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Inclining Mimesis: Continuing the Dialogue with Adriana Cavarero

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ABSTRACT

In this article, Adriana Cavarero and Nidesh Lawtoo resume a dialogue on mimetic inclinations in view of furthering a relational, embodied and affective conception of subjectivity that challenges *homo erectus* from the immanent perspective of *homo mimeticus*. If a dominant philosophical tradition tends to restrict mimesis to an illusory representation of reality, Plato was the first to know that mimesis also operates as an affective force, or pathos, that dispossesses the subject. While Plato tended to emphasize the pathological implications of mimesis, Cavarero and Lawtoo agree that both mimesis and inclinations go beyond good and evil and can be put to both pathological and democratic use. Picking up a dialogue started during a walk in New York City, Cavarero and Lawtoo, take their shared interests in Joseph Conrad's relating narratives as an occasion to discuss good and bad mimetic inclinations in contemporary politics and ethics. Joined in conclusion by the Gendered Mimesis team (Willow Verkerk, Isabelle Dahms and Giulia Rignano), topics addressed include new fascism, surging democracy, ethical responsibility for vulnerable others, hypermaternity and public happiness in a precarious world.

KEYWORDS

Adriana Cavarero; inclinations; mimesis; (new) fascism; ethics; surging democracy

This special issue of *Critical Horizons* was prompted by a dialogue on mimetic inclinations between Adriana Cavarero and myself in personal encounters in the physical world that started in 2017, first in New York, then in Verona, Milan and other places. As such, we thought of concluding the special issue that emerged from an online conference by continuing the dialogue in writing. Our shared goal? To join our distinct yet echoing voices once again, in view of continuing to incline mimesis towards future directions in the transdisciplinary field of mimetic studies relevant for online and, hopefully, offline worlds as well.

We thought that our privileged form of communication, namely the dialogue, remained particularly adequate to account for our relational subject matters, namely

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mimesis and inclinations. The dialogue is, in fact, a mimetic genre through which self and other speak in a first-person, direct speech addressing the uniqueness of the other, face to face, but also ear to ear, speaking body to listening body – and vice versa. A balanced dialogue based on a reciprocal and relational back and forth movement can, over time, and via relations of sympathy that are not based on fusions or confusions but on a *sym-pathos* (feeling together), generate a unique e-motion of thought. In the process, the affective and conceptual dynamic of such a dialogic e-motion can also begin to trouble, or blur, the ontological distinction dividing self and other, speaking subject and listening subject generating a relational conception of subjectivity we group under the rubric of "homo mimeticus".[1]

It could perhaps be objected that the dialogue is a literary genre more than a philosophical genre and is thus not adequate for theoretical or conceptual explorations. This is certainly an opposition that troubled the founder of mimetic studies (Plato) in abstract theory at the level of his philosophical logos as he expelled mimesis from the just republic (what he said). Yet as any reader of his dialogues knows, it troubled him much less so in his communicative practice (how he said it). In theory, Plato inaugurated the field of Western poetics in Book 3 of the *Republic* by stressing that mimetic genres like tragedy, comedy and in a mixed way, the epic, were at play in a still predominantly oral culture in which the theatre served as a privileged medium of mass communication and education.[2] In this oral, theatrical context, since poetry was staged and thus dramatized, actors or rhapsodes did not speak in their proper name. On the contrary, they "delivered a speech as if [they] were somebody else",[3] speaking under the mask of another, namely a fictional character or persona (mask worn in the theatre) whose body and voice they mimed, generating magnetizing illusory effects on the audience. Hence, as Plato set out to critique mimesis as an illusory shadow or phantom of realty in the famous "Allegory of the Cave" in book 7 of the *Republic*, he did so not only to anticipate his much-discussed idealist metaphysics that relegates artistic spectacles at three removes from reality. He also did so on the basis of his less discussed narratological considerations concerning the "enchanting", as Adriana Cavarero calls it, nature of mimetic speeches that generate a "collective hypnosis"[4] he had already sketched out in book 3. The origins of mimetic studies, in other words, start with a reflection on the genre of the dialogue – hence our choice of diction, or *lexis*.

The narratological origins of Plato's critique of mimesis are not often mentioned in textbook introductions to philosophy but are worth recalling in this context, if only because they overturn Plato's theoretical conclusion via a dramatic medium. Plato consistently privileged the dialogue in his dialogic practice, for many reasons, but perhaps also because he realized that the magnetic powers of mimetic inclinations internal to this literary-philosophical genre could be put to pedagogical use. As Pierre Hadot recognized, "philosophy consists in 'forming [*former*]', that is, transforming [*transfomer*] individuals. It does so by making them experiment the exigency of reason and ultimately the norm of the good via the example of a dialogue the reader has the illusion to partake in" (my trans.).[5] These are the transformative mimetic powers Cavarero and I seek to re-enact from the other end of the metaphysical spectrum. How? By inverting Plato's idealist theoretical evaluation of mimesis in view of affirming the immanent, embodied and affective powers of imitation in pedagogical practice. We do so for at least two theoretical and practical reasons. First, because Cavarero, in addition to being one of the most

influential feminist philosophers and political theorists writing today, is also a renowned classicist with a specialization in Plato, or to quote one of her first books, "in spite of Plato".[6] And second, because we spoke in mimetic speech already during the "original" conference, without relying on a predefined written text as a stable origin we would then simply reproduce or copy. It is thus this oral mimetic genre that, paradoxically, most adequately *re*-presents (presents for the second time) the so-called "original" dialogue we actually staged during the "Mimetic Inclinations" conference – a mimetic dialogue or dialogue on mimesis whose oral dimension we are now transcribing, or perhaps re-enacting on the written page.

Dialogues, it is also important to recall, take place in specific contexts, locations, or landscapes that deserve more attention than they usually receive in the dominant philosophical tradition. Traditionally relegated to the background of the human, all too human philosophical logos in the foreground, and treated at best as literary embellishments or decorations, background landscapes are never simply background. Rather, they provide the material conditions on which to stand, walk and lean on each other. The relational logic of mimetic inclinations is thus attentive to the dynamic interplay between the human and the nonhuman, *logos* and *physis*, bodies and matter, voices and echoes, calling for more attuned articulations between foreground and background. This is, again, a lesson that is already at play in Plato, if not in his idealist theory at least in his dialogic practice. The founder of mimetic studies, in fact, carefully staged his dialogues in specific settings – most of them in Athens but sometimes outside the city as well, as in *Phaedrus* and *Laws*. These settings, be it a public agora, a banquet, or a walk along a river, form, inform and transform the dialogic conversation in the foreground in a plurality of human and nonhuman ways that need to be carefully considered as well.

