

DANCE AS PROTOCOL:
SOCIAL CHOREOGRAPHY IN ELITE WASHINGTON, 1920-1940

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In the early twentieth century social dance played an important role in communal activity. In the aftermath of World War I and as the United States struggled through the Great Depression, both the elites and the working class moved away from established practices. Americans had a new fascination with dance during the Progressive era as people contested issues of identity through bodily discourse and this interest carried into the 1920s.¹ Dance halls, which had long been a place for the working-class and ethnic communities to gather, drew the interest of elite society who wanted to explore “socially marginalized urban neighborhoods and the diverse populations that inhabited them.”² This exploration manifested itself in the nightlife. Known as “slumming”, the upper class flocked to the jazz cabarets, speakeasies and nightclubs, spurring “the development of an array of new commercialized leisure spaces that simultaneously promoted social mixing and recast the sexual and racial landscape of American urban culture and space.”³ Beginning in New York City, this trend spread to almost every major City in the United States.⁴ The practice, which could be traced to a century earlier, contained very different motives in the 1920s. While in the mid-nineteenth century men explored lower class areas to feed their curiosity and women remained at home, in the early twentieth century men and women together chose to interact with the socially marginalized to escape the demands of high society and break free from family constraints.⁵ Upper class whites reevaluated the roles of blacks in

¹ Linda J. Tomko. *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20-21.

² Chad Heap. *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2.

³ Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife*, 2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

Lewis A. Erenberg. *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1980-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), xi.

society as they grew to appreciate and adapt black music and dance.⁶ In the *New Yorker* in 1925, Ellin Mackay, daughter of an affluent and powerful Long Island family, wrote that she and her friends preferred the more loose structure of black cabarets to the exclusivity of parties with a fixed group of people.⁷ Democratization trickled into music and dance as the upper class grew increasingly fascinated by the practices of the lower class.

Middle-class participation in slumming activities increased as they turned to distractions such as music and dance. The desire to escape monotonous professions over which they had no control drew the middle-class men to black nightlife. They hoped “to partake of the happy-go-lucky and joyous spirit supposed to be inherent in the Negro soul.”⁸ Middle-class women strived to escape the “sterility” of modern life by participating in what they associated as the primitive customs of black culture.⁹ They believed exposure to these activities would allow them to break out of their sphere and broaden their influence in society. A female undergraduate student told sociologist Walter Reckless that during her first visits to an integrated resort in Chicago she hesitated, but eventually the lively orchestra drew her to dance with her white male partner. She recalled, “I lost my old self in the delight of perfect freedom and movement. A Jewish boy with a nice face pressed his lips to those of a mulatto girl who was his partner. They danced on and on, their lips and bodies pressed together.”¹⁰ Young white women, Jewish men, and “mulatto girls” came together under the same roof as music and dance dissolved the boundaries between racial groups.

⁶ Erenberg. *Steppin' Out*, xiv.

⁷ Ibid., xi.

⁸ Ibid., 194.

⁹ Ibid., 195.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Dance marathons also characterized the scene as black dance and music rose in prominence in American culture. Dance marathons were events where male and female couples danced together performing fast paced and high energy dancing for extended periods of time with the couple who danced the longest winning a prize. In his 1993 book *Dance of the Sleepwalkers: the Dance Marathon Fad*, Professor of Psychology at Union College Frank M. Calabria explored dance marathons from social, literary, and cinematic views in order to explain the motivation behind this activity.¹¹ He argued that the dance endurance contests were a therapeutic device that allowed individuals to experience freedom.¹² Dance marathons held some structure, but generally brought participants together and gave them the opportunity to experiment with movement with no inhibitions. The common interest of dance brought people together and allowed them to mingle with another despite their differences.

Social dances rooted in black culture replaced those influenced by European traditions as upper and middle-class Americans interacted with all races in urban nightlife. The Original Dixieland Jass Band (ODJB) brought New Orleans-style brass band music to New York in late 1916.¹³ Inspired by black and white brass bands in New Orleans prior to World War I, five men formed the group to bring music with greater syncopation and improvisation to the cafés and dance halls in the North. The musicians duplicated animal sounds with their instruments, and the ODJB introduced wild, unstructured music that quickly took root and became known as jazz.¹⁴ Jazz music gave dancers more room for personal expression and higher energy movement, and as a result they increased the speed of their dances. New social dances such as the Swing, the

¹¹ Frank M. Calabria, *Dance of the Sleepwalkers: the Dance Marathon Fad* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993).

¹² Ibid., 3.

¹³ Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 250.

¹⁴ Ibid., 250-251.

Lindy Hop, and the Jitterbug emerged, and these styles demanded the dancers personal expression and improvisation. These dances and the jazz music provided an outlet for unique demonstration and a melding for different cultures.¹⁵ Most importantly for those seeking escape from structured life and movement, this phenomenon provided freedom. New popular venues opened and became famous as these styles brought people together at dance halls and nightclubs.

One of the most popular jazz venues, the Savoy Ballroom, provides an important snapshot of racial diversity in dance. In her 1983 *Dance Research Journal* article “Swinging at the Savoy,” Barbara Engelbrecht gave a short history of the Savoy Ballroom to articulate how the Lindy Hop defined the Savoy Ballroom.¹⁶ The Lindy Hop was a dance that emerged in Harlem in conjunction with jazz music. Whites attended the Savoy Ballroom to dance and watch the black dancers, so they began to perform acrobatic movements to impress their white audience.¹⁷ Engelbrecht’s article incorporated the role of both dance and music to show how they are both crucial to understanding the Savoy. She added the perspective of musicians who performed at the Savoy to further explain the nuances of the dance. Most importantly she analyzed the dance contextually to gain full understanding of the functions of the movement. “The Lindy Hop must be remembered within its context—Black Culture, the Depression, and the Savoy Ballroom. It is a product of its time—perpetually astonishing to those who watched it and those who danced it.”¹⁸ Activities at the Savoy showed how dance provided distraction and freedom to its participants. It allowed for artistic exploration and brought people of many different working class and poor backgrounds together around a common enjoyment.

