the universal as the right to execute legitimate violence. It is through the delegitimation and exclusion—the racialization—of some social formations that universal Western man becomes intelligible. Yet, as

Lisa Lowe argues and Reed shows, violence also marks assimilation into the liberal order, leaving behind what Lowe calls an enduring racial “remainder” that attests to “the processes through which the human is universalized and freed by liberal forms, while the peoples who created the conditions of possibility for that freedom are assimilated or forgotten” (7). Haitians, Vietnamese, and Americans of color are all, in different ways, touched by the violence of liberal freedom.

Reed casts the invasion of Haiti as part of a larger war against Jes Grew, a war reminiscent in rhetoric and racial meaning to Nixon’s war on drugs. After Jes Grew arrives in the United States from Haiti, its “miasmatic source” (64), the Wallflower Order arranges for its eradication by installing Harding in the White House and then grooming a Talking Android who will embed himself in black communities to undermine the virus among its most active carriers. The Talking Android will infiltrate “the Negro, who seems to be its classical host; to drive it out, categorize it analyze it expell [sic] it slay it, blot Jes Grew,” the Order asserts (17): “In other words this Talking Android will be engaged to cut-it-up, break down this Germ, keep it from behind the counter.” Reed wrote *Mumbo Jumbo* in 1971, the year Nixon declared drug abuse “America’s public enemy number one,” and it is hard to miss the resonances between the Order’s anti-Jes Grew crusade and the Nixon administration’s antidrug agenda. The Order’s account of Jes Grew assumes its foreignness, that it originates not in the United States but from Haiti, while also associating it with black American neighborhoods and culture. In much the same way that mainstream news media was surprised to learn that heroin had affected middle-class white Americans, the secret organization is shocked to discover that middle-class white Americans have also been contaminated with the virus. In substituting narcotics with music and dance, Reed satirizes how the war on drugs, with a colorblind rhetoric focused on behavior rather than bodies, functioned to criminalize blackness. Blackness became a condition for crime, drug use, and, in Reed’s novel, infectious dancing. As one leader of the Order suggests, in a nod to the events of 1971, “Suppose we take [black] musicians out of circulation, arrest them on trumped-up drug charges and give them unusually long and severe prison sentences” (154).

The Wallflower Order organizes its crusade around controlling the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate beliefs, licit and illicit behaviors. Its goal is to “keep [Jes Grew] from behind the counters,” to ensure that it doesn’t achieve legal status in the commercial market. This racial criminalization in Reed’s novel reflects the racial criminalization of the federal government’s antidrug crackdown in

the 1960s and 1970s in how it mobilizes the race-neutral language of legality to distract from its race-making function. As Khalil Gibran Muhammad has documented, crime emerged during the Progressive era as the foremost mechanism for measuring black Americans' fitness for modern life. Liberal social scientists, he argues, contributed to the condemnation of blackness by substituting racial-biological accounts of black crime with racial-cultural accounts that, while couched in statistical methods framed as race-neutral, reinforced an assumed connection between race and crime. Whereas white ethnic crime was attributed to class disadvantage, leading to state interventions on behalf of white working-class communities such as the New Deal reforms, black crime was attributed to black culture. Thus, Muhammad concludes, "Liberalism fueled [white] immigrant success even as racial liberalism foundered on the shoals of black criminality" (13). The result was a social order in which white men *commit crimes* and black men *are criminals*. This Progressive-era racial liberalism foreshadows the post-World War II racial project in which the government would cast itself as an arbiter of antiracism by defending the existing social order from illegitimate beliefs and behaviors that it associated with blackness. Reed's satire of the war on drugs allows us to see how these new racial categories (communist, criminal, drug trafficker) revised and extended the existing racial order for an age of state antiracism.

Reed's novel also imagines alternatives to racial liberalism, however. The invasion of Haiti, which the narrator ascribes to the Wallflower Order's war on Jes Grew, leads black Americans to learn about and align themselves with the Caribbean nation. They read books about Haitian culture, learn Creole, and wear Haitian clothing. "As the war drags on," the narrator says, "it arrives upon American shores. The Wallflower Order launched the war against Haiti in hopes of allaying Jes Grew symptoms by attacking their miasmatic source. But little Haiti resists. It becomes a world-wide symbol for religious and aesthetic freedom. When an artist happens upon a new form he shouts 'I Have Reached My Haiti!'" (64). While the Order seeks to stigmatize Haiti and black America through a military, intelligence, and media crusade against Jes Grew, its actions have the unintended effect of instigating new transnational coalitions against the narrow universalism and white racial rule for which it stands. American communities of color recognize Haitians to be undertaking an analogous struggle against state-sanctioned racial violence committed in the name of national defense, order, and liberation. Reed does not dismiss the universal altogether but articulates an alternative universal-

ism by adopting a different starting point that decenters whiteness and transcends and exceeds the nation form. His novel reflects what Monique Wittig describes as the overlooked “polysemy” of minority literature, in which a writer assumes “both a particular *and* a universal point of view” and, indeed, arrives at a new understanding of the general through the individual and the local (67).