For this and other reasons, then, I set the stage for this continuation of a dialogue with Adriana Cavarero with a framing story, narrative, or to use a more ancient term, myth. It narrates our first meeting in a time and space that gave rise to the concept of mimetic inclinations. And it does so by foregrounding a specific city, polis, or metro-polis, prompting reflections on mimesis that are not singular but plural. Thus framed, the *dia-logos* that follows includes other feminist voices as well aiming to open up a space for a pluralist approach to mimetic inclinations for the future.

A Framing Narrative: *Heart of Darkness* in New York

The story does not start in an ancient European city like Athens or Rome – though that would have been closer to our origins. It starts in a city far from home, across the ocean, which is nonetheless close to Cavarero's heart: New York City, Manhattan, a few blocks from Central Park West Ave – Central Park (almost) in sight. The occasion of our first in-person meeting was an international conference at Fordham University hosted at the Lincoln Center I had co-organized in the fall of 2017. It was a particularly dark time to be in the U.S. in general and in that area of Manhattan in particular. A looming political shadow was difficult to ignore. The conference, however, was of literary rather than political orientation. It focused on crosscurrents at the juncture of "creativity and critique"[7] central to one of our shared narrative interests, or rather, passions: the Polish emigree, sea captain and modernist diagnostician of western horrors, Joseph Conrad.

We had not planned our talks to be in sync. Still, due to shared critical interests whose currents were already crossing, in order to counter the political darkness all around us, we both gravitated towards a Conradian text that continues to generate reflections on present horrors, including the horror of invasions: namely, *Heart of Darkness*.

For our narrative, let us simply recall that despite the proliferation of conflicting interpretations generated by Conrad's tale, which include problematic representation of race, gender and empire, *Heart of Darkness* attracted some of the most incisive critics and theorists of the past century – from J. Hillis Miller to Fredric Jameson, Chinua Achebe to Edward Said, Hannah Arendt to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe to, yes, Adriana Cavarero[8] – who, in their own singular voices, continue to cast a light on the present century. Cavarero and I fundamentally agreed that the horror, or, to use her concept to designate a violation of the uniqueness of individuation, the "horrorism" Conrad dramatizes in his novella is not only located at the heart of Africa via brutal practices of colonial exploitation and extermination characteristic of western "civilizing missions" in general and of Belgian colonialism in particular – the phrase is King Leopold II's. The darkness Conrad dramatizes at the heart of Africa reflects (on) the darkness all around Europe and western "civilization" more generally, stretching to cast a long shadow that was particularly palpable in the U.S., and especially in the corner of Manhattan in which we found ourselves.

That summer in New York, following Donald Trump's election and the rise of far-right movements in Europe and around the world, and with the shadow of Russia already cast under western eyes, Cavarero and I felt that the meaning, or rather the soundscape, of "the heart of darkness" was illuminated by the context all around us. It felt as if the text had anticipated political horrors to come. Interestingly, both our talks turned to address the power of leaders who are "hollow at the core", yet are endowed with a magnetizing "voice" and will to power to cast a spell over the masses by "electrif[ying] large meetings" on "the popular side".[9] This is not a post-World War II description of fascist and Nazi leaders that cast a shadow on Europe on the past century. It is, in fact, Conrad's account of mimetic horrors that, as Hannah Arendt also wrote, is "the most illuminating work on actual race experience in Africa",[10] which, among other shadows, anticipates both old and (new) fascist horrors in the present century.

To be sure, Conrad's narrative dramatization targets that enigmatic "shadow" or "phantom" par excellence who is Mr. Kurtz.[11] But since he also famously specifies that "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz"[12] the portrait applies to other hollow leaders as well. Consequently, Cavarero furthered Arendt's work on totalitarianism to give an account of "the soundscape of darkness" at play in the text, paying specific attention to the reverberating sound and voices to generate a plurality of horrors outside the text as well.[13] I furthered Lacoue-Labarthe's diagnostic of Kurtz as a subject without proper identity to account for the surprising emergence of (new) fascist leaders in the present.[14] Our perspectives were different, but our diagnostics were in tune: a duet on the relevance of Conrad's mimetic politics for the present, so to speak.

After giving our talks and exchanging ideas with other participants inside, we needed some fresh air. So, we went for a walk and continued the discussion outside. It turned out to be a long walk. With the benefit of hindsight, or delayed decoding, I can now see and hear that the trajectory of the walk through the city's landscape both reflected and resonated with our dialogue. As noted, we started on the West side of Manhattan, and as we

were headed East, we walked over a long shadow cast by an onymous tower. We looked up. And, just to remind us of the material reality of the phantom we had been discussing within academic walls, it turned out to be the wall of one of Trump's hotels, located at the West/South corner of Central Park, at Columbus Circle. This imposing vertical structure, with its fake golden inscriptions, made us uneasy; it redoubled a Conradian experience that was not limited to the confines of the text, let alone the historical past, but was all too visibly at work in contemporary U.S. political life, eroding the foundations of democratic institutions from within and generating instabilities across the world. To be sure, phallocentric leaders qua actors had been ridiculed as "hollow" just a year before and were not taken seriously by most political scientists, except some theorists and historians.[15] And yet, the phantom turned out to have had the power to "electrify large meetings" on the far right, after all, as Conrad predicted, and January 6 2021 made visible for all via a historical delayed decoding. At the time, we both registered the (new) fascust pathos, but we didn't linger on it or, rather, with it. For as we emerged from the shadow of Trump's hotel, we were already at the border of Central Park, and ready for a change of atmosphere.