¹⁵ Erenberg. *Steppin’ Out*, 251.

¹⁶ Barbara Engelbrecht, “Swinging at the Savoy” (*Dance Research Journal* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 3-10).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

Engelbrecht's article is an important example of how to look at genres of social dance, and speaks to the actions of the public in New York City. The scene at the Savoy Ballroom while representative of the general American scene contrasts greatly with the dance in Washington.

The challenges of daily life increased Americans' desire for change. In the 1920s Americans were disillusioned as they moved away from the devastation that had defined their recent past. Business flourished and the automobile and radio changed the lives of the working class.¹⁹ The dance industry prospered during this period as "social dancing was also one of the very few legal opportunities for nighttime recreation or entertainment."²⁰ With the influx of jazz music and new dance styles increased the public's desire for dance and thus the availability of venues. This triggered an intense debate about morals as anxiety over racial and class integration led to a strong backlash. Community leaders pushed for federal regulations of all leisure activities to reform the country.²¹ They believed that commercialized leisure and the dancing that was taking place threatened the harmony of society by encouraging liquor consumption.²² The government guided dancers away from dance halls feeling that these venues would counteract any progress in countering the leisure that some believed contributed to the Depression. For the average American however, "leisure had become a symbol of democracy and hope for the future."²³ Most Americans flocked to the dance halls, as they became the center for leisure activity. Others pushed for reform arguing that these practices led to sin. For the

¹⁹ Ralph G. Giordano. *Satan in the Dance Hall: Rev. John Roach Straton, Social Dancing, and Morality in 1920s New York City* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2008), xi.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xi.

²¹ Susan Currell, *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 29.

²² Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife*, 47.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

most part the reformers were unsuccessful as the dancing continued, providing average Americans with a distraction that brought many people together for the first time.

In Washington, DC, the elite members of society hesitated to accept these new social dance forms. This thesis examines protocol of official society and how social dance fits into the practices of the upper class in Washington in the 1920s and 1930s. I argue that despite most Americans eager embrace of new social dances, the role of dance in white elite society in Washington, DC did not change. Washingtonians continued to follow strict protocol in order to maintain their status and to help further their political careers.

Dance at formal events was about presentation and it served as an auxiliary activity that complemented the event rather than serving as the reason for the event itself. All generations learned how dance fit into the intricacies of protocol and the importance of presentation. While the younger members of the upper class had a little more freedom as they began attending dance halls, proper etiquette detailed that their actions remain just as structured as they would be at official events.

Washington provided a new look into the social dance during this period because it is unique, not representative. Not all the elites were involved in political life, but those that were formed the exclusive and very powerful official society. I focus on the official society, or the politically connected elites, because this group held immense power not only in Washington, but also for the entire country. Elites provide a unique window into how social dance can be used to form exclusive bonds, complicating theories about the democratization of dance during this period. Hoping to preserve a changing social order in cities all over the country, elite Washingtonians held fast to their values in the period between World War I and World War II.

Defining the Function of Social Dance

Recent scholars have conceptualized social dance as separate from other dance forms because it serves such a unique purpose and have advocated for increasing scholarship on the subject. Social dance is a dance form where socializing is the most important function. People dance to spend time with one another, rather than to entertain an audience like in concert dance.²⁴ It is a necessary form of expression and holds much more than just entertainment value. Julie Malnig, a cultural historian of theatre and dance performance and editor of the book *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy, Sham, and Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, argued that social dance is hard to define “it is constantly in flux. New forms spring up; others disappear; and what may have been considered elitist in one generation, in the next may become “popular” or widely heralded.”²⁵ Malnig believed that that social dance is necessarily “popular” dance, which is contested by scholars. But it is this flux that makes dance social; it changes with the trends of the time and speaks to the values of the participants. Malnig argued that the history of the study of concert dance, its choreographers, and dancers is extensive while there has been very little study done regarding social dance.²⁶ Like the “great man” approach, the “greatest moments” approach has been applied to dance, and much of the more inclusive and widespread dance trends have not been specifically examined except sometimes briefly as a side note to studies of musical periods.²⁷

Recent scholarly interest in the study of dance as its own discipline has enabled historians to critically examine social dance as a social and historical practice. Literary critics Ellen W.

²⁴ Julie Malnig, ed., *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy, Sham, and Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

Goellner and Geraldine Shea Murphy wrote that social dance was “[l]ong viewed as unintellectual, intuitive, and uncritically expressive”²⁸ Scholars in different fields analyzed social dance in studying other work, but rarely focused on the movements themselves. Dance sociologist Andrew Ward acknowledged that while this is no longer the case, it is important that scholars do not put too narrow a framework on dance studies.²⁹ Anthropological, sociological, and historical approaches are germane to specific dance forms and it is important to consider all. Ward wrote to spark discussion in hopes that inquiry would continue to increase, for as important a place as dance holds in life, it is addressed only marginally in discourse.³⁰

Scholars became more interested in studying social dance as they sought to understand the complexities of racial integration in dance. In the 1980s as dance historians looked to examine the origins of current dance forms such as hip-hop, they realized that they were unable to understand hip-hop without analyzing the influence of African dance as well as jazz dance and music. Most of the currently emerging concert and social dance forms demand that writers look back and study the roots of the style in order to understand the movement. cursory studies of specific social dances excited dance historians and scholars now understand the importance of examining social dances in their historical contexts. Sally Banes, for example, a dance critic studying hip-hop culture found that she was not able to understand the dance form until she combined her research of the origins of the movement with an anthropological approach she gained through immersion in the Bronx.³¹ While many scholars do not have the opportunity to

²⁸ Ellen W. Goellner, and Jacqueline Shea Murphy. *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 3.

²⁹ Andrew Ward. “Dancing Around Meaning (and the Meaning Around Dance)” in *Dance in the City* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997.), 19.

³⁰ Ibid., 19.

