Retorik • Vol. 13(2), 2025
DOI: 10.24071/ret.v13i2.14229

Editorial

p-ISSN: 1412-6932
e-ISSN: 2549-2225

Cultural Studies after the End of the World?: Introducing Vol. 13 No. 2

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This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

—T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"

The present issue of *Retorik* was envisioned as the second installment of the special volume celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Graduate Program in Cultural Studies at Sanata Dharma University. While Vol. 13, No. 1—featuring a guest editorial by one of the founders of the Program, Dr. Stanislaus Sunardi[1]—comprises six articles from alumni of the Program who were invited to contribute, several articles included in this issue, Vol. 13, No. 2, are responses to an open call for papers circulated in April 2025. The theme of the CfP was: "Cultural Studies after the End of the World," or, in the Indonesian version, "*Kajian Budaya Setelah Kiamat*." Of course, what is meant by "the end of the world"—deliberately rendered with theological undertones in the Indonesian version, i.e., as "*kiamat*" (apocalypse) rather than the more neutral "*akhir dunia*"—merits some clarification.

The call for papers invited contributors "to consider the various meanings that the phrase 'end of the world' can have in the Indonesian context and to include reflections on the past, present, and future of cultural studies as a political-intellectual practice in Indonesia." But what relevance does the theme of the end of the world have specifically for cultural studies as an intellectual and political practice? Let us begin with the increasingly popular notion that the world is profoundly "disrupted" or even irreparably "broken." Climate change and ecological catastrophes rage on. Simultaneously, rapid advances in generative AI are having profound consequences on various facets of life,

[1] St Sunardi, "Rediscovering Resonance," *Retorik: Jurnal Ilmu Humaniora* 13, no. 1 (June 2025): v–xv, https://doi.org/10.24071/ret.v13i1.12865.

including communication, business, and, of course, higher education. It can hardly be denied that the so-called "rules-based" liberal international order of the post-Cold War era is being dismantled at the hands of the very power that had relentlessly pursued its original institution. "*Era Disrupsi*" is a popular buzzword in Indonesia, and a number of events and conferences have been organized around that theme in 2025. The fact that the expression has caught on perhaps attests to the particular intensity with which volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) are felt by many today.

The implications that these shifting conditions have for students of cultural studies in the Global South cannot be overstated. For example, the critique of Eurocentrism, it might be argued, inadvertently endows Europe with cultural, political, or economic centrality, whereas in truth, Europe increasingly is losing its place in the emerging bi- or multipolar order—one in which the very notion of the Global North, or that of the "West" that encompasses both North America *and* Europe, may well be obsolete. Slavoj Žižek, whose "leftist plea for 'Eurocentrism'" from the standpoint of the universal still remains provocative in today's bi- or multi-polarizing world,[2] has observed:

> A specter is haunting the world—the specter of Eurocentrism. All the powers of old Europe and of the new world order have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter: Farage and Putin, AfD and Orbán, pro-immigrant anti-racists and protectors of traditional European values, Latin American leftists and Arab conservatives, West Bank Zionists and Chinese "patriotic" Communists…[3]

In a global order in which power is distributed between the two poles in North America and East Asia, Europe can no longer be assumed to be a hegemonic center. This is why, today, the typical cultural studies presupposition of Europe as that which must be "de-centered" is oddly Eurocentric: it tacitly perpetuates the illusory sense of Europe as center.

Similarly, given the ongoing displacement of free markets by tech fiefdoms across the world, the critique of neoliberalism—part and parcel of the cultural studies reading list since its rise to prominence as a critical academic discipline in Thatcherite Britain—must now come across, at least to some,

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[2] Slavoj Žižek, "A Leftist Plea for 'Eurocentrism,'" *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998): 988–1009.

[3] Slavoj Žižek, "Fate No Longer Smiles on Europeans," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, Summer 2025, http://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-summer-2025--issue-no-31/fate-no-longer-smiles-on-europeans; see also: Slavoj Žižek, "A Leftist Plea for 'Eurocentrism,'" *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998): 988–1009.

as beating a dead horse.[4] The *modus operandi* of power, and therefore of resistance, is consequently undergoing transformations that potentially render previous conceptual frameworks inadequate. To put it succinctly: power has drifted far from what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri called "Empire," and resistance, from "multitude." Indeed, already thoroughly criticized by Marxists such as John Bellamy Foster and the late Samir Amin—the latter of whom opined in his incisive review of *Empire* and *Multitude* that the "political culture that stands out behind Hardt and Negri's discourse is that of American liberalism"[5]—the categories of Empire and multitude seem to be indexed to a bygone era of hyperglobalization.