I was beginning to wonder where we were headed for Adriana walked with a sense of direction and seemed to have a *telos* in mind. But in the ramifying paths of Central Park a plurality of possibilities opened up as we were enveloped by a different, more refreshing, energizing and happy public atmosphere. The undifferentiated noise of traffic was left behind the curtain of trees, and more pleasant sounds and voices were now audible: children happily playing, joggers and skaters keeping in shape, lovers holding hands, bikers and walkers speaking a multiplicity, or as Cavarero calls it, "pluriphony" of languages, not to speak of the vital breath of fresh air emanating from trees and enveloping us. This more natural environment was tempting but having reached the East side of the park, we seemed destined to keep walking. We were now heading south, passing restaurants and terraces that seemed good enough to me, but apparently not for Adriana. And then, suddenly, I saw a sign that gave me a clue. Central Park behind, it began to dawn on me that we were getting close to that other central location, locus of many encounters, real and fictional, rendered familiar across the world via the mythic medium of cinema: Grand Central Station – a place of arrival and departures which was, indeed, our final destination that day.

As we entered the building we could see and feel a denser assemblage of people passing by; a flow composed of different faces, and a plurality of voices too. The atmosphere was, once again, palpably different. We entered the pullulating station via its central lobby following the flow of people; we then diverged from the flow as we walked up the marble stairs towards the scenic terrace overseeing Grand Central. On the terrace, we found a table and finally sat down – with happiness and relief. The long walk had indeed been worth it, not only for what we saw but also for what we were now hearing. There, while we were resting, sipping coffee and continuing the dialogue, Adriana offered me a lesson in listening. Addressing me in the maternal language we share, she said: *ascolta* [listen]. And so, I listened. There was a buzzing, vibratory yet (in)distinct sound, difficult to describe and not very clear. No, not very clear, but I heard it, and felt it too. And then the author of *For More than One Voice*, added: *questa è la voce della pluralità;* this is the voice of plurality.

I narrated this story in some detail – beginning, middle, and end, so to speak – because, in more than one way, it provides a frame, or perhaps a map or soundscape, for the dialogues Adriana and I have had over the past years on the polarized subject of "mimetic inclinations",[16] which we continue to pursue. The conceptual polarity at play in mimetic inclinations was already reflected, or rather, dramatized in the polarity of the different, often conflicting inclinations in the background that connected, like a guiding thread, the orientation of the walk I foregrounded.

In its most schematic delineation, this background which is not one but multiple, stages a conflict, or agon, between verticality and horizontality that results in an inclined orientation. On the side of verticality, the beginning started with our shared concerns with authoritarian leaders that rely on the power of myth for the worse to cast a hypnotic and contagious spell on the masses and are constitutive of what I call "(new) fascism" and Cavarero calls "the voice of the mass".[17] On the side of inclinations, a surging potential of a multiplicity of unique voices that preserve a distance from fusional pathos and is constitutive of what Cavarero calls, in *Surging Democracy*, the "voice of plurality" and I call "patho-*logies*".[18] Both books appeared in 2019 and are genealogically entangled; among other influences, they bear the traces of our dialogic encounter. Part of the same walk, they articulate different, or rather, opposed ends of the political spectrum as they are attentive to both the pathological and patho-*logical* sides of mimetic inclinations. It is our belief that the patho(-)logies of mimesis, in both their (new) fascist and democratic aspirations need to be rethought with an eye to the present and future as well.

Dia-*logos* Resumed: Mimesis, Mass and Plurality

Nidesh Lawtoo [NL]: I would like to frame the continuation of our dialogue in the space between the polarities of (new) fascism and surging democracy that our walk already traced. Let us imagine our walk had taken a different, perhaps less geometric route, that we lingered in the meandering paths of Central Park where new connections with human but also nonhuman forces are possible. This space was designed as a contribution to public happiness for New Yorkers and tourists to breathe, including during a pandemic crisis. However, if we take a genealogical detour, the name Manhattan (*manaháhtaan* place for gathering wood to make bows) reminds us that it was previously inhabited by Indigenous people, a primordial forest to gather wood, perhaps to make bows and other tools. The Indigenous peoples who endured European horrorism through settler colonialism genocide were inclined, through traditional cultural practices, to listen to nonhuman forces via non-anthropocentric perspectives that are now regaining traction in the epoch of the Anthropocene. As anyone who has walked through Central Park immediately senses, this human space has a much longer genealogy that is rooted in nonhuman natural forces still operating in streams and levigated rocks that bear the traces of previous geological ages. Those majestic prehistoric rocks emerging from the ground below also sustain the human constructions above. They will be there long after we are gone. And the non-human life of a park (streams, fish, birds) is vital for human happiness, relations and public encounters. So, let's imagine we are back in Central Park, a liminal space between the voice of the mass we linked to (new) fascist movements and the voice of plurality characteristic of surging democracy, with an eye and ear open to inclinations that go beyond all too human boundaries (good/evil; nature/culture) as well.

In this context, we can pick up the mimetic thread we started discussing in the introduction: you are interested in joining forces with mimetic studies to reframe a dominant Platonic conception of mimesis traditionally restricted to a stabilizing ontological mirror that is speculative, disembodied and reassuring to *Homo erectus*. Contra, this dominant tradition, you expressed your interest in a second, less-known, and in this sense minor notion of mimesis qua *homo mimeticus* linked to sympathy, understood in its original mimetic meaning of *sympatheia*, *sym-pathos* (feeling with) that entails a shared, and thus relational pathos. As you know very well, "*pathos*" is a difficult Greek word to translate. It is linked to *penthos*, to sorrow, and plays a key role in tragedy, but it is not restricted to tragic emotions alone. As the classicist E. R. Dodds pointed out, *pathos* is a "force that takes possession" of the subject generating ecstatic, enthusiastic states that, as you say in *Inclinations,* "bend the ego and dispossess it"[19] for good and ill, generating both pathologies and what I call "patho-*logies*",[20] that is, *logoi* on *pathos* that preserve a degree of distance and uniqueness while paying attention to the shared pathos that inclines us towards others.