³¹ Sally Banes. “Criticism as Ethnography,” in *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 24.

immerse themselves in other cultures, they know that cultural and historical contexts are crucial to understanding the context of a social dance. Banes' historical perspective allowed her to study the trends in social history that contributed to the melding of dance and music traditions to form hip-hop dance. Because social dances are produced and developed by the people, understanding the history of a group helps determine their motivations. Using historical, social, and anthropological perspectives when analyzing social dance helps scholars separate its significance from other dance forms.³²

Scholars and dancers discuss the purpose of dance in different levels of function and different disciplines disagree about the function social dance provides. First function dance is when the dancer herself experiences emotion from participating in the activity. Second function dance is when the dancers perform so that an audience experience emotions.³³ Malnig and Ward argued that is important to recognize "social and popular dance both as an *experience* of movement and as 'a form of life or as a way of being.'" ³⁴ Ward argued that we should not approach social dance as if it has a message to reveal like in concert dance and "[to] do this we must recognize that dance enables us to access a different plane of experience that is in itself meaningful, where this meaning is continuous, diffuse and pervasive."³⁵ For Malnig and Ward meaning in social dance arises from the experience of participation in the action itself.

Anthropologist Anya Peterson Royce disagrees with Ward, arguing that the meaning of social dance is found in the larger context. She asserted that examining the values of participants is the key to analyzing these activities and an anthropological approach is necessary in order to understand what dance does for the body. Royce distinguished "between dance which is

³² Malnig, *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy, Sham, and Shake*, 3.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ward, "Dancing Around Meaning (and the Meaning Around Dance)", 3.

³⁵ Ibid., 18.

essentially an aesthetic activity and dance which serves some other function as well” because it is an integral component of human behavior.³⁶ She believed, as with all aspects of human behavior, it is important to observe from a culturally relevant perspective. Determining the significance of dance in a cultural scene requires that scholars remark on the participatory nature of the activity.³⁷ Royce argues:

One of the most universal functions of dance is to provide diversion or recreation. Occasions that are primarily social and recreational in nature usually stress the general participation of all who attend, with the additional stipulation that they enjoy themselves. This being the case, it is not surprising that the dances associated with these occasions are simple enough to be learned easily and performed without taxing either the mind or the body. Were they otherwise, they would defeat the recreational purpose.³⁸

Royce echoes Ward’s discussion that there is inherent meaning in social dance, but they disagree as to where the meaning stems. While Ward believed that the dancer’s experience is most important, Royce believed that the simple and recreational attributes of social dance fuse it with everyday life and create an inviting atmosphere that speaks to the values of a group of people.

The historical interpretation of social dance is key because it shows how intertwined dance is with everyday life. Combining what these scholars argued about the function of social dance, a proper analysis of a social dance includes examination of both the experience of dancers and the context in which these practices are taking place. These layers of experience are what really separate social dance from concert dance. In her book, *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, dance scholar Jane Desmond took Malnig, Ward, and Royce’s discussions a

³⁶ Anya Peterson Royce. *The Anthropology of Dance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 5.

³⁷ Ibid., 15-16.

³⁸ Ibid., 81.

step further to pinpoint what examining the history of movement in this way can tell us about society. Desmond argued, “Movement style is an important mode of distinction between social groups and is usually actively learned or passively absorbed in the home and community.”³⁹

Dance trends are continuously changing, but examining one moment “signals group affiliation and group differences, whether consciously performed or not.”⁴⁰ When isolating a moment however, we must be careful not to analyze a dance style as a distinct entity because dances are interconnected with each other and ways of moving are pertinent to the contextual history.⁴¹

Desmond began to touch on the questions that scholars must ask when examining dance. They must explore what types of movement are considered appropriate, who can perform, and who has the power to determine who is allowed to participate. Scholars must ask who dances, when, where, and with whom. What are the conditions behind these dances, and equally as important, who is not dancing and why? Desmond wrote:

By looking at dance we can see enacted on a broad scale, and in codified fashion, socially constituted and historically specific attitudes toward the body in general, toward specific social groups’ usage of the body in particular, and about the relationship among variously marked bodies, as well as social attitudes toward the use of space and time.⁴²

These questions frame a study that focuses on historical significance of dance while still taking into account the cultural roots of social dances.

A discrepancy among scholars lies in their definition of who can participate in social dance. One very important distinction that Malnig makes is between social dance and folk dance. She believed that social dances often create communities whereas folk dances take place

³⁹ Jane Desmond, ed. *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 31.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 32.

in homogenous preexisting communities.⁴³ Again she feels that social dance is “popular” dance and therefore crosses racial and class barriers rather than remaining in an established group. Malnig concludes her argument by emphasizing that social dance is not considered to be high culture; rather it is popular because it is for all. While there is opportunity for some people to be more proficient in dances than others and more skilled dancers sometimes perform in a concert setting, fundamentally social dance is not an exclusive form.

This idea is critical when examining what kind of community was formed during the 1920s and 1930s and what groups it drew from. In many of the major cities of the country, social dance spread through the classes as upper and middle class citizens explored new nightlife. But I disagree with this limited approach to the study of social dance and this thesis offers a perspective on an exclusive group of high culture individuals who participated in dance together. The social dance that elites practiced in Washington did not permeate classes. The exclusivity of the group encouraged social functions as the upper class held onto the strict form of specific social dances to fit their protocols. The dances that they practiced would not be considered “folk” dances by Malnig’s definition because while they applied to a specific group, where people came together for the primary purpose of socializing. Therefore studying elites in Washington offers a new look into a group whose dancing was not democratized during the 1920s and 1930s. Strict protocol prevented new practices from entering the sphere, and the upper class continued to value social dances at their events, hoping to preserve their social order.