What seems difficult to deny is that the relevance and force of intervention that cultural studies can hope to make depends on articulating new analytical perspectives. Not so much because such things as capitalism, hegemonic ideologies, commodification, colonialisms, control society, and various other traditional objects of critique have *ceased* to exist, but because the conditions under which they operate have radically changed. Because critique itself is a practice embedded in and conditioned by the very world shaped by the processes it critiques, radical shifts in material and social conditions necessitate a rethinking of the "grounds" of critique itself. It needs no reminding that thinking the grounds of critique is a topic that has occupied Frankfurt School Critical Theorists for many years, but also one that has been reignited by proponents of "postcritique."[6]

The shifting conditions of the present sketched so far serve as the broader context of the "end of the world." But the call for papers for this issue of *Retorik* placed particular emphasis on the intellectual trends that have gained influence in discussions of the Anthropocene in the humanities and social sci-

[4] For analyses of what arrives after the demise of neoliberalism and hyperglobalization, see: Yanis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (London: Bodley Head, 2023); Wolfgang Streeck, *Taking Back Control?: States and State Systems After Globalism*, trans. Ben Fowkes and Joshua Rahtz (New York: Verso, 2024).trans.

[5] Samir Amin, "Empire and Multitude," *Monthly Review* 57, no. 6 (November 2005), https://monthlyreview.org/articles/empire-and-multitude/. For Foster's criticism of Hardt and Negri, see: John Bellamy Foster, "The New Denial of Imperialism on the Left," *Monthly Review* 76, no. 6 (November 2024), https://monthlyreview.org/articles/the-new-denial-of-imperialism-on-the-left/.

[6] For a seminal essay of the postcritical turn, see: Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (January 2004): 225–48, https://doi.org/10.1086/421123.

ences. Despite leaving the interpretation of the "end of the world" open-ended, the CfP thus encouraged contributors to engage, "whether affirmatively or critically," with new materialism, object-oriented philosophy, and pluriversal politics.

The connection between the Anthropocene and the theme of the end of the world is likely familiar to many readers of this journal. A number of key theorists of the Anthropocene (some of whose ideas are discussed in several articles in the present issue of *Retorik*) have associated the affirmation of the Anthropocene with the supersession of presuppositions of modernist social and political thought, within which the reconstitution or "fixing" of a dislocated or broken world is regarded as the objective of utmost importance. These theorists argue that rather than attempting to reconstitute an anthropocentric world—the inevitable cost of which is the suppression of more-than-human relationalities—what must now be resolutely affirmed, amidst the various crises of the Anthropocene, is the thesis that there is no returning to a comfortable world, that the world really is a "perforated patchwork quilt" with no definite boundary between the human and the nonhuman, or between culture and nature.[7] For thinkers such as Timothy Morton and Anna Tsing, the "end of the world" is not a catastrophic event that is imminent but has yet to actually happen.[8] Rather, they assert that the end of the world—specifically, of the modern world—has *already* taken place, and they articulate our intellectual and ethical task as that of coming to terms with "living on in the ruins" of the onto-epistemological frameworks that had previously sustained our world-making practices.

The world ends not with a bang but a whimper. The anticlimactic end of the modern, capitalist world precisely was the prediction of "sober" leftists, such as environmental socialist Douglas Boucher and the often provocative, always insightful sociologist of capitalism Wolfang Streeck, who cautioned against the allure of leftist apocalypticism or catastrophism.[9] But if, as Ernesto Laclau observed in relation to postmodernism, discourses of the "end"

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7 Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017), 93.

8 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

9 Douglas H. Boucher, "Not with a Bang but a Whimper," *Science & Society* 60, no. 3 (1996): 279–89; Wolfgang Streeck, "How Will Capitalism End?," *New Left Review*, no. 87 (June 2014): 35–64.

often imply a new beginning,[10] then what kind of new beginning is suggested by the discourses of the end today? On the one hand, Streeck, diagnosing the demise of neoliberalism and the era of hyperglobalization, calls for a political retrenchment: a reaffirmation of the (democratic socialist) state and national sovereignty.[11] On the other hand, and perhaps closer to the concerns of *Retorik*, many posthumanists and new materialists propose that the end of the (modern) world opens up a pluriverse: *worlds* where humans are inextricably and uncannily entangled with the very nonhuman beings that anthropocentric constructions had hitherto relegated to the background.[12]