Do you think this pathos is, if not explicitly, at least embryonically, already at play in your notion of inclinations opening up the possibility to qualify them as mimetic inclinations? I ask the question because Hannah Arendt is one of your main sources of inspiration in your work. There are, indeed, many continuities between your thought and Arendt's take on uniqueness and plurality, storytelling, relationality, and birth, all of which are constitutive of the *vita activa* as you both theorize it contra the abstractions of the dominant philosophical tradition. At the same time, you seem much more sensitive to the register of affect or *pathos* than Arendt. For instance, you often start thinking from what is audible rather more than what is seen. You have a very acute "speculative ear" that renders you sensitive to the unique sounds and voices. And when I read you, I also hear differences in your attention to the register of pathos. You mentioned in one of our previous dialogues that Arendt is not the ideal person to turn to develop a "phenomenology of emotions".[21] But in your recent work like *Inclinations,* and even more explicitly, *Surging Democracy,* you are pushing with and against Arendt in the direction of *pathos* central to mimetic studies. So, could you give an account of your specific interests in mimetic pathos that starts with Arendt but also goes beyond her in its attention to the affective and embodied side of plurality, voice, happiness, maternity, or other phenomena that you find relevant to further the positive powers of mimetic inclinations – be they good or bad or both?

Adriana Cavarero: Thank you Nidesh. You are my brother, the brother I don't have: a brother in philosophy. And yes, I remember very well our walk and dialogue on the way to Central Station, well before the Covid-19 pandemic. As you know, I am very interested in your discourse on new fascist mass and the magnetic contagion of the leader, and I think that there is now in the time of pandemic a particular linguistic and conceptual confusion between affective and viral contagion or pathologies as you call them. Regarding your question, I think that mimesis, or rather, mimetic inclinations, is a good concept to approach the question of togetherness; it's a phrase used by other contributors to this special issue as well, so let's use it. Traditionally politics has been conceived in terms of power, not the Arendtian but the traditional notion of power and of government consisting in taking power and governing people, or disciplining people. This was, and still is in my view, a strange mistake. I learnt from Arendt to think of politics in terms of

relationality, of an interactive being-between, that entails a distinctive form of togetherness. This togetherness is not the same as other ways of being together, because we could be together if we are friends, if we are lovers, if we walk together and we work together. Indeed, it is a special form of togetherness, a political form of togetherness in which we experience a peculiar emotion that Hannah Arendt calls, of course you know, "public happiness". Yet, in revisiting Arendt's very important notion of public happiness, I try to approach it from a different perspective: namely, I call for a different way of crossing the issue of togetherness as public happiness, joy, and plurality by focusing on voices instead of on visibility alone. I think Arendt is very Greek in her thought – ancient Greek – because she focuses most of all on visibility: the public, for her, is something under the light where we can see each other and we are freed from the obscurity of our private lives, so that we can eventually feel the happiness of being together and appearing to each other. You know all this Greek vocabulary of visibility because it is central to the dominant translation of mimesis as representation you're up against. I think it is interesting to focus on the same programme, the same issue of togetherness by using the topic of voice, primarily because the voice is very emotional. This is why, as you also know, Plato was so afraid of vocal performances, of poetry, of epic, of singing, because our voice is absolutely linked to the bodily dimension of human being, something that we share with many animals, non-human animals and something that expresses emotions, which the algid order of ideas opposes.

There is a very interesting connection between mimesis, togetherness and voice. I have a question for you, actually. In my opinion, by focusing on voice more than vision, or to use your terms, mimetic *pathos* more than mimetic representation, we can distinguish different political forms of togetherness. On the one hand, the fusional togetherness of the crowd, of the mass, in which we find the masculine, sovereign and populist leader. This scenario is very dangerous for the human condition of uniqueness because, in the case of the mass, individuals are fused and merged in view of constructing a huge, impersonal subject whose voice is a voice in unison, which is the contrary of the soundscape of plurality. On the other hand, the emotional soundscape of plurality is extremely difficult to describe. Namely, while it is easy to describe something dealing with the visual field, this is not the case if we try to describe something dealing with the phonetic field, with the oral field that is not visible and is only audible. But it is interesting to try to analyse this specific emotion. I'd call it a democratic emotion, the emotions of being together, the emotion of participating without losing your embodied uniqueness.

My question to you is: if there is a mimesis, or a mimetic inclination, do you see the possibility not for a fusional mimesis but for a mimesis that underlines or expresses the joy of togetherness, preserving uniqueness? My point is that, if we could speak of a politics whose fundamental kernel is togetherness, we could speak also of political emotions, of soundscapes filled with political emotions without running the risk of being absorbed in the fascist, or new vocal fascist crowd which is not a togetherness but, rather a fusion – a fusion waiting for a leader – I'm quoting Arendt, but we could also quote Conrad. On the other hand, it is important that, if we speak of togetherness as a plural relationship of unique beings who experience the emotion of joining in a public space, we highlight the horizontal dimension of this joining, opposite to the vertical one which characterizes the link between the mass and the leader. The very beginning of democracy, the nascent phase of what I call "surging democracy", entails horizontality: the concept of plurality

itself entails horizontality. In the other case, that of the crowds, of the masses, the leader is already there towering on the people because he is the voice that solidifies or amalgamates it in one vocal subject.

Nidesh Lawtoo: Indeed, this is a part of that conversation we keep returning to as a *leitmotif* in our dialogic walks. You touch on the Janus-faced aspect of mimetic inclinations that is easier to theorize through the distance of vision than through the *pathos* of voice, and I agree with you that we need to theorize the differences between the two to avoid confusing mass and plurality. This is why I started by situating our dialogue in the visual space of our walk that clearly marks the opposition between fascist fusion on one side and pluralist togetherness on the other. It's definitely easier to see the verticality of Trump Tower and all it stands for symbolically (phallocentrism, antidemocratic power, identification with one leader, etc.) and take critical distance from it. As Conrad also notes, and we both stressed it back in New York in 2017, this mimetic fusion can be triggered by vision but also by voice, at least if the voice of a leader has the power to electrify meetings and crowds generating (new) fascist insurrections we have all seen and heard on January 6 2021, for example. The possibility of a fusional (new) fascist mimesis is a dangerous reality to which we are both attentive. On the other side, a different form of mimetic *pathos* also operates in the horizontal space of togetherness where mimetic inclinations relate to subjects with a shared emotion that does not exclude uniqueness and distance but rather preserves it. Again, at the visual level, it is easier to see or theorize (from *theōría,* "contemplation, looking at"): in a train station, for instance, people assemble, come together, but without fusing because they have individual trajectories of their own to follow projecting them towards unique destinations. So, I agree with you that it is very important politically to set up a distinction between a mimetic inclination that is not one but Janus-faced: it can be vertically absorbed in the pathos of the leader on one side, and it can oscillate between shared emotion and individual uniqueness, *sym-pathos* and distance, on the other. This tension, or oscillation, is in many ways at the heart of the theory of *homo mimeticus* I tried to propose.