Protocol in Elite Washington

What makes the practice of elite Washingtonians so intriguing is the stark contrast they present with the rest of the dance scene. While the majority of Americans explored dance in the

⁴³ Malnig, *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy, Sham, and Shake*, 4.

lower class nightlife, upper class Washingtonians clung to protocol and their established dance traditions because rules and precedents created a tight, virtually impenetrable elite circle that clearly denoted who was part of the group and how they should act. John F. Simmons who served as the Chief of Protocol for the Department of State described protocol as “the body of accepted practices which has grown up among the nations in the course of their contacts with one another...It plays an important role in carrying out a successful foreign policy.”⁴⁴ The protocol that they followed pertained specifically to those involved in political life. Elite society in Washington was official society, and it consisted of those who held office in the political sphere: the President and his cabinet, the Vice-President, Senators, Congressmen, Supreme Court Justices, Diplomats, and their wives. It was necessary that they understand and adhere flawlessly to etiquette. In his 1954 book *A Handbook of Conduct in America and International Circles: Etiquette and Protocol*, I. Monte Radlovic, a retired British army officer, described how American behavior code, developed from European influence and practices. As a British army officer, he had participated in British army protocol and its influence on American practices. Americans selected and melded European traditions to create their own code pertaining specifically to the Washington political scene.⁴⁵

The behavioral code that developed in Washington served to establish and facilitate amiable relationships between people and other countries. Radlovic opened his book with an article published in *The Diplomat* in 1954 by Simmons. In order to achieve a relationship with

⁴⁴ John Simmons quoted in I. Monte Radlovic, *A Handbook of Conduct in American and International Circles: Etiquette and Protocol* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1956), x.

⁴⁵ Although Radlovic published his book later than the period this paper addresses the other primary sources corroborate, indicating that there was not a significant shift in protocol from 1920 to 1950. See Vera Bloom. *There's No Place Like Washington* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1944) and Edith Benham Helm. *The Captains and the Kings* (New York: G.P. Putnam Sons, 1954).

other nations, the protocol began at a basic level with the placement of words on invitations and extended to how guests proceeded from drawing rooms to dining rooms at parties and danced with one another. Simmons quoted political science scholar Graham H. Stuart who wrote, “experience has shown on many occasions that these procedures have a very definite proved value and that a reckless disregard for them can lead to serious consequences.”⁴⁶ Mistakes made in the public sphere resulted in instant repercussions and if someone blamed a misstep on the fact that she was unaware of a practice she would be shunned. Protocol delineated the clear roles of both men and women. For example a woman’s lack of knowledge of whom she should walk behind when moving from the drawing to dining room at a party was considered oversight and reflected extremely poorly on a her image. Negligence detracted from one’s reputation among peers and determined invitations to future events. If a congressman incorrectly asked a woman to dance at a ball or failed to attend an important event, while his rank would not change, he would jeopardize his ability to compromise and work with his peers on legislative matters. “[T]here is no appeal from highest authority: the decisions of the chief of protocol at the State Department. Where he says you rank, you rank; and at a dinner party, where he says you sit, you sit.”⁴⁷ Protocol allowed couples to build relationships, and thus adherence to the system constructed political rapports and maintained reputations.

Individuals entered the political social scene through election or appointment, and at the moment of their arrival in Washington their fellow elites expected perfection. The complexity and unique nature of the events made adjustment taxing. Entrance into the scene required that individuals instantly ingrain the behavioral code into their everyday lives. Vera Bloom moved from New York City to Washington when her father was elected to the House of Representatives

⁴⁶ Radlovic, *A Handbook of Conduct in American and International Circles*, xii.

⁴⁷ Vera Bloom. *There’s No Place Like Washington* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1944), 12.

in a special election in 1923, and upon first arriving observed that she and her mother needed to quickly learn the intricacies of the political scene to establish their family and then maintain their image.⁴⁸ Bloom published in memoir in 1954, but wrote for the most part about her experience in the 1920s through 1940s. Her perspective is particularly important because she experienced the elite social scene in both New York City and Washington. She made the transition reluctantly, and conveyed the stark contrast of the two cities as she grew to love social life in Washington as well. Her role in Washington was representative of all women as is evident from comparing her writing to descriptions by other women such as Frances Parkinson Keyes and Edith Benham Helm. Bloom wrote, “Protocol is as much the law of social Washington as the Constitution is the law of the land. It settles irrevocably who’s who in official life; and precedence, protocol’s little brother, then decides exactly how much more or less important everyone is than everyone else.”⁴⁹ In New York City, the composition of the upper class was multi-faceted, consisting of men from many professions including bankers, artists, and businessmen. The simplicity of the Washington scene lay not in the practices, but rather in its makeup. “[Bloom] began to realize that while in New York it’s more important to ‘do something,’ in Washington it’s more important to ‘be someone.’”⁵⁰ Wealth determined the rank of individuals in many parts of the country. But “in Washington it’s the Congressional Directory, and not the Social Register, that decides” who sits where.⁵¹ A non-negotiable list determined social hierarchy: the office determined the rank rather than factors such as family or wealth altering social status.⁵²

⁴⁸ Bloom. *There’s No Place Like Washington*, 12.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁵¹ Ibid., 51.

⁵² Ibid.

Entertaining at balls and observing protocol was not about wealth. Those who did have a fortune at their disposal displayed it quietly because they were more likely to be laughed at than admired.⁵³ Washington was not about the allure of greatness because people had already reached a level of high importance. Bloom wrote:

All the time [Washington] is generating the power, the energy, that runs the greatest government in the world... We are in Washington for a serious purpose—to represent the folks back home as well as we possibly can, and to see that both their big interests and their personal problems are helped and safeguarded. At the same time we enjoy sparkling occasions that we would almost certainly have missed if we had stayed in private life.⁵⁴

The most important part of representing the people back home was “realizing that a friend made across a dinner table the night before may be truly a friend in need across a desk the morning after.”⁵⁵ In order to serve the people, they had to work well with their peers and this meant maintaining a perfect image. The positions the men and women held were public ones as they are now, but the goal was not to maintain their image among all society, rather to their peers. The first function of their lives was to serve the people, and at this time this was done through maintenance of proper etiquette. The work that the politicians undertook permeated every aspect of their lives, and acquaintances they and their wives made would help them serve their constituents through increasingly empowered discussions.

