Indigenous Information Literacy: nêhiyaw Kinship Enabling Self-Care in Research

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Introduction

Indigenizing the library is a project that shares some of the theoretical foundations of critical librarianship. Yet in the same way that Indigenous activism critiques mainstream social justice movements for their lack of long-term relationship building and their ethics devoid of a relationship to land, librarianship (even critical librarianship) lacks a rigorous understanding of relationality (defined roles in how we are related to each other) and reciprocity (who we are accountable to and responsible for) that characterizes Indigenous perspectives on librarianship.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the violence of classroom research, and the way this trauma and research intersect intimately for Indigenous students, to provide context for why librarians need to address the student's whole self—mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical—in information literacy instruction. Next, some existing information literacy instruction models, both mainstream and feminist, that address emotion will be reviewed. As a comparatively more comprehensive approach, the nêhiyaw law of wâhkôhtowin, which uses building kinship as a framework for responsibility and accountability in information literacy, will also be considered. The chapter ends with a sense of how wâhkôhtowin provides an onus for librarians to create capacity for self-care in student researchers.

Research as Violence

As Indigenous students, Erica Violet Lee and Jesse Thistle speak about the ways that existing in the academy can be violent: in both the dynamics in racist class

assignments and longer research projects where trauma may be encountered. Erica Violet Lee writes about her experiences as an undergraduate student and the power dynamics of her work being seen "not just as a personal failure but a failed responsibility to break stereotypes and represent all Native people everywhere in a positive way."[1] Her expertise, voice, and very existence is scrutinized and threatened, and she rejects it: "Fuck any academic career that comes at the price of my safety and bodily sovereignty. Fuck any academic career that requires my silence."[2] The classroom is a site of ongoing colonization, where stereotypes about the Indigenous student as the expert work against brilliant individuals, in classrooms where Indigeneity is pathologized.[3] This experience speaks to the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students; unlike other students who may be afforded the luxury of simply writing a paper, Indigenous students may have to challenge their professors on racist essay topics. Librarians recognize the problems of teaching information literacy with someone else's poorly conceived assignment; add racist overtones and the challenge students have with these poor assignments intensifies, particularly for those whose experiences are weakly reflected, absent, or negated in these assignments.

But racism is not the only reason that Indigenous students experience violence when conducting research; the stories they research may inflict harm too. While studying Batoche Métis history, Jesse Thistle realizes that his health suffers as he engages in the research that looks primarily at trauma stemming from generations of hardship.[4] The stories of the elders he interviewed remain with him: "During my early research, I could deal with the emotional pain that came with the stories about my ancestors and the road allowance, as it helped me to understand why I was plagued by the effects of intergenerational trauma throughout my life. But my ancestor's stories linger and revisit me and harm me as they are trying to be remembered."[5] He is hardly alone in this experience. He speaks of the reactions of scholars also working in this area: mental breakdowns, being sidelined from academic work for a period of time, emotional instability, even having to quit school. The trauma of researching affects him entirely.

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1 Erica Violet Lee, "Good Philosophers Don't Have Anxiety Attacks," *Moontime Warrior*, March 27, 2014, https://moontimewarrior.com/2014/03/27/good-philosophers-dont-have-anxiety-attacks/.

2 Erica Violet Lee, "That Deadly Academic Silence," *Moontime Warrior*, August 17, 2017, https://moontimewarrior.com/2015/08/17/that-deadly-academic-silence/.

3 "What I Learned in Class Today: Aboriginal Issues in the Classroom," University of British Columbia, accessed December 6, 2017, http://www.whatilearnedinclasstoday.com/.

4 Jesse Thistle, "Vicarious Trauma: Collecting the Herd," *Active History*, November 3, 2015, http://activehistory.ca/2015/11/vicarious-trauma-collecting-the-herd/.