With respect to the role voice plays in this distinction between mass and plurality, pathos and distance, I think your ear is unique in the history of philosophy. I mean this in the sense that you listen with a speculative ear not only to philosophical and literary texts as you do in *More than One Voice*, but also to the plurality of voices at play in public spaces outside the text, as you stress more recently in *Surging Democracy*. I don't have your ear; nobody does. Still, I share that attention to different forms of affects at play via rituals, dance, singing and music, which can indeed open up a different way of being in common that does not culminate in a fascist fusion. So, for instance, in *The Phantom of the Ego*, with the help of Nietzsche's ears, which are also very sensitive ones, after critiquing fascist fusion, I ended with an account of a community that is held together by shared laughter. The shared experience of laughter is first and foremost heard, or rather, felt, more than seen. It is a shared affect or pathos that is not necessarily based on exclusion or scapegoating but can open up an inclusive horizontal feeling of togetherness that does not erase the distance of uniqueness – each individual laughter is, in fact, distinct. This could be an example of a mimetic pathos that contributes to what you call, after Arendt, public happiness, but there are many others at play in concerts, peaceful marches, and festive communal gatherings. So, I find this distinction not

only between verticality and horizontality, but between different voices, the one of the mass and the one of plurality very useful to articulate the opposed Janus-faced sides of mimetic inclinations. There are indeed different affects mediated by them that make all the difference between what I call a pathology with its violent fusion, and a patho-*logy* with the ability to preserve a distance between self and others while sharing an emotion.

My fear is that the line dividing the two patho(-)logical sides, even when voices are at play, could be very thin, more like a tenuous dash between *pathos* and *logos* than the physical space dividing Trump Tower from Grand Central, to revert to our landscape. My fear is that the voice of plurality expressed during peaceful protests, for instance, can always potentially turn into the voice of a mass. Conversely, there might be diversity or uniqueness in people attracted to new forms of fascist fusion via the distance of new media, for instance. The realm of mimetic emotions or *pathos* is very messy, and often escapes neat conceptual oppositions in practice. I can see why Arendt tended to steer clear from them in her account of the *vita activa*. This is one of the reasons I felt the need to supplement a conception of *vita mimetica* that engages more directly with the sphere of emotions calling for the pluralism of mimetic studies. I fully agree with you that in order to engage the question of being together or in-common, we cannot exclude or scapegoat emotions altogether. Public emotions are the magnetic *pathos* or power that brings us together, via myth and poetry in classical antiquity, as you also show in your work on the Muses in minor Platonic dialogues, as well as via public marches and demonstrations, which as we have seen during the pandemic can remain peaceful if animated by a pluralist democratic pathos. My sense is that the specific character or *ethos* of the affect or *pathos* that animates a collective, say, at a concert or at a rally, is what makes the decisive difference between what you call the voice of the "mass" and the voice of "plurality", though a democratic *ethos* can perhaps also lead to forms of fusional enthusiasm that, because of the affect in question, remains peaceful, respectful of otherness and democratic oriented.

I have no ready-made solutions to the patho(-)logical problem of mimetic inclinations that each call for situational and contextual analyses. I can thus only agree with you that, in addition to vision, an ear for affective distinctions is absolutely crucial in politics to distinguish a different ethics that traverses them. Each context, then, requires a specific analysis of the ways in which mimetic pathos bridges the gap between self and others, for good and ill. My sense is that in our dialogues we replay a pathos of distance[22] with respect to the fusion/individualism problem that provisionally and productively connects on the problematic of relationality and togetherness, which also concerns ethical responsibility. It seems to me that your resistance to fragmentation and fusion stems from a political concern I share. At the same time, this openness to affects is also inevitably entangled with an ethical concern to rethink the relation to others by taking seriously the power or pathos of emotions.

And so maybe I throw you back a different but related question. Can you imagine a form of responsibility that is based on uniqueness but since this uniqueness is relationally inclined and mimetically open to the outside from the very beginning – that is from birth or, actually, even before birth as the fetus is in a fusional relation with the mother – this uniqueness remains entangled with others at a very deep affective level? Following figures like Pierre Janet and, more recently Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, I argue that it is

because of this constitutive relationality with significant caring others (what Janet calls *socius* to designate the mother but also parental figures, and later friends, teachers, lovers...), it is beacause of this relationality in childhood that we remain open to affect in adulthood as well. So, what I feel when I'm part of a collective or a plurality is a change in my body, a visceral response to faces, voices, sounds that extend the *sensorioum* of *homo mimeticus* to the outside, often unconsciously so. This physiological transformation is once again rooted in a pathos that connects without necessarily fusing, though an ecstatic fusion is always a risk, or possiblity to become other. So can you think of a responsibility that relies as much on a unique subject, a "who" that is distinct, but at the same time is also in a horizontal relation of affective communication that problematizes that very uniqueness, that renders it fluid, to use a metaphor that already emerged in relation to birth, for instance.

Adriana Cavarero: Yes. You saw a central problem in my position. I think it is a general problem, and it is the problem of the transition from ethics to politics. I think Levinas has the same problem, a very serious one in Levinas, actually. In fact, it is not difficult to speak of responsibility at the level of ethics. You respond to the other, as Levinas would say, to the face of the other with a unique face. He or she is a unique human being. And I'm responsible for you and I must respond to your ethical demand – I agree with Levinas; his intuition is profound. Ethics is not rooted in the I or, as you say, in the ego. Ethics, radical ethics, is rooted in the presence in the face of the other, specifically the uniqueness of the other. So, the first praxis, the first gesture of ethics is to respond to the other and to preserve the other in his/her uniqueness.

If we now turn this discourse into the field of politics, the topic, however, is more problematic. It is much more problematic because, as you said, but also in different articles in this special issue, plurality is not something static. Plurality is fluid. It's a particular togetherness in which you are in proximity with other people. But people change in this web of proximity. So, there is this fluidity. To be responsible – this is what I suggest – is to respond to the standards of fluidity and to the dynamic situation of plurality. I mean: to respond to the other is fundamental for being ontologically a plurality. If you cancel the uniqueness of others, you risk turning plurality into a crowd, into a monolith subject.