Washingtonians did not rush to flaunt wealth because their rank could not change unless their political position changed unlike in New York City where glitz and glamour helped define power. New Yorkers’ emphasis on defining this power from glamour and their inability to directly lose political power are part of what drove elite New Yorkers to dance halls such as the

⁵³ Bloom. *There’s No Place Like Washington*, 50.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Savoy.⁵⁶ Established rank made money less important, but the heavy focus on rank kept Washingtonians focused on class. The transition to life in Washington could be abrupt, but it provided just as much glamour as life in New York City but of a different kind. Sol Bloom initially did not accept the request that he run for the special election because his daughter did not want to go to Washington, but after meeting the Italian Ambassador Prince Caetani in New York City, “it dawned on [her] that Washington was not merely a city of Boss Tweeds, it was also one grand series of ballrooms filled with glamorous diplomats.”⁵⁷ Bloom observed that, “Naturally, evening clothes are about the same everywhere; but for Washington nights too much magnificence, too many jewels, too many orchids are more apt to be amusing than envied... You get a few things and wear them over and over all season, and so does everyone else.”⁵⁸ The glamour of political life in Washington stemmed from the power present at official events rather than from wealth and attire.

Because the United States is one of the few countries where the capital and the biggest city are not the same city, Washington was a very distinct home to diplomats and politicians. Washington was the center of the political world in the country while New York City was the center of the cultural and financial happenings. “You would have to imagine Washington transplanted to New York and lost in the mazes of the financial, commercial, and artistic interests of a great city, to get an other-country perspective on diplomats as seen against the more varied background of most other capitals.”⁵⁹ For Bloom, this did not lessen the experience; rather the allure of the international figures that she encountered was even more captivating. Taking away other distractions such as wealth put all the focus on the domestic and foreign

⁵⁶ Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife*, 4.

⁵⁷ Bloom, *There's No Place Like Washington*, 3-4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

issues and the behavior of their representatives. She and her mother's duties grew to encapsulate politics as the success of a man determines the power of the woman in the social circles. Dance added to the glamour and flawlessness of these events, as maintaining tradition and perfection by those involved forwarded their image.

With the hardships that swooped in during the Depression, there were fewer official parties, but those that remained maintained their importance. Bloom wrote, "even the world's most terrible war has not halted the parties, you realize that surely something beyond frivolity keeps them going; that they are somehow altogether a part of carrying on the nation's and the nations' business."⁶⁰ Roosevelt's administration was less of a social one in part due to his handicap, in part due to the trying economic times. However, parties continued throughout the Depression and their set structure did not change. For those who thrived off the social scene such as Vera Bloom, Roosevelt's administration was disappointing. Few social events graced the calendars of the upper class and Roosevelt avoided formal festivities whenever possible anyway. He rarely appeared at any dinner besides the select few he hosted at the White House. "One of the first social reforms of the New Deal was to do away entirely with the annual dinners given in honor of the President and the First Lady by the Vice-President, the Speaker, and each member of the Cabinet, and their wives."⁶¹ As the situation worsened, and the administration struggled with "bank failures, price collapses, the deepening Depression, dust storms, unemployment, and floods", parties remained important for the men and women to come together to discuss their plans for change.⁶²

⁶⁰ Bloom. *There's No Place Like Washington*, 1.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 82.

The cuts continued and Roosevelt got rid of the New Year's Day receptions at the White House, one of the biggest events of the year, but certain sacred events remained. The McLean Ball that took place on New Year's Eve remained on the calendar for a while.⁶³ Hosted by Mrs. McLean, the guests rung in the New Year while enjoying music and dancing. Bloom wrote,

“Perhaps Washington as a whole had nearly its share of the brassy tone and fevered pace we remember as the age of hot mammas, hip flasks, gangster heyday, and Florida boomtime. Probably it had full share of that opposite, equally characteristic strain of the twenties epitomized nowhere more clearly than in two Presidents: one who was everything the name Calvin suggests, and Herbert Hoover, so devout a Quaker that he could not even lend his presence to a patriotic occasion if it included dancing. But the Washington of the parties belonged a little to both worlds and not much to either. It was gay but not hot; decorous but not unbending. It was an island in the sea of prosperity.”⁶⁴

The Washington party scene of the twenties did not mirror that of most major American cities, but the necessary cutbacks were welcomed by many of its conservative inhabitants. Social events continued as the depression deepened, giving the politicians and their wives a chance to distract themselves from the problems.

Women did not have a direct voice in politics, but their detailed duty was as important as their husbands' legislation. Women were responsible for meeting people and making connections through official calls and attendance at parties. The moment they arrived in Washington, they were expected to deliver calling cards to the President and First Lady and then begin their calls. Women had to visit the home of every woman whose husband outranked them, leaving cards every year they were part of official life. Etiquette established the visits that were to be made each day, and these even included a loosely designated call time for “Cave-dwelling

⁶³ Bloom, *There's No Place Like Washington*, 32.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

Ladies” or “Members of unofficial but exalted society” on Saturdays, bringing calls to over one thousand a season.^{65,66} Protocol strictly determined the structure of daily visits:

Ladies of the Supreme Court Mondays
 Congressional Ladies Tuesdays
 Cabinet Ladies on Wednesdays
 Senatorial Ladies on Thursdays
 Diplomatic Ladies on Fridays⁶⁷

Visits initially allowed women to meet other official women, but the relationships went beyond acquaintance. Women would arrive and present a card to their hostess on behalf of themselves, their husbands, and any daughters they may have had. Frances Parkinson Keyes whose husband served in the Senate from 1919 to 1937 wrote, “It is the newcomer, not the old inhabitant, who is required to call first, and woe betide her if she does not pay her respects to all her superiors in rank, for these keep careful account of who has called and who has not, and frequently comment on the subject in public.”⁶⁸ Keyes was a novelist and non-fiction writer who wrote frequent articles for *Good Housekeeping* entitled “Letters from a Senator’s Wife” and eventually compiled these into her memoirs in 1937. Because she published her writings at the same time as she appeared in official life, peers and the general public read her words. This meant that she was held her to factual accounts of the social scene. Women had to find homes, decorate quickly, print cards and be ready to receive callers. Once a woman established acquaintances, these visits could develop into invitations to less official social functions and proper conversations allowed them to transfer over to other Washington events. A woman’s

⁶⁵ Frances Parkinson Keyes. *Capital Kaleidoscope: The Story of A Washington Hostess* (New York: Harpers and Brothers Publishers, 1937), 35.