5 Thistle, "Vicarious Trauma."

Stories of Indigenous researchers like Jesse Thistle and Erica Violet Lee illustrate how research affects emotional and spiritual facets and the need for librarians to be conscious of our varied roles in facilitating research. Librarians may fail to realize the violence that research can be violent, particularly for Indigenous students. As librarians teaching information literacy, we seldom reflect on how the work of a university sees Indigenous people primarily as Othered objects of research and rarely as researchers. To be Indigenous in Canada is to be inherently political: my body and my legal identity is regulated by the state through biopolitical processes such as the inheritance of Indian Status.[6] If I want to research even my own family history, trauma is inevitable; to research as an Indigenous scholar is to confront horrific stories, many of them directly tied to my own experiences or the experiences of people I love. Recognizing, confronting, and assessing how trauma is experienced in the university looks different for different Indigenous people. Librarians, archivists, and others who work with materials from the Holocaust, for example, provide a model for considering the emotional and spiritual caretaking element of librarianship[7] and recognizing that trauma may be unavoidable. Paul Howard Hamburg, a librarian at the Simon Wiesenthal Center Library and Archives, reflects on his stewardship role: "In assisting survivors, children of survivors and their relatives, in closing the circle of uncertainty with regard to loved ones who perished at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators, I am present at moments of intense pain."[8] As a librarian working with Holocaust researchers, he is aware of his own emotional and spiritual stability as a facilitator of research.[9] From an Indigenous view, particularly from a nêhiyaw perspective, it is harder to delineate the borders between mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual components of self.[10] How notable then, that Hamburg calls his work with trauma and research "truly sacred,"[11] align-

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6 For a more nuanced discussion of biopower and Indigeneity, Morgensen's theoretical perspective on the bodies of Indigenous people and state is helpful. Scott Morgensen, "The Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism," *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011), http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2011.10648801.

7 This is not necessarily unique to librarianship. The emotional and spiritual element of memory work done by archivists, particularly those working with records of trauma, provides insight into this relationship-building. The work of Caswell (2014) on a survivor-centered approach to records is outside the focus of this chapter but well worth exploring. Michelle Caswell, "Toward a Survivor-Centered Approach to Records Documenting Human Rights Abuse: Lessons from Community Archives," *Archival Science* 14, no. 3 (2014): 307–22, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-014-9220-6.

8 Paul Howard Hamburg, "Closing Circles, Opening Pathways," in *Introduction to The Holocaust: Memories, Research, Reference,* eds. Robert Hauptman and Susan Hubbs Motin (New York: Routledge, 1998), 236.

9 Hamburg, "Closing Circles," 236.

10 Sylvia McAdams, *Nationhood Interrupted: Revitalizing nêhiyaw Legal Systems* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 2015), 29.

11 Hamburg, "Closing Circles." 242.

ing with Indigenous librarianship's calls for a more holistic stewardship of information literacy.

Deborah Lee's perceptions of relationship building include a similar sense of how the sacred and spiritual functions in librarianship.[12] For Indigenous students, the university, and by extension, the library, can be inhospitable in part because the institution fails to act as a reciprocal party in its relationships with students. Deborah Lee's case study of Aboriginal students' information needs points to a lack of relevant library material, a lack of research development on Indigenous issues, and "a lack of services recognizing the Indigenous values of 'being in relationship' and reciprocity."[13] Lee's work highlights the time and energy necessary in maintaining good relations and reciprocal relationships as a means of survival and well-being for both librarians and students.[14] For Lee, reciprocity is a key element for librarians to engage meaningfully with the information needs of Indigenous students, particularly as librarians work against the commonly held perception that interactions with non-Indigenous people will be disappointingly non-reciprocal.[15]

Existing Models For Affect and Information Literacy

To arrest that expectation of non-reciprocity, I want to look at librarians thinking through affect and emotion in mainstream and feminist approaches to information literacy. Positioning research relationships between librarians and students as important to the work of information literacy is not new; research by non-Indigenous librarians provides some context, and although somewhat flawed, a starting place for where Indigenous librarianship might intersect with mainstream and feminist approaches to information literacy instruction.

Mainstream pedagogy

Much of the research on students' emotion in information literacy focuses on research anxiety:[16] students unable to choose a topic, or unable to know

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12 Deborah Lee, "Aboriginal Students in Canada: A Case Study of Their Academic Information Needs and Library Use," *Journal of Library Administration* 33, nos. 3–4 (2008): 259, http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J111v33n03_07.