So, it is true, as I said before, that we enjoy a natural, a spontaneous emotion in participating in politics as the interaction of a plurality. But this emotion, which we have to preserve, is not enough. You have to care so that this emotion can be experienced also by future generations. You have to care so that institutional powers don't close or oppose spaces of participation. Public happiness "happens" when spaces of participation, through public demonstration, gathering and manifestation, are not barred by totalitarian institutions. In other words, you are responsible for the future, maybe not for your future, but the future of others. You are responsible because you must respond to that. This, however, doesn't fully resolve the problem because the concrete effort of constructing democratically affordable institutions, as Arendt knew too well, is a very difficult further problem. On the other hand, if you think that politics can be confined to the realm of institutions, you are outside what Arendt calls politics and I call surging democracy. So, the enterprise is hard: at least, as political theorists, we must think about the construction of institutions that preserve horizontal responsibility towards the other and so preserve the possibility of a plural participating joy, of public happiness.

Of course, this is an extremely difficult issue. If it is relatively easy to speak about it, it is very, very difficult to engage in analyses of the actual status of democratic institutions, especially in a global scenario. This is why, many years ago, by quoting Arendt, I spoke of politics of the absolute local. In my opinion, the quality of politics – if we intend politics in terms of plural interaction – is linked to locality, to people who are present in a physical space. It is just the contrary of the fantasy of a global government, the government upon all the world. Think, for example, of the banalization of the neoliberal notion of economy and markets. Something that functions everywhere, which is globally effective. I think that when we think globally, we are wrong, we are wrong politically. If we want to preserve the responsibility inherent in democracy, we have to think of democracy locally. Actually, I think that what is particularly convincing, in Arendt's idea of the political, is her stress on spatial proximity, if not the "face-to-face" physical contiguity of an interactive bodily plurality. Her original and indeed radical version of politics as participative democracy entails a space that is physically shared, in which those present appear to each other, through words and deeds, and in so doing exhibit their uniqueness and their capacity to begin new things, the two characteristics already apparent in each newborn. Put another way, through interaction in a shared space, the plurality of embodied uniqueness acquires a political status that calls on the material, territorial dimension of democracy. What I mean with "locality" deals precisely with this dimension.

You often mention the hypermimetic role of the media, and I want to know your opinion because you are a specialist in that area. In this new kind of fascist mass, taking to the streets and squares, and demonstrating against the government mandate for the pandemic in Italy – but I know it is the same in Berlin for example – the central flag is "freedom, freedom, freedom". The issue is twofold. On the one hand, this is true in Italy, there are far-right individuals, organizations leading demonstrations where the slogan is "freedom, freedom". You remember what Arendt said about the revolution when the crowds were crying "bread, bread" and Arendt comments: you can start a political revolution crying "bread, bread" because bread pertains to your biological self, the body. On the other hand, I think that nowadays in a time of pandemic crisis we have to give a thought to this neolanguage which is rooted in the modern concept of freedom, because it is individual freedom. So, my question is: do you think there is a magnetism and attraction which is part of the modern political lexicon of freedom. I am always surprised to see how no-vaccine masses led by far-right organizations are crying for individual freedom, which is the French revolutionary vocabulary in our tradition.

Nidesh Lawtoo: Yes, this is a good example that illustrates that troubling indeterminacy internal to the powers of mimesis, which I group under the rubric of mimetic patho(-)logy. Depending on the context, a liberating slogan traditionally linked to democratic and egalitarian movements, such as "freedom", can indeed be co-opted by the far-right, which puts it to pathological political use. This can be done by playing on the neoliberal myth of the autonomous, independent, and absolutely "free" subject *contra* the regulating powers of the state that, during the pandemic crisis, had to restrain freedom of movement for logical medical reasons, but also resurrected the phantom of the "state of exception". While abusees of political control can be legitimately critiqued from a philosophical distance, as has been done by Italian philosphers, the myth of the "free individual" without responsibility for others except himself is so affectively rooted in neoliberal,

consumer-oriented societies that it can be effectively appropriated by far-right media and politicians in order to trigger, hypermimetically, an affective response of indignation that, especially in times of crises, spreads contagiously, thereby amplifying the risks of viral contagion. Hypermimesis is the concept I use to account for the efficacy of new media to disseminate hyperreal simulations online that can be injected with any content, including far-right, neo-fascist content masked under the democratic rubric of "freedom" or "national greatness," which in turn retroacts on the embodied and mimetically inclined dispositions of *homo mimeticus*, often for the worse, but again, not deterministically so depending on the logos and pathos the media mediate.

In a way, *Surging Democracy* also struggles with this difficult problem of how to distinguish between democratic and anti-democratic movements and the types of emotion or pathos they mobilize. What I find distinctive in your analysis is that you engage the problematic of mimesis, or mimetic *pathos*, from the angle of public happiness as well. There is a utopian, revolutionary drive in this book, which I think is important for the future. This leads to another question which has to do with inclinations and the postural geometry you suggest. And it's a naive question. Someone who comes across your work for the first time might sense a tension between the fluidity of emotions and dispositions you see in works of art, on one side, and your attention to abstract geometrical figures. Geometry is a very precise, visual science with universal aspirations that seems far removed from the uniqueness of the works of art and the voices that your ear is attentive to. You mentioned the importance of Foucault to think about a certain system of verticalization in discursive forms of power, and I understand the need of providing an alternative posture to *homo erectus* since *homo mimeticus* shares that goal. Since you devote a chapter to Plato in *Inclinations*, I was wondering if he is also part of the picture because he was obviously also very interested in geometry as a model for philosophy.

To formulate the question differently and specify it: I was wondering if there is a form of what I call mimetic agonism in your confrontation with Plato. Mimetic agonism is not the same as mimetic rivalry for it does not lead to violence and scapegoating. On the contrary, it is a form of intellectual confrontation entailing thinking both *with* and *against* predecessors in productive ways. As you also show, when Plato is confronting Homer, he is not simply opposing Homer; he is also mimicking Homer by adopting some of his literary techniques in order to better oppose him. I call that mimetic agonism and I find it central to a plurality of intellectual relations that push the history of philosophy forward. So, I was wondering if the idea of taking the Platonic science of geometry to challenge *homo erectus* may be part of your larger agonistic confrontation with Plato, which is also a mimetic inclination with a difference since you destabilize the abstraction of geometry by turning to paintings, narrative, and other mimetic simulations Plato fears, condemns, and excludes from the *polis*.