⁶⁶ Bloom, *There’s No Place Like Washington*, 9-10.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 35. Cave Dwellers were people who had lived in Washington for generations, and had earned their reputation in the Capital for reasons other than wealth or official rank.⁶⁷ These members held their own place in the social scene, and were not required to follow official etiquette.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

ability to establish herself among women of all ranks would help provide entrance to the societies that supplemented the social scene such as the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Congressional Club. Women whose husbands held specific offices were automatically eligible for these clubs, and involvement would benefit both the wife and husband's image.

Keyes wrote, "Much as most women dislike the treadmill of making the rounds, there has always been considerable rivalry among official hostesses concerning the number of their own callers."⁶⁹ Women occasionally augmented their number of callers to appear more popular, but the fact that they maintained all of their visits to others was most important.

Washingtonians follow strict protocol throughout the entire official process. Bloom listed that one would attend social gatherings to make new acquaintances, to please good friends, to make up for having to decline attendance at a previous event, to experience extravagance a hostess was known for, to insure that you didn't miss anything, or to avoid seeming too grand. If a hostess outranked a woman, attendance at that would bolster her image, while a higher ranking woman's attendance at the party of a lower ranking woman would increase the image of the latter woman.⁷⁰ Aside from the official parties, which were obligatory, this list infers that there was choice, but Bloom describes that these reasons together made almost every party mandatory. Men and women came together under these circumstances to talk, dine, and occasionally dance. If a couple received an invitation, there were few reasons why one might not attend. A death in the family or another obligation to someone of a higher rank was an acceptable reason to decline an invitation, but there was almost no excuse to miss an official event.⁷¹ Hostesses had almost no say in the how they planned the evening as protocol left little room for creativity in the structure

⁶⁹ Keyes, *Capital Kaleidoscope: The Story of A Washington Hostess*, 37.

⁷⁰ Bloom, *There's No Place Like Washington*, 1-2.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

of the event or the dancing that took place. Parties were where the men and women came together to carry on the nations business. The dinners and balls were not simply leisure activities, they were structured very specifically to provide time for the men to do business and communicate beyond political party commitments. Parties ended early so that the next day's important political activities could continue as the carried their discussions from their homes to the floor of the Senate.⁷²

Mistakes in protocol indicated the distinct divide between elites and others. An error by one individual led to crackdown in procedure that affected even those of extremely high rank. The Ambassador and Lady Geddes spent months planning an extravagant event held at the British Embassy in 1921 during Harding's time in office. They distributed thousands of invitations, but failed to indicate that guests must arrive at the door with their cards. This led to hundred of social climbers in Washington "crashing the party." The upper class attendees observed that those who were not part of the elite society easily stood out as they danced where they were not supposed to beneath the chandeliers and they conducted themselves in a raucous manner. The official guests reacted murmuring, "“Why, I have never seen *him* anywhere in Washington before—you know he's *never received*.’...‘How could Lady Geddes have invited *her*? Why, the Ambassadors can't realize...”⁷³ Unofficial Washingtonians filled the Embassy to such capacity that the elites left the event and they remained. The contrast between these two groups was clearly apparent, but most importantly, dance indicated to the upper class that there people present who did not belong. Dancing underneath a chandelier in an entrance hall instead of on a dance floor indicated ignorance to the behavioral code. The elite Washingtonians disgust and rapid exit from the party demonstrated their discomfort with the lower classes. Unlike with

⁷² Bloom, *There's No Place Like Washington*, 115.

⁷³ Keyes, *Capital Kaleidoscope: The Story of A Washington Hostess*, 87.

the upper and middles classes in other cities, elite Washingtonians were not curious about the practices of those outside their group. They wanted their parties to remain strictly regulated, and this meant they also did not venture to observe practices elsewhere.

Following that mishap, admission to large dinner events as well as even smaller luncheons and conferences required admission by card only. Everyone took this extremely seriously as once Mrs. Coolidge arrived for a session of the Arms Conference without her ticket. Trying to enter by simply smiling at the doorman, he stopped her and viewed her suspiciously:

“I am Mrs. Coolidge,” she said, pleasantly.
 The doorman looked at her impassively. “What’s your husband’s first name?” he inquired.
 “Calvin.”
 “What’s his business?”
 “He’s Vice-President.”
 “Vice-President of What?”⁷⁴

Dance as Protocol

Dance etiquette fit seamlessly into the protocol of official life. Hosts provided information on invitations about the type of event they were hosting and if dancing would be involved. “Dancing” was engraved in the lower right-hand corner indicating to guests what they should expect. One of the most important things at a party, and particularly one which included dance, was to have an even number of to men and women at the event. “Guests are announced at formal and semi-formal dances. The hostess and her husband receive guests; for a formal dance, the requisite time for them to remain standing at the post is one hour; for less formal dance, half an hour will suffice.”⁷⁵ Because the placement of couples was fluid at events that involved dance, introducing couples established rank and gave other guests a clear idea of who was present. At events that excluded dance men and women had to remain standing and seated based

⁷⁴ Keyes, *Capital Kaleidoscope: The Story of A Washington Hostess*, 88.