13 Lee, "Aboriginal Students in Canada," 275.

14 Lee, "Aboriginal Students in Canada," 265.

15 Lee, "Aboriginal Students in Canada," 285.

16 Julie Obst and Joe Eshleman, "Librarians and Students: Making the Connections," in *Not Just Where to Click: Teaching Students How to Think About Information*, eds. Troy A. Swanson and Heather Jagman (Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015), 303. Their literature review is also a rich source for librarians looking at research anxiety.

why they need to research in order to write a good paper. However, simply asking the question "shouldn't the instruction librarian…ask [students] how they feel about doing research?" as Obst and Eshleman do[17] obscures the possibility that research may be fundamentally violent, particularly for Indigenous students. Emotional competency, and specifically, self-care strategies, must be included in information literacy instruction, and this is even more pressing when the research itself is traumatic. This next section will outline three perspectives (experience-centered information literacy, acceptance of uncertainty, and awareness of emotional intelligence) as mainstream approaches that attempt to address relationships and emotion in information literacy.

First, Susie Andretta makes a case for an experience-centered information literacy, relying heavily on Christine Bruce's relational approach.[18] Andretta positions the learner-information relationship as the most central focus, with a "ternary information relationship between facilitator, learner, and information"[19] providing the basis for understanding the research experience. That relationship depends on librarians understanding the emotional component of research: research shows that emotional dynamics affect research strategies[20] and information literacy competency.

Next, Carole Kuhlthau's model of emotional stages[21] provides insight on how research is not constructed simply as a mental exercise, moving closer to the holistic nêhiyaw conception of the world. Her model embraces affective elements of research, incorporating the management of feelings like uncertainty and anxiety into information seeking.

Finally, Julie Obst and Joe Eshleman see emotional intelligence as helping students to prioritize their thinking and manage their emotions throughout the research process.[22] They emphasize a connection between librarians and students, and posit that meeting students is a starting place for understanding their needs.

Yet these examples of mainstream librarianship are only just beginning to consider the affective aspect of information literacy. They recognize that yes, research is not just a mental exercise, but do not necessarily dictate

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17 Obst and Eshleman, "Librarians and Students," 295.

18 Susie Andretta, *Ways of Experiencing Information Literacy: Making the Case for a Relational Approach* (Oxford: Chandos, 2012).

19 Andretta, *Ways of Experiencing Information Literacy*, 188.

20 Obst and Eshleman, "Librarians and Students," 298.

21 Carol Kuhlthau, "Inside the Search Process: Information Seeking from the User's Perspective," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 44, no. 5 (1991): 361–71.

22 Obst and Eshleman, "Librarians and Students," 298.

the creation of a space where librarians can help build students' capacity for emotional awareness. How can we make space for not just emotional awareness, but reciprocal relationships in information literacy?

Feminist Pedagogy

Feminist pedagogy attempts to create space for relationships in information literacy. In many ways, feminist pedagogy blends organically with Indigenous librarianship; this is a rich space for research outside the scope of this chapter. Feminist pedagogy, as articulated by Maria T. Accardi, provides an illustration of the power of this perspective. For example, information literacy is positioned to necessarily include conceptions of self-care and allow for social change in instruction, referencing bell hooks and Paulo Freire.[23] That social justice bent creates a meaningful space for understanding research violence. Feminist pedagogy carves out a space in higher education that is truly student-centered,[24] thus engaging with relationships in a way that mainstream approaches seem unable to articulate.