Adriana Cavarero: Oh, yes, I have a mimetic inclination for Plato. I have admiration for Plato. And so, of course, I appreciate very much his distinction between geometry and philosophy when he puts geometry as the last step to learn philosophy. He has a positive idea of geometry, a positive idea of *episteme*, of science. To be frank when I deal with geometry as a postural geometry, a postural disposition, I don't have in mind only Plato but most of all Foucault and his analysis of modern *dispositifs* of verticalization, which doesn't mean that I forget the fact that there is a science that we call geometry,

an exact science, universal in its way. But we are dealing in history with applied geometry, applied science of geometry. Think for example, of a city, of the map of a city, to go back to our walk. What struck me is that in applied geometry it is not only a question of constructing an urban world or figure, or of positioning buildings and volumes like in architecture, but also a question of constructing relationships, forms of dependencies. And you cannot even imagine dependency if you organize your construction on a vertical axis. If you put a vertical axis, there is no dependency. I mean, there is dependency in the form of hierarchy. Alternatively, in the form of the vertical leader, the image you mentioned at the beginning via Trump Tower stands in for the leader towering over the population like in the famous cover of the Leviathan by Thomas Hobbes. If you think of a reciprocal dependency, or even better of unbalanced dependency, of a web of dependencies, you have to think not in terms of verticality, but of inclination. Anyhow, this is the way I engage with geometry in order to frame – ontologically, ethically and politically – the human body as a relational body. It is true that geometry is abstract. As Plato points out, geometry deals with ideas because it is universal, abstract, visible to the mind. And if you apply geometry or if you interpret it in terms of geometry of the human condition, you have a special applied geometry.

Let me insist on the issue of the body. We were speaking of squares crowded with people, or Central Station overflowing with people. To be more precise, we should say they are crowded with bodies. And the body has a geometrical posture or, rather, different geometrical postures. Think of the role of the body in the political imaginary of the West; for example, think of the cover of Hobbes' Leviathan we quoted above. Besides, let me note that even dancing is a geometry, a living geometry: dancing deals with the emotion, pleasure of constructing figures with the body, geometrizing a rhythmed space with bodily lines. I believe that the pleasure of dancing, typically of ritual dances, presents us with a sort of universal emotion. Actually, if there is something universal, something humans share beyond the obvious uniqueness of each body, it could be the human body. I mean by this that the postural fluidity or capacity of having different postures of the human body, which can be resumed in the pleasure of dancing.

I'm not an expert but I think that this pleasure is very similar to the pleasure of hearing and the pleasure of vocally participating in a pluriphony. Recently I had the opportunity to reflect again on the myth of the sirens, a topic that has always fascinated me. I was impressed by the fact that, already in Homer, the sirens are described from the perspective of the listener, whether this be Odysseus, who manages to enjoy their song without succumbing to them, or whether this be the various sailors who, attracted by the irresistible voice of the sirens, have gone to their death on the rocks. In other words, since Homer the tradition concentrates its attention on the one who listens and feels immense pleasure in listening, while nothing is said about the pleasure the sirens themselves feel in singing. But we could tell the story differently. Actually, if the myth were recounted from the perspective of the sirens, it would be precisely their pleasure that would come to the fore. We could then describe the sirens as creatures who excel in enjoying the bodily emotion of emitting a voice and thus expressing materially, physically, sonorously their uniqueness and plurality. As you see, I am very interested in the topic of plural emotions at the present.

New Beginnings: Hypermaternity, (Non)Human Life and the Future

Nidesh Lawtoo: Yes absolutely – I can see and, above all, hear it. And that's also how theories of mimesis that incline subjects towards others, as Aristotle points out in the *Poetics*, originate, namely, in dance and ritual. This genealogy is still audible in the etymology of mimesis that goes back to the *mimos*, the actor, but also the performance we took as a starting point for mimetic studies. It brings us back not only to where we started but to positive, relational and communal mimetic inclinations that are perhaps at the origins of culture and being in common more generally.

As we located our dialogue in an imaginary walk in Central Park, I have one last question that has to do with the relation between humans and the non-human. Be they dancing, walking, or singing, human bodies do so in relation with nonhuman forms of life as well, which add a material touch to mimetic inclinations rooted in life as a productive force, *pathos,* or power more generally. In your recent work, you are developing the concept of "hypermaternity" and I was wondering if you could tell us in which direction you're taking it. How far down into the materiality of life are you willing to take, or rather, incline the (hyper)maternal subject. Nietzsche would say it's an untimely concept given the constructivist approach to gendered and sexual identities dominant in contemporary feminist philosophy. Can you say something about the ethical, political, or, perhaps, ontological implications of this new concept you are currently developing?

Adriana Cavarero: I'm just trying to ponder on our material relationship with the living world and, particularly, with the biosphere. I think it is important to rethink the relationship of the human animal with non-human animals and with the environment more generally, with the living planet. As many others, I think that the main risk today concerns the question of the environmental crisis. There are gradations in our relationship with the world, and we have to think about how we are human animals who are in touch, outside and inside ourselves, with non-human animals and the infinite life we are made of, and are complicit with. I mean that, as human animals, and as mammals, what we share with nonhuman animals is the direct experience of life as a process. And I think that we cannot develop a serious discourse on the environment without taking this complicity with life process seriously into account. Of course, all people admit that we are human animals. But it is not enough to admit that; we have to think of ourselves as human animals in concrete terms. Let's say as responsible animals who are part of a greater expressions of life in its multiple manifestation.

I believe that the topic of maternity is interesting in this sense because the experience of giving birth, or the experience of pregnancy, is a case in which a singularly embodied human being, by generating another embodied singularity, experiences in her own body the working of the process of life. It is a form of knowledge, more precisely, a special and uncanny knowledge of how life gives always itself in the singularization of the flesh, that is, in the form of a singular body. There are, of course, many troubles, at least, many feminist troubles, in engaging with topics like maternity, pregnancy, abortion and the like. At the moment, I am focusing on these issues not from an ethical point of view but from an ontological-material one. And I don't know exactly where I'm going to land, but this is my beginning, my very beginning. By now, I am working on texts by Simone de Beauvoir, Clarice Lispector, Elena Ferrante and Annie Ernoux, as well as on hyper-maternal figures in the mythological tradition.