⁷⁵ Radlovic, *A Handbook of Conduct in American and International Circles*, 12.

on rank. Almost all official events included music and those that added dance as an auxiliary activity were conducted in much the same way. Guests took some time after dinner to mingle and dance with each other, performing dances such as the waltz and the tango. Aristocrats throughout Europe refined the waltz, which originated as a German peasant dance in the late 1500s. The form that came to America was the Viennese waltz, and Washingtonians practiced this dance maintaining the slow tempos of the European form.⁷⁶ Both the music and dance had a clear structure, so there was no room for improvisation, only perfection and grace. The waltz required that the dancers paid attention to musicality in order to execute the three steps in time with the three beat per measure phrases, while accenting the first beat of each measure.⁷⁷

The tango held less structure, but required a strong lead by the male. The tango that elites across the country performed was called the “Parisian Tango” as opposed to the Argentinean Tango; therefore they could trace the roots to more acceptable European traditions.⁷⁸ Both the waltz and the tango required that dancers glide across the floor and that couples weave in and out of one another, acknowledging those that surrounded them.⁷⁹

Escort cards determined initial partnerships and dance allowed elites to properly present themselves to one another.⁸⁰ Events that had “dance” in their title were given so that dance could supplement the sometimes monotonous dinners. The dancing that took place outside of the official functions furthered young elites’ rapport with one another. Edith Benham Helm who served as White house social secretary for 25 years, most importantly for this study under Roosevelt, recounted her time in the White House, boasting that she attended more White House

⁷⁶ Malnig, *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy, Sham, and Shake*, 6.

⁷⁷ Harvey, J. Wehman. *The Way to Dance* (New York : Wehman Bros., 190-?), 19.

⁷⁸ Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out*, 163.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Bloom, *There’s No Place Like Washington*, 112.

parties than anyone else. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt joyfully hosted White House dances for younger elites particularly her sons or other relatives when they visited. Someone once observed to Helm that “it would be better to face a man-eating tiger than a mother whose daughter had been omitted from a White House dance.”⁸¹ Invitation to a White House State Dinner or other official event brought prestige to a family, and invitation for a young Washingtonian indicated a future in the public sphere. Eleanor Roosevelt also famously hosted two debutante balls at the White House. The first debutante dance was for her niece on Saturday, December 30, 1933, with 700 invitations sent and 515 people in attendance. Later in the administration, Roosevelt hosted a debutante dance for Miss Joan Morgenthau, daughter of the Secretary of the Treasury.⁸² This event consisted of a small dinner preceding the dance, with 600 invitations sent and nearly 500 in attendance. Guests packed the East room, making it difficult to dance, but the couples joyfully navigated the room soaking in cheer with one another.⁸³ Washingtonians valued the opportunity for their children to attend these events because they closely mirrored the events they themselves attended. Dance allowed the younger Washingtonians to apply and practice the behavioral code.

Roosevelt reached out to others to give more opportunities to participate in White House functions. She hosted the party that Helm classified as the gayest of the year. She inaugurated this event to give the opportunity to bring more people into the White House, specifically those who spent their lives reporting on what went on behind the walls. The annual Spring Dance for the accredited newspaper correspondents in Washington brought the men and women who wrote about White House functions their first invitation of their own to a White House event. “The groups invited to these spring parties included the White House correspondents and news

⁸¹ Edith Benham Helm. *The Captains and the Kings* (New York: G.P. Putnam Sons, 1954), 166.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

photographers, the press and radio galleries of the House and Senate, and the active members of the men's and women's press clubs. The entire Cabinet was invited, and came."⁸⁴ Like at the debutante balls, dancing took place in the crowded East Room. Helm recounts that Mrs. Roosevelt even danced a Virginia Reel, which is a folk dance from the 17th century.⁸⁵ Helm classified the event itself as "more of a Promenade. The great French doors to the terraces were thrown open for this springtime evening event, and couples walked and chatted on the roofs of the East and West terraces, a lovely sight. The South Grounds also came alive, gay with voices and laughter."⁸⁶ The First Lady received the guests as the President sat on the sofa, enjoyed the music and watched the dancing. Introductions to him were not formal, but guests properly approached him to pause and introduce themselves, and closer acquaintances offered a joke in passing. Dance presented the guests the chance to more joyously engage with one another. They mingled with one another as guests would at official events, and because they were in the presence of the First Lady and President when dancing they were held to the standards of elites.⁸⁷ This event presented an interaction with the lower classes, but contrasts with the interactions that took place in other cities. The mingling of the elite Washingtonians and others took place following the rules of the officials.

The most notable exception to elite maintenance of protocol was executed by one of the few Washingtonians who could act without consequence. Alice Roosevelt Longworth, who grew up in elite society in the White House while her father, Theodore Roosevelt was President, disregarded all etiquette during an official party. "Alice Longworth took it into her head to give an exhibition of the new dance, the turkey trot. But to add zest to the performance, she lit a

⁸⁴ Helm, *The Captains and the Kings*, 174.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 174-175.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 175.

cigarette first, and smoked while she danced...[sailing] down the middle of the room.”⁸⁸ The press and crowd were shocked, but neither Longworth nor her husband, who was a Congressman from Ohio, suffered any repercussions. Because Longworth was the daughter of a former president, she held incredibly strong standing in Washington society for decades. This standing was very unique, but protected her from the critiques she suffered.

The younger generation of the upper class followed the tide toward dance halls, but maintained strict protocol in their activities outside official life. Margaret Wallace wrote an article in *The Washington Post* in 1937 about the shift in venue to public dancing. Previously, proper and well-bred women only danced at private events except when a private party was hosted in a public venue. Society became more accepting of the practice “provided the dance hall or night club [was] a properly conducted place.”⁸⁹

Young people who frequented these dance halls were expected to follow the rules in order to avoid scrutiny. Protocol delineated that they dance with members of the group they came with, their party, unless the host or hostess approved. Men could not intrude on groups that were not theirs to dance with other ladies because a hostess expected to socialize with the members of her party that she invited out. Intruding on another group was just as serious an offense as crashing a private party without an invitation.⁹⁰ “When a man escorts a woman to a dance hall or night club, he may present any man of his acquaintance who is present to the woman he is escorting. This, of course is equivalent to permission from the escort to dance with his guest. However, the man who has been introduced to a woman guest by her escort should

⁸⁸ Nelle Scanlan. *Boudoir Mirrors of Washington* (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Co., 1923), 22.