Let it be clear: I have no intention of dismissing the political, ethical, and philosophical proposals articulated by the abovementioned thinkers. Far from it, I often find myself inspired by thinkers of the Anthropocene.[13] Yet, I cannot help but feel that a truly novel political imagination has yet to transpire. Neither strengthening the nation-state form nor "living on in the ruins,"[14] neither a reinstatement of the human nor its supposed radical displacement, seems entirely satisfying as a response to declarations of "the end of the world." Is that… *it*? Maurice Blanchot's response to the Cold War era talk of nuclear apocalypse surely hangs on the lips of many who are acquainted with contemporary literature on the Anthropocene: "The Apocalypse is Disappointing."[15]

In fact, I am inclined to suggest that one way to approach the first three articles of this issue of *Retorik* would be to read them as studies in the "disappointing" imaginations of the apocalypse or post-apocalyptic futures. In "Whose Apocalypse? Unfuturability and the Politics of Settler-Colonial Futu-

[10] Ernesto Laclau, "Politics and the Limits of Modernity," *Social Text*, no. 21 (1989): 64, https://doi.org/10.2307/827809.

[11] Streeck, *Taking Back Control?*

[12] Rangga Kala Mahaswa and Min Seong Kim, "Introducing the Pluriverse of the Anthropocene: Toward an Ontological Politics of Environmental Governance in Indonesia," in *Environmental Governance in Indonesia*, ed. Annisa Triyanti et al. (Cham: Springer, 2023), 15–31, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-15904-6_2.

[13] See, for instance: Min Seong Kim, "Post-Marxism and the Pluriverse: Antagonism and Heterogeneity in More-than-Human Worlds," in *Posthuman Southeast Asia: Ecocritical Entanglements Across Species Boundaries*, ed. Ignasi Ribó (Lanham: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), 240–61, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781978748057.ch-011.

[14] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[15] Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 101–8.

rity in Western Apocalyptic Narratives," Stefanus Galang Ardana turns to films such as *Interstellar* and *Children of Men*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and the video game series *Fallout* to demonstrate how imaginations of post-apocalyptic future are always-already contaminated by the histories and ideological fantasies of the present.[16] The critical spirit of Zuhdi Siswanto's contribution is similar in kind to Ardana's. Rejecting the "after" of the end of the (modern) world imagined within discourses of the Anthropocene and pluriversal politics as ultimately a utopian construct that ignores structural antagonisms, Siswanto introduces the term "transapocalyptic" (*transapokaliptika*) to designate the continuous, rhizomatic network of crises that humans currently inhabit and normalize.[17] In signifying resistance toward imaginations of post-apocalyptic futures that repeat the violent foundations of the present, it might be argued that Siswanto's term performs a role comparable to that played by *unfuturability*—the signifier of Ardana's positive alternative inspired by strands of decolonial thinking, notably as voiced by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in their important intervention "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,"[18] and Black Feminism, represented by Christina Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman.

As the Indonesian anthropologist Geger Riyanto has stated apropos of *adat*-based[19] movements in his excellent article on Indonesia's rural space, indigeneity in Indonesia is "an ideology as much as it is a resistance gambit" against statist enclosure.[20] But while indigeneity and tradition—ideological as they may be—can be deployed by those at the marginalized peripheries

[16] Stefanus Galang Ardana, "Whose Apocalypse? Unfuturability and the Politics of Settler-Colonial Futurity in Western Apocalyptic Narratives," *Retorik: Jurnal Ilmu Humaniora* 13, no. 2 (2025): 159–90, https://doi.org/10.24071/ret.v13i2.12831.

[17] Zuhdi Siswanto, "Transapocalyptic: No Cultural Studies in the 'Post-Apocalypse,'" *Retorik: Jurnal Ilmu Humaniora* 13, no. 2 (2025): 191–225, https://doi.org/10.24071/ret.v13i2.13394.

[18] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (September 2012): 1–40.

[19] A word that could be rendered "custom" or "tradition," *adat* is commonly associated with Indigenous peoples in Indonesia. Worth noting, too, is that the modern Indonesian imagery of *adat* (indigeneity) has been heavily influenced by the Dutch colonial era legal anthropologist Cornelis van Vollenhoven and his disciples.