The novel identifies a continuous undercurrent in black intellectual culture from the 1920s to the 1970s. As black Americans faced exclusion from the alleged universalism of national life, writers from W. E. B. Du Bois and C. L. R. James to Harold Cruse and Angela Davis sought to articulate alternative communal forms within and across state borders. These included Pan-African movements, such as those dramatized in *Mumbo Jumbo*, as well as a sense of alliance with Southeast Asians during the war in Vietnam, when lawmakers were characterizing Southeast Asia and black American communities as the miasmatic sources of narcotics. Reed’s novel echoes, with some ironic distance, the third-worldism of the Bandung era from which emerged new transnational Afro-Asian connections based on shared anticolonial and antiracist struggles. That sense of identification with Vietnamese among black American writers could at times, as Bill Mullen observes, devolve into a kind of “cultural fetishization” and “lead to reifying definitions of culture” that are part of what he calls the Afro-Orientalist tradition (xx). If the Nixon administration reduced Vietnam and its people to a symbol of uniform criminality, American radicals could sometimes reduce them to a symbol of uniform resistance.⁴

The narrator’s account of black Americans’ growing interest in Haiti’s anticolonial struggles faces an undated image of a Black Panther demonstration. Black men march in two rows, their arms swinging in unison at their sides, while white, helmeted law-enforcement officers look on. A Panther sign is visible in the background. The image draws a line from the invasion of Haiti and the country’s emergence as “a world-wide symbol for religious and aesthetic freedom” to the war in Southeast Asia and the black freedom struggles of the late 1960s and 1970s. At their height the Panthers, as Nikhil Singh has shown, balanced a commitment to local, community-based autonomous black government with an identification with other “victims of Americanism” in and outside the nation’s borders (197). “The Panthers argued that civil rights leadership had missed the main lesson of anti-imperialism, that the United States was not a nation into which black people could successfully integrate, but an empire they needed to oppose,” Singh writes. They linked the fates of black

and Southeast Asian communities in a shared struggle against the United States. The Panthers saw the liberal state as the source of, rather than the solution to, racial violence. Huey Newton, in his 1970 essay “To the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam,” wrote that while the Panthers recognized Vietnam’s “right to claim nationhood” (182), they could not be nationalists themselves because “our country is not a nation but an empire”: “We have the historical obligation to take the concept of internationalism to its final conclusion—the destruction of statehood itself” (183).

Reed doesn’t mention the Panthers in the text of *Mumbo Jumbo*, but their visual inclusion makes sense in the context of his satire. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense also had its satirical edge. The Panthers’ commitment to policing the police and Newton’s title as their Minister of Defense drew attention to how law-enforcement agencies did not defend them as black working-class men and women. They had to defend against defense. That defense, they recognized, did not conform to national borders but targeted them and NLF soldiers as criminal actors, as external threats to the existing social order. Written as the Nixon administration transitioned the national security state from anticommunism to drug control, Reed’s novel substitutes narcotics with black music and dance to suggest how the United States had criminalized blackness rather than substances through a new mode of national defense that it called the war on drugs. But like the Black Panthers, it also gestures to how that racial project might be turned back on itself—how resistance to racial criminalization can found new alliances and forms of belonging that transcend state and nation.

The Black Panthers weren’t alone in seeing their struggles at home reflected in those of Vietnamese overseas. The Chicano movement, which had emerged across the western states in the late 1960s, saw the invasion of Southeast Asia as continuous with the colonization of Aztlán—an imagined indigenous nation stretching across the southwestern United States—in the nineteenth century. The movement marked a radical transformation in the long Mexican American civil rights movement that had earlier sought state-granted rights and advocated military service as a route for achieving government recognition and reform. This new generation of activists instead argued that Chicanas/os should fight at home for their *raza*, that their struggle was against rather than for the United States. In a 1969 letter to the Temescal, California, draft board, informing it of his refusal of induction into the armed forces, movement leader Manuel Gómez wrote, “It is well known that Mexicans were among the first

victims of your empire” (qtd. in Martínez and Vásquez 287). Thus, he concluded, “The Vietnamese people are not my enemy, but brothers involved in the same struggle for justice against a common enemy” (289). Months earlier, in a coauthored statement at the Denver Youth Liberation Conference, he had declared, “Because we know who we are, our nationalism becomes an internationalism” (“Statement”).