Nidesh Lawtoo: We are delighted to hear this beginning surge forth *in status nascendi*, so to speak. Now I would like to pass the word to some of my team members, starting with Willow Verkerk, Isabell Dahms and Giulia Rignano who have three last questions that might resonate and/or follow up on this new beginning.

Willow Verkerk: Many of your points in your dialogue have already answered my questions, but one question that I have has to do with *homo erectus*. In *Inclinations* you provide a robust critique of *homo erectus*, which is extremely helpful for analysing the androcentric subject of modern European philosophy. I was wondering if you could speak to some of the ethical, political or ontological consequences of the anti-mimetic tendencies of *homo erectus*.

Adriana Cavarero: Oh, yes. I think that for answering I would have to reconstruct all the history of philosophy, at least in the western tradition. I always speak of the western tradition because it is the only one I know. It's not universal; it is my perspective – the one I studied. My short answer would be that *homo erectus*, the sovereign subject is a belligerent and violent subject. Because at the very beginning of the picture there is the figure of his isolation. You can have many vertical subjects, but they are individualist, isolated. And I think it is difficult to speak of peace, of non-violence beginning from a discourse or picture dominated by the vertical subject. So, I think that our fight for dismantling the vertical subject is the fight for non-violence, for constructing an imaginary of non violence. And this is where I meet Judith's Butler's discourse and I agree with her. I mean, we have similar aims. Maybe we have a different way of reaching the goals, but this is where our efforts resound at the moment.

Isabell Dahms: You emphasized throughout the importance of the given. And I was curious if you could say a little bit more about this given. For instance, how does history or social historical context fit into your understanding of the given? Is there already something continuous, performative or mimetic within the given?

Adriana Cavarero: The given is the one point that Hannah Arendt mentions in *The Life of the Mind*. We could also call it data or factum, something that you don't construct, you don't decide; it is something that you are not in control of and that is part of the condition of the human animal. We are not in control of our animal lives. You can dream of a rationality in control of itself. You can dream a little bit, of course, even if it is not true, it is a phantasy. But you cannot dream of being in control of who you are and of your bodily consistence. You cannot dream of controlling it as you are not in control of *who* you were born. This is given. For example, in my opinion, the fact of maternity, I mean, the fact of being born from a mother, is a given as well. So, this is what you have to make sense of. And this operation of making sense of it is ongoing; you cannot give it a definitive sense. There is no definitive sense. This is our effort of giving sense, of signifying – this is the current word – of signifying the given. But the operation of signifying is repetitive, is going on and on, interminable. And this is why history and also philosophy, or the history of thought, the history of society, the history of politics deal with questions that pass from generation to generation. Because there is no generation that gives the definite significance, or definite sense to what is given. What is given and the significance of the given is something each generation engages with, something of the past transmitted to the next generation. The endless work of human history as far as humans, as Arendt would say, have an appetite for meaning.

Giulia Rignano: My question follows up on the conclusion of your answer to Isabell's question. It is linked to Rosi Braidotti's definition of your methodology "of theft" as a strategy of mimetic repetition. And since I won't stop to think about "mimetic inclinations" since it concerns my Ph.D., I would like to ask you if you could say something more about that and about what kind of mimesis you see at play in it, perhaps in relation to temporality.

Adriana Cavarero: Yes, maybe we could conclude on this issue. I think that there is no way of escaping mimetic repetition. We are mimetic animals – there is no way to evade it. But on the other hand, this mimesis is not static; it is dynamic. There is an evolution. There's a past, the present and the future, and everything is changing rapidly. If it wasn't for changes in repetitions, we wouldn't be human, we wouldn't be human animals. What is peculiar to the human animal is to be a mimetic animal, given, driven by repetition, but also capable of inserting a change in the process of repeating. And this is what is called culture – all that you could call language. So, in my opinion, research has to find the connection, the equilibrium between repetition and the insertion of change in the process of repetition. For justifying language, culture, art. How could you have an art? Art is mimetic by definition. But how could you have art if art were only mimesis restricted to repetition? And this is something that Plato understood. But something that for him was very disquieting because it dealt with *il divenire*, with becoming, and he was not fond of becoming. He was fond of static objects. But repetition is interconnected with becoming. So how can you ever have a mimetic repetition – going towards a perennial becoming? This mimetic becoming is culture.

Notes

1. See Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus.*
2. See Plato, *Republic*, 392c–393c; Havelock, *Preface to Plato.* ch.2.
3. Plato, *Republic*, 393c.
4. Cavarero, *Platone*, 143, 142. See also, Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus*, 69–92.
5. Hadot, *Philosophie*, 118 (my trans.).
6. Cavarero, *In Spite*.
7. GoGwilt, Harrington, and Lawtoo, *Conradian*.
8. For a volume on *Heart of Darkness* and contemporary thought, including theorists like J. Hillis Miller, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, see Lawtoo, *Conrad's* Heart of Darkness; for Cavarero's engagement with *Heart of Darkness* see Cavarero, *Horrorism,* 116–124.
9. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 58, 72.
10. See Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 185–186. See also Lacoue-Labarthe, "Horror."
11. I first discussed the link between mimesis and fascist horrors in Conrad's novella in Lawtoo, *Phantom of the Ego*, 130–141, Conrad's Shadow, 129–171.
12. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 50.
13. Cavarero, "Soundscape,"
14. Lawtoo, "Conrad's Mimetic."
15. For initial exceptions see Snyder, *On Tyranny,* and Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism*.
16. Cavarero and Lawtoo, "Mimetic Inclinations." This dialogue took place one year after, in Verona, but it bears the traces of the walk in New York.
17. Lawtoo, *(New) Fascism*; Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, ch.5.
18. Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, ch. 6.
19. Cavarero, *Inclinazioni*, 16 (my trans.).
20. See Lawtoo*, Phantom of the Ego*, 6–9.

21. See Nidesh Lawtoo, *Feminist Politics*.
22. I take this concept from Nietzsche to indicate a tension between individual distance and openness to pathos. While Nietzsche and Arendt are unlikely companions – not only because of the former's fascist misappropriations but also for his aristocratic politics – my sense is that in our dialogues, Cavarero and I take steps to bringing, in our own voices, their perspectives on mimesis in implicit dialogue as well.

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