[20] Geger Riyanto, "Indigeneity as a Sphere of Differences: State Enclosure and Counter-Enclosure of Rural Spaces in Indonesia," *Anthropological Theory* 25, no. 4 (2025): 451, https://doi.org/10.1177/14634996251313825.

of the archipelago as a means of resistance, the Indonesian state and its ideologues, as is well known, have mobilized such ideas toward their own hegemonic ends.[21] This state ideological capture of indigeneity and tradition is arguably a cause of profound "disappointment" for theorists of the Anthropocene in Indonesia. In their contribution, entitled "Nusantara Philosophy of Post-Apocalypse," Rangga Kala Mahaswa and Gloria Bayu Nusa Prayuda present a critique of the nationalism, romanticism, and anthropocentrism that dominate the Indonesian academic discourse of *Filsafat Nusantara* (Nusantara Philosophy), whose devotees tend to expend their energy identifying and cataloguing traces of "local wisdom" in the archipelago's cultural artefacts (which, unfortunately, often passes as "cultural studies" in Indonesia[22]). By pointing to the deficiencies within what is widely considered as traditional imaginaries of the end times, however, the authors' critique—which builds on their previous work[23]—reaches further beyond simply state ideological capture of tradition. The example here is the Javanese millenarian myth of *Ratu Adil* (literally, "Just King"), traditionally popular among the oppressed (*wong cilik*) owing to the comfort offered by a narrative of a powerful savior that puts an end to social and cosmic chaos. For Mahaswa and Prayuda, however, the Ratu Adil myth is deficient in its promotion of only a passive waiting for divine intervention and for its reliance on an anthropocentric worldview.

Although not discussed by Mahaswa and Prayuda, a potentially interesting comparison might be drawn between the eschatology of the Ratu Adil myth and divine intervention as depicted in *The Eumenides*, the final play of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy. Divine intervention in *The Eumenides* does not consist in direct determination of and retribution against the unjust party by

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[21] For an analysis, see: Min Seong Kim, "Agonizing Pancasila: Indonesia's State Ideology and Post-Foundational Political Thought," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, advance online publication (October 2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2024.2408230.

[22] For a scathing criticism of typical Indonesian scholarly discourses on culture or *kebudayaan* from the Birmingham cultural studies perspective, see: Mark Hobart, "Cultural Studies and Everyday Life: A Balinese Case," *Jurnal Kajian Bali* 12, no. 2 (October 2022): 627–47, https://doi.org/10.24843/JKB.2022.v12.i02.p15.

[23] Including a collaborative work between Mahaswa and me on *Filsafat Nusantara* and the state ideological capture of the archipelago: Min Seong Kim and Rangga Kala Mahaswa, "The Nusantara Assemblage: A Manifesto for the (Re)Commencement of Indonesian Thought," *Proceedings of the Critical Island Studies 2023 Conference (CISC 2023)*, Atlantis Press, January 11, 2024, 13–19, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-186-9_3.

the gods. Instead, the goddess Athena, who arrives on the scene to interrupt the intergenerational cycle of blood and vengeance that drives the *Oresteia* trilogy, institutes a *system*, namely a court of law that, importantly, *functions independently of the gods*, wherein the opposing parties—the Furies (*Erinyes*) and Orestes—are given a fair chance to articulate their grievances before a citizen's jury. The institution of a fair system and common stage for the opposing parties eventually results in the transformation of the Furies, chthonic spirits bound by ancient law to hunt Orestes, who had killed his mother in order to avenge his father, into the "Kindly Ones (*Eumenides*)." If what is demanded by the Anthropocene and archipelagic thinking in the version defended by Mahaswa and Prayuda is "new forms of exchange and communication between humans and nonhumans that might ultimately give rise to [what Bruno Latour called] a 'parliament of things,'"[24] could *The Eumenides*, with its emphasis on the establishment of a more inclusive system of communication as the basis of a new "order," not be regarded as offering a closer approximation of the civilizational transition to post-anthropocentric pluriversality than the Ratu Adil myth?

The next two articles in this issue, "Not Victims, but Rhizomes: Choreographies of Migrant Body Resilience in Taiwan's Capitalist Ruins" by Anastasia Melati Listyorini and "Rights of Nature: Considering *Conatus Essendi* from the Perspective of New Materialism" by Eventus Ombri Kaho, appear to illustrate a more "positive" vision by mobilizing the theoretical perspectives opened by the Anthropocene, new materialism, and posthumanism. Listyorini seeks to challenge the dominant narrative that views Indonesian female domestic workers in Taiwan as passive victims of global capitalism. Even as they live in restrictive 3x3-meter dormitory rooms, migrant workers perform what Listyorini calls "choreographies of resilience," i.e., the use of digital platforms (TikTok) and embodied practices (the *sholawat* dance) to carve out spaces of survival, and perhaps even flourishing, at the margins and in the ruins of capitalist society.[25] Kaho, continuing his posthumanist reflections,[26] attempts to synthesize new materialist readings of Spinoza in support of a

[24] Thomas Lemke, *The Government of Things: Foucault and the New Materialisms* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 47.