As Gómez and others were imagining a new transnationalism that united Chicanas/os and Vietnamese against state violence, the Nixon administration, with the assistance of alarmist news media, was advancing its own transnational narrative that cast Chicanas/os and Southeast Asians as analogous sources of illicit drugs and crime. These conflicting transnationalisms surface in Acosta’s *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, his fictional account of his legal work on behalf of Chicana/o activists in Los Angeles. Acosta’s novelization of his life and law career through his alter ego, Buffalo Zeta Brown, has been discussed as a device that destabilizes the truth claims of “ethnic-identified autobiography” (Aldama 64) and enacts a “dereifying function” (González 79). Indeed, when taking account of its extranational orientation to the Vietnam War, the novel refuses the static, subnational organization of racial difference into which the American literary market has long sorted writers of color. Like Gómez, Acosta imagines a Chicano movement engaged in the same fight as Vietnamese, a connection that he identifies through and against the emerging wars on drugs and crime. Like Reed, he reveals the racial work of antidrug surveillance by showing how it forms racial divisions abstracted from yet conforming to the existing color-line racial order.

The novel, Acosta’s second, articulates a Chicana/o alliance with Vietnam that traces the limits of rights-based freedom struggles. At an antiwar demonstration in Laguna Park, Brown stands on a bench and, before a crowd of fellow Chicana/o activists, describes the war as a threat to their own survival. “We may be the last generation of Chicanos if we don’t stop the war,” he declares (200). He continues:

If we don’t stop the destruction of our culture, we may not be around for the next century. We are the Viet Cong of America. Tooner Flats [Acosta’s fictionalized version of East Los Angeles neighborhood Lincoln Heights] is Mylai. Just because [Sheriff] Peaches and [Police Chief] Reddin haven’t started throwing napalm doesn’t mean they have stopped the war. The Poverty Program of Johnson, the Welfare of Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy, The New Deal and The Old Deal, The New Frontier as well as Nixon’s American Revolution . . . these are further embellishments of the government’s pacification program. (200–01)

While Brown's assertion that Chicanas/os are "the Viet Cong of America" effaces vast historical differences and is made in the total absence of Vietnamese, it draws attention to the boundaries of liberal universalism. He focuses not on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) but on the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong). The NLF was an attractive model for Chicana/o radicals because, unlike the DRV and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), it was not a landed state government but a colonized insurgent organization. It did not and could not conform to a world order of states and nations. Aligning Chicanas/os with the NLF, Brown identifies the unevenness of universal liberal rights. Reformist agendas from Roosevelt's New Deal to Kennedy's New Frontier to Johnson's Great Society were nothing more than "embellishments of the government's pacification program" for those denied the right to have rights.

While Brown's statement can be read as an endorsement of ethnic nationalism, his identification with Vietnamese also advances an alternative, extranational form of belonging. His connection to the NLF is not so much grounded in a shared national-liberationist ethic but in their resistance to a government that seeks to either assimilate or eradicate them. Forced assimilation is, he suggests, its own kind of violence. As Lorena Oropeza writes of the Chicano movement and the Vietnam War, "[o]pposition to the war forced movement participants to break apart narrow conceptions of citizenship and national belonging that had privileged whiteness, masculinity, and military service" (82). Looking abroad to a country under attack by its own government, Chicana/o activists recognized the norms governing national belonging and one's right to execute legitimate violence.

Acosta's novel charts the transition from anticommunism to drug control as a mechanism for regulating these boundaries from the Nixon administration on. As Brown readies his defense of the East LA Thirteen—demonstrators arrested for organizing walkouts at underfunded schools in Chicana/o neighborhoods—he and his friends travel to the desert to blow off some steam and take acid. Brown takes solace in the fact that, in the desert, he is "twenty-five miles and two mountain peaks from Edwards Air Force Base" (65). Yet, as he and his friends are relaxing beside a lake, a landowner flies overhead in a small plane and shakes his fist at them. Soon thereafter, three men arrive in a motorboat and begin shooting at Brown, calling him a "fucking greaser" and telling him to "get the hell off" their land (69). Hallucinating, Brown stumbles backward from the lake and imagines a "giant black bird floating above my head" (70). It carries bombs and a thousand men. He throws rocks at the bird. He aims

to strike it “before it can drop those bombs on downtown LA and East LA and downtown Mongolia or Saigon or Haiphong or Quang Tri or Tooner Flats and Lincoln Heights or wherever Cockroaches live.” Brown’s hallucination connects the war against communism in Southeast Asia to the war against drugs in Los Angeles. His imagined black bird bombs the cities of East Asia and Southeast Asia and the Latina/o neighborhoods of California in one continuous run.