Though feminist pedagogy is, at its best, intersectional, acknowledging and making space for Indigenous perspectives is often absent from these analyses. Consider a framework like James Elmborg's ethnographic contact zone, which conceives of students entering a zone where they learn to communicate;[25] this is particularly problematic in considering how Indigenous students are still positioned as sites of research rather than as researchers. Here, they are literally ethnographic subjects. This rhetoric of anthropology paints them with a lack of agency. In an attempt to amplify Indigenous perspectives that feminist pedagogy may make space for, I present a more comprehensive and holistic model of relationship building: the law of wâhkôhtowin, of building kinship.

wâhkôhtowin and Information Literacy Instruction

Even though mainstream and feminist approaches to holistic care in information literacy instruction are encouraging, they fail to account for the relational accountability between librarians and students in dealing with traumatic research. In the nêhiyaw (Cree) and Michif (Métis) law of wâhkôhtowin, the importance of understanding relationships provides a

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23 Maria T. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013), 36.

24 Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy*, 42.

25 James Elmborg, "Libraries in the Contact Zone: On the Creation of Educational Space," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (2006): 56–64, https://dx.doi.org/10.5860/rusq.46n1.56.

model that inscribes that responsibility and accountability. What follows is an attempt to translate the way wâhkôhtowin works, applying it as a conceptual model to structure ongoing research relationships.

wâhkôhtowin as Building Kinship

The nêhiyaw and Michif concept of wâhkôhtowin is one model for building kinship, which provides a structure for reciprocal accountability through relationship. An introduction to this nêhiyaw law of relationality is found in commentary from nêhiyaw and Michif thinkers on wâhkôhtowin, or wahkootawin (an alternate spelling in Michif). There are some slight distinctions between nêhiyaw and Michif understandings of wâhkôhtowin, but Michif concepts primarily draw from their maternal link to nêhiyawak. This section looks at Sylvia McAdam's work on nêhiyaw law, Jesse Thistle's historical work on Michif wahkootawin, Zoe Todd's work on kinship as radical love and accountability, and Lindsey Nixon's work on kinship as survival to expand and discuss components of wâhkôhtowin. These are discussions from various individuals, drawing gratefully on the work of Sylvia McAdams, who translated this nêhiyaw concept into academic English. This will not be a comprehensive understanding of wâhkôhtowin as nêhiyaw legal systems are interrelated and numerous.[26] I speak about them because they structure my own practice as a librarian. [27]

   Maria Campbell, a Métis elder interviewed by Jesse Thistle in his work on Métis trauma and research, speaks of wahkootawin as the "foundational philosophy, the foundation of our culture and our governance structure"[28] for Michif people. In nêhiyawêwin, it "is used to describe the kinship connections to all of creation, such as the various clan systems that create kinship responsibilities to the animals and to creation in general."[29] This life philosophy, worldview and way of life is about interconnectedness; it positions families as the foundational relationship for shared cultural activity and responsibilities.[30] This goes beyond an anthropological sense of how kinship functions in nêhiyaw and Michif culture, and is rooted in the nêhiyaw law miyo-wîcêhtowin, to have good relations, which directs both individuals and communities to create positive relations in every relationship.[31] wâhkôhtowin privileges the

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26 McAdams, *Nationhood Interrupted*, 38.

27 All inaccuracies here are from my own limitations in understanding and attempting to translate these laws, in writing down legal systems meant to be shared in other ways.

28 Jesse Thistle, "The Puzzle of the Morrissette-Arcand Clan: A History of Métis Historic and Intergenerational Trauma" (MA thesis, University of Waterloo, 2016), 2.

29 McAdams, *Nationhood Interrupted,* 60.

30 Thistle, "The Puzzle," 42.

31 McAdams, *Nationhood Interrupted*, 47.

collective over the individual, not vaguely, but through specific relationships: "[it is] the understanding that, when we are born into our humanity, we are born into our nation's obligations and responsibilities."[32]

Kinship delineates blood ties, but also connections in addition to family, including but not limited to marriage, kin, trade, law, and social structures.[33] Oral histories of treaty making during Treaty 6[34] show how kinship is co-constituted with ancestry and community connection:

> When treaties became binding, it became a ceremonial covenant of adoption between two families. kiciwâminanak, our cousins: that is what my elders said to call you. In nêhiyaw law, the treaties were adoptions of one nation by another. At Treaty 6 the nêhiyawak adopted the Queen and her children. We became relatives. When your ancestors came to this territory, kiciwâminiwak, our law applied. These kinship relationships were active choices, a state of relatedness or connection by adoption.[35]