⁸⁹ Wallace, “Capital Manners”, 1937.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

say, “Do you mind?” when he asks the woman to dance.”⁹¹ Dance served as the vehicle through which protocol was transported outside the realm of official events.

Dance halls in conservative Washington were most often not the raucous scenes that upper and middle class American sought in other cities. Margaret Wallace wrote that many dance halls were wholesome places where entire families would go to eat and listen to music.⁹² Before planning an evening at a dance hall it was important for a hostess to determine that the venue was reputable. Conduct by young people at dance halls was as important as in the ballroom. Wallace observed, “Young people in Washington would be surprised to learn how often they are judged on their good breeding by their conduct at a dance.”⁹³ Wallace advised that although they were socializing and dancing to enjoy themselves, they could not allow themselves to get too wrapped up and forget their manners. “While a young man may want to dance only with good dancers and have no real desire to ask a girl who does not dance well to dance with him, good form often demands that he remember his social duty as well as his own inclinations.”⁹⁴ Because partnerships at dance halls held less structure, the most frequent lapse in courtesy at unofficial events was when men failed to ask a girl whom the hostess introduced to him to dance. A man had to ask the young lady he met to dance despite how seriously he felt accepting a possibly inadequate dance partner would be. He could escort her back to her group after the dance if he did not feel that she would be a good partner, but he had to do so politely.⁹⁵ Repercussions for a lapse in judgment would hurt standing among peers as they regulated one another’s actions.

⁹¹ Wallace, “Capital Manners”, 1937.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Margaret Wallace. “Dance conduct often displays your breeding: Good manners are as important in ballroom as elsewhere”. *The Washington Post*, Oct 1, 1936.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Protocol strictly determined how a man asked a woman to dance at both official and unofficial events. No matter how well a man knew a woman, he politely invited her by saying, “‘may I have this dance? or ‘would you care to dance?’ The girl responded with a simple “yes,” and smile or ‘yes I’d like to very much.’”⁹⁶ Men could ask a girl who already had a partner for the evening to dance, but he had to “turn to her partner and say, ‘do you mind.’ The girl should say ‘will you excuse me’ as she leaves to dance.”⁹⁷ These rules were extremely similar to those that took place at official events, and would prepare youth for a possible future in the political sphere.

Learning the Intricacies of Dance

Official society expected proper etiquette from the moment newcomers entered the scene, and learning the ins and outs of dancing was an important aspect. All members of official life studied etiquette pamphlets, but many had been raised learning the steps of the waltz and tango. Etiquette pamphlets reveal differentiations between conduct in a ballroom and a dance hall, therefore and guided the upper class. In his pamphlet *The Pocket Ball-Room Prompter, Containing Calls for the Different Changes and Figures to All the Principal Quadrilles, Cotillons, Country Dances and Fancy Dances of the Day*, Elias Howe discussed in great detail proper etiquette for a man specifically at balls. “In requesting a lady to dance, you stand at a proper distance, bend the body gracefully, accompanied by a slight motion of the right hand in front, you look at her with complaisance, and respectfully say, will you do me the honor to dance with me, or, shall I have the pleasure of dancing with you, will you be pleased. or will you favor

⁹⁶ Wallace, “Dance Conduct often displays your breeding”, 1936.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

me with your hand for this or the next dance, remaining in the position you.”⁹⁸ While this manual was written in 1886, the overall etiquette choices remained even as steps changed as Bloom indicated in her writings.⁹⁹ As the elites held onto their traditions, politeness defined etiquette at dance functions.

Some members of the upper class who developed a passion for social dance sought extra instruction to supplement etiquette pamphlets. Mary Foote Henderson, wife of senator John B. Henderson, began taking “afternoon dancing-classes, ostensibly inaugurated for the benefit of her young granddaughter.”¹⁰⁰ These classes “were soon enlarged to include her own acquaintances; and even when she gave a party for ‘Trixie,’ she always supplemented this granddaughter’s guests by a number of her own.”¹⁰¹ The dances that select elites practiced privately mirrored the conservative social scene. They were not privately learning the Charleston or the Lindy Hop, rather their interest remained with the dances inspired by European traditions.

The study of elite Washingtonians offers a very different take on dance during the 1920s and 1930s. In scholarship, social dance itself is overlooked, especially in studies of the upper class. The elite society in Washington contrasts with Americans across the country who came together in dance halls crossing racial barriers to explore new dances. Official society in Washington lived for socializing for political gain and this defined their dancing. Washington society treated protocol as choreography, and thus dance was simply part of this choreography. Malnig argued that social dance is not “high culture” because it was for all, but this study shows

⁹⁸ Elias Howe, and Miniature Book Collection (Library of Congress). *The Pocket Ball-Room Prompter, Containing Calls for the Different Changes and Figures to All the Principal Quadrilles, Cotillions, Country Dances and Fancy Dances of the Day ...* (Boston, O. Ditson & Co., 1886), 4.

⁹⁹ Bloom, *There’s No Place Like Washington*, 115.

¹⁰⁰ Keyes, *Capital Kaleidoscope: The Story of A Washington Hostess*, 39.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

that social dance did not have to permeate all classes. Social dance can bring groups with common values together, or in this case it can supplement occasions that are already established and serve a larger purpose than enjoyment. My thesis presents a different way dance can be used: to maintain social function rather than break down race and class barriers.

Participation in elite social dance provided a greater purpose than most dances. Looking at the functions social dance serves: the experience of the individual and the aesthetic experience, I conclude that dance in official society served the individual happiness of the dancer, but most importantly maintained or improved a dancers public image through maintenance of the visual protocol. Visual protocol, or the impression a viewer has from watching someone execute steps, allowed elites to demonstrate perfection. Official life in Washington was a performance, and dance was simply a step in the choreography of etiquette.

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