Drug control is one more instrument with which the state can rationalize its policing of Asian, black, and Latino bodies without acknowledging it as a form of racial and class violence. Without their own land, Brown and his friends face continuous surveillance, whether by the state or white landowners acting with the license of state law. Later, Brown oversees a coroner’s examination of a Chicano man who died in jail after being arrested “because he had heroin tracks on his arms” (110). Brown’s black bird enacts the state’s transformation of its anticommunist crusade into an antidrug campaign and indicates how one’s identification as an unredeemable communist or drug trafficker begins with one’s identification as Asian, black, or brown. Though Acosta imagines rather than stages these cross-racial connections, with Vietnam an abstract elsewhere and Vietnamese far-off and sometimes exoticized anticolonial comrades, his novel reverses what Colleen Lye identifies as the derivative and “analogical status of Asiatic racial form” in the United States, where Asian racialization is assumed to follow from anti-black and anti-Latina/o racism (1735). Instead, Reed and Acosta see in their government’s imperial war against Southeast Asians a way to conceptualize and condemn the policing of black and brown bodies in Harlem and East Los Angeles. Even as Acosta’s black bird may risk flattening the differences between Chicana/o and Southeast Asian racialization, it draws attention to the war-minded racial lumping performed by the Nixon administration’s law-and-order legislation.

Associating black and Latina/o communities with drug use also served to turn acts of collective resistance into individual acts of irrational behavior. When Brown first joins the Chicano movement, after moving from Oakland to Los Angeles, an organizer asks him what kind of cases he has handled. “Criminal. . . . Dope busts and such,” Brown answers (34). When the man asks why he hadn’t taken on more “political cases,” Brown insists that “every dope bust is a political event.” All drug trials are political, he argues, because they occur within a legal order weighted against working-class Americans of color. Acosta’s novel recognizes that, with liberal lawmakers and media recasting drug addiction as a disease, narcotics-related arrests

have emerged as an effective mechanism for delegitimizing the actions of such organizations as the Black Panthers and the Brown Berets. Whereas the law assumes the white landowner's innocence—it understands his shooting at Brown and his friends as a legitimate act of self-defense—Brown faces a legal order that assumes his criminal status and dismisses his behavior as irrational, the result of a troubled mind rather than a valid statement of dissent.

Acosta's novel interrogates the meaning of defense in an age defined by it. Echoing the Black Panthers, Brown runs for sheriff of Los Angeles County in 1970 and guarantees that, if elected, he would dissolve the office. (Acosta himself ran for sheriff, collecting half a million votes and finishing second to incumbent Peter Pitchess.) In a television interview with reporter Roland Zanzibar (based on famed journalist Ruben Salazar), Brown admits that he has little chance of winning. "My effort is an educational endeavor," he acknowledges (136): "The law enforcement officers of this county, of this nation in general, are here for the protection of the few, the maintenance of the status quo." Instead, he says, "I would have a People's Protection Department. I would enlist the aid of the community to find ways to protect ourselves from the violence of our society. Obviously, the answer is not more tanks, helicopters, and tear gas." The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) had added the motto "to protect and to serve" to all of its vehicles in 1963. Brown's insistence that police officers are a source of violence toward him and other working-class Americans of color challenges the universalism of that motto. Who is being protected? Who is being served? He suggests that the state's acts of defense at home and abroad don't extend to protect him. The LAPD sends "tanks, helicopters, and tear gas" into his neighborhood to secure the county's white, bourgeois communities from him and other "cockroaches." Brown's intention to dissolve the sheriff's office and form a "People's Protection Department" forces the reader to ask who is being defended and who is being defended against by the existing military and law-enforcement infrastructures.