[25] Anastasia Melati Listyorini, "Not Victims, but Rhizomes: Choreographies of Migrant Body Resilience in Taiwan's Capitalist Ruins," *Retorik: Jurnal Ilmu Humaniora* 13, no. 2 (2025): 268–91, https://doi.org/10.24071/ret.v13i2.13439.

[26] For Kaho's previous work also published in *Retorik*, see: Eventus Ombri Kaho, "Negosiasi Manusia dan Nonmanusia Pasca-Alih Fungsi Hutan

notion of rights that is contingent not on rationality or the capacity to speak, as has been the case in the humanistic philosophy of European modernity, but instead on the shared fragility of life and the drive to persist.

Any attempt to delineate the contours of something positive amidst the ruins of the modern world, however, is likely to be confronted by the inescapable persistence of the negative. The two articles by Listyorini and Kaho are no exceptions. While Listyorini's discussion closely follows the thematics of many of the theorists of the Anthropocene—*resilience* is something that has been deployed extensively, especially by theorists working at the intersection of Indigenous studies and new materialism[27]—it does invite the question of whether our very eagerness to find forms of resistance, to detect some silver lining in the ruins, risks complicity with the depoliticizing potential of discourses that valorize the essentially defensive ideals of resilience and adaptability. Should any politics worth its salt not aspire to dismantle the social-economic system that presents some with the opportunity to flourish in open—and offline—public spaces while others must attempt to find ways to live and flourish either online or in 3x3-meter dorm rooms? Discerning forms of agency and flourishing of migrant workers in the latter kind of space does not negate the tragedy of their absence from the former kind of space. But is it not precisely this disparity that motivates the popular construal of migrant workers as "victims" of an exploitative system?

Kaho's call for the expansion of rights likewise leaves aside the political question that is inseparable from the historical expansion of rights. One wonders, for instance, how the "conquest of rights"—i.e., the protracted, sometimes violent, *struggles* through which marginalized groups have historically established their freedom, political representation, and legal protection—would unfold in the case of nonhuman rights. In the history of the expansion of rights and entitlements to socially marginalized groups (workers, women, racial minorities, etc.), the latter were not passive recipients of rights bestowed upon them. Rather, they were *active demonstrators* of equality and belonging to the rest of the community. For this reason, the expansion of rights implied the interruption and potential dismantling of the inequality or hierarchy between an established "inside" and the "outside." While Kaho provides an argument for *human* consideration, he does not seem to adequately explicate

Bakau Menjadi Tambang Garam," *Retorik: Jurnal Ilmu Humaniora* 12, no. 1 (June 2024): 1–28, https://doi.org/10.24071/ret.v12i1.7501.

[27] David Chandler and Julian Reid, *Becoming Indigenous: Governing Imaginaries in the Anthropocene* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

the political agency of nonhumans to conquer rights. But if it ultimately falls on humans to extend or grant rights to nonhumans, does it not paradoxically confirm the supreme sovereignty of the human over the nonhuman—the former installs itself as the active giver of rights whereas the latter remains a passive receiver—rather than problematizing the hierarchy between the two? The result would be more accurately described as an augmented or inclusive humanism, rather than posthumanism.

"Any 'good' Anthropocene," Claire Colebrook writes, "would be possible only by way of countless injustices, just as what we think of as justice has occurred by way of a history of passed and erased thresholds."[28] Unsurprisingly, if there is one thing that the five contributions I have discussed so far collectively demonstrate, it is that *power* remains relevant for cultural studies at or after the end of the world, regardless of whether we consider the condition of the Anthropocene as "transapocalyptic," "post-apocalyptic," or in terms of "unfuturability." While the last three articles included in this issue—"Perhaps We're Already There: Observing Power Through the Postmodernist Dystopian World of *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*" by Aisyah Caesarani Maulida and Marti Fauziah Ariastuti; "Culinary History as a Form of Local Community Resistance Under the Shadow of Colonialism" by Yohanes Leo; and "Academia as a Cult: Knowledge, Power, and Abuse in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*" by Aisha Zahrany Putri Noor and Manneke Budiman—do not directly engage with the theme of the end of the world in relation to the Anthropocene or new materialist thought, they nevertheless provide analyses of power, and the related notions of domination and exclusion, in different contexts.

This issue of *Retorik* closes with a review essay, "Is the Anthropocene Enough?: A Critical Review of Donna Haraway's Multispecies Justice Idea" by Muhammad Fahmi Nurcahyo. In this substantive review, Nurcahyo provides a critical reading of one of the key texts in discussions of the Anthropocene: Donna J. Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.

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[28] Claire Colebrook, "We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene: The Anthropocene Counterfactual," in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 18.

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