In naming law enforcement as an instrument of racial violence, Brown argues that such violence should be understood as constitutive of, rather than a deviation from, the liberal legal order. When lawmakers discuss the death of a black or Latino man at the hands of a law-enforcement officer, they tend to see such events as an aberration or as the result of local human error, a violation of some institutional code. By contrast, Acosta's novel locates racial violence at the center rather than the outer limits of the legal order. As Dylan Rodríguez argues in his account of what he calls the prison regime, the modern

state functions through and because of its excesses and violations. “The state’s contemporary modality of power and enunciation—its statecraft—works through the constant exceeding of its announced material boundaries and juridical limits,” he writes (47): “Brutality, torture, and excess should be understood as an essential element of American statecraft, not its corruption.” Rodríguez shows that the state’s excesses aren’t excesses at all; they form the basis of the liberal state and its means of governance. One’s status as defended by the United States is made intelligible by bodies and social worlds that must be defended against. The existence of an institution undertaking “to protect and to serve” is founded on the idea that some deserve that service and others necessitate it. It must, Brown suggests, reinforce “the protection of the few, the maintenance of the status quo” because it has been forged through that uneven social order. The trouble with the drug wars is not only the misidentification of innocent black Americans and Latinas/os as criminals but the criminalization of blackness and brownness before the fact.

This criminalization was nothing new in the 1970s, as Reed and Acosta recognize, but built on centuries of colonial narratives about Haitians’ and indigenous Americans’ fitness for self-governance and a receding racial anticommunism. In his 1971 *Rolling Stone* article “Strange Rumbblings in Aztlan,” Hunter S. Thompson identified the fluid relationship between anticommunism and drug control as a rationale for the LAPD’s crackdown on the Chicano movement. Thompson first met Acosta in 1967 and later immortalized him in *Fearing and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) as the character Dr. Gonzo. On Acosta’s urging, Thompson traveled to Los Angeles to cover the aftermath of a massive antiwar demonstration in which a white LAPD officer killed Salazar with a tear-gas bazooka. After conducting interviews with local lawmakers and police officers, including Sheriff Pitchess and police chief Edward Davis, Thompson summarized: “The Anglo power structure keeps telling itself that ‘the Mexican problem’ is really the work of a small organization of well-trained Communist agitators, working 25 hours a day to transform East L.A. into a wasteland of constant violence” (36). These white lawmakers, he wrote, imagined a combat zone with “mobs of drug-crazed Chicanos prowling the streets at all times, terrorizing the merchants, hurling firebombs into banks, looting stores, sacking offices and massing now and then, armed with Chinese sten pistols, for all-out assaults on the local sheriff’s fortress.” Thompson was not a radical himself, but his article, like Reed’s and Acosta’s fiction, distilled the incoherence of the discourse of national defense in the Nixon years.

Local law-enforcement agencies, militarized through LEAA-funded training and gear, blurred the line between communists and drug traffickers, anti-Asian racism and anti-Chicana/o racism, the war over there and the war over here.

When Nixon declared his war on drugs two months after Thompson wrote these words, he may have been seeking to distract Americans from the war in Southeast Asia—a week earlier, the publication of the Pentagon Papers brought to light the secret bombing of Laos and Cambodia—but he also recalibrated it. The state refocused its war against illiberalism on alleged drug traffickers while targeting some of the same bodies, territories, and social formations it had earlier deemed communist. These wars occasioned a new kind of war novel through which such writers as Reed and Acosta reveal racial anticommunism and racial criminalization to be two stages in one unending war.

Notes

1. Reiss shows how, from the 1940s to the 1960s, the United States used economic sanctions, war, and international governing bodies to define the boundaries of licit and illicit drug trafficking. These boundaries, she writes, were “rooted not in scientific objectivity but in the political economy and cultural politics of US drug control” (10). Her research reveals how drugs functioned as a mechanism of social control as well as a way to create new markets for American drug manufacturers.
2. Whereas the rise of law-and-order rhetoric in the 1960s has been attributed to a white backlash to civil rights reform, Weaver suggests that it also stemmed from conservative elites’ efforts to redefine black civil rights as a crime problem. She theorizes these efforts as a “frontlash” in which “losers in a conflict become the architects of a new program, manipulating the issue space and altering the dimension of the conflict in an effort to regain their command of the agenda” (236).
3. Sociologist William Petersen introduced the idea of the Asian American as model minority in a 1966 *New York Times* article titled “Success Story, Japanese-American Style.” Petersen observed that Japanese Americans had a lower incidence of “social pathology” than other ethnic groups despite living in “neighborhoods characterized by overcrowding, poverty, dilapidated housing, and other ‘causes’ of crime” (40). Though Japanese Americans are “surrounded by ethnic groups with high crime rates,” he wrote, alluding to black communities, “they have been exceptionally law abiding” (21).

4. Afro-Asian connections have also been complicated in the United States by the treatment of some Asian Americans as so-called model minorities, a myth that, as Prashad observes, pits them against black Americans, “the model versus the undesirable” (x).

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