Though buffalo hunt governance is not actively practiced by the Métis now, its structures of reciprocity, sharing, and awareness of the collective remain central to Michif culture.[36] The land informs understanding of nêhiyaw law, as another relationship to reckon with: "The land is intertwined in a most profound manner, so to separate the two would mean death to many aspects of nêhiyaw culture."[37] It is impossible to conceive of nêhiyaw law without the "inextricable relationships between land, bodies, time, and stories."[38] Kinship is connected to land; it grounds this accountability as "we must liberate both land and life by actively honouring our responsibilities to kinship in this moment, fostering good relations within all creation in our intentions and actions." [39] Those good relations can also extend the breadth of a librarians' responsibilities to consider how research affects our students.

32 McAdams, *Nationhood Interrupted*, 22.

33 Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1980), cited in Thistle, "The Puzzle," 5.

34 Treaty 6 was signed in 1876 between the British Crown and Indigenous nations, primarily the nêhiyaw. There were several adhesions to Treaty 6: Michel Callihoo, the author's ancestor, signed an adhesion to Treaty 6 on September 18, 1878 (giving his name as Michel Calistrois).

35 McAdams, *Nationhood Interrupted,* 24.

36 Thistle, "The Puzzle," 3.

37 McAdams, *Nationhood Interrupted,* 23.

38 Zoe Todd, "Relationships," *Theorizing the Contemporary. Cultural Anthropology,* January 21, 2016, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/799-relationships.

39 Lindsay Nixon, "Visual Cultures of Indigenous Futurisms," *GUTS Magazine*, May 20, 2016, http://gutsmagazine.ca/visual-cultures.

wâhkôhtowin as a Model for Teaching

Informed by the context of our relationship to the land and to each other, wâhkôhtowin allows librarians to position ourselves in a framework of care because it recognizes that those who teach information literacy are responsible not only for the mental work of research but also for providing an ethic of care. We can lean on "principles of loving accountability and reciprocity [that are] deeply embedded in Indigenous legal orders and relationships"[40] to guide our research relationships. This accountability informs us, as librarians, of our responsibilities to those we teach: it helps us understand that we are responsible for teaching to a comprehensive sense of research, not only a mental exercise. Awareness of emotional, spiritual, and physical health become necessary principles in teaching students about accessing information.

In nêhiyaw worldviews, kinship and relationality are core values; knowing how you are related to other people is essential. wâhkôhtowin defines those relationships, even beyond familial kinship ties. There is space for librarians as instructors to see themselves as responsible for building a student's research capacity, including the physical, emotional, and spiritual components of challenging research; within this concept is a sense of holistic care and radical love that requires a recognition of emotion as wellness. We go beyond relationships (vaguely defined) to kinship (clearly, strictly defined). Zoe S. Todd suggests we use kinship to face the past, present, and future with care—tending to relationships between people, place, and stories through reciprocity, love, and accountability.[41]

From this lens, creating capacity for self-care is a responsibility for librarians working in academic contexts. Considering our professional work as building wâhkôhtowin allows us to engage in reconciliatory action and avoid the trap of decolonizing without centering Indigenous thought, which Lindsay Nixon warns infantilizes "those Indigenous people who exercise agency in their interactions with the state, including elders."[42] Decolonization only occurs by re-centering Indigenous ways of knowing, rather than layering them superficially on a Western conception of the world.

Kinship is less concerned with us as individuals, but more concerned with our relationships to others; it delineates who we are accountable to and responsible for. It is built on a radical love. As an "okanaw'masinahikanêw"— a nêhiyaw word for librarian that translates to "the one who watches the

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40 Todd, "Relationships."

41 Todd, "Relationships."

42 Nixon, "Visual Cultures."

books"—I have a responsibility not only to my materials, but also to the people accessing these materials, those who engage in a research relationship with me and the information they seek. pamihisiw—the act of self-care, attending to oneself, knowing when to take a break, to make sense of the research's effect on us—is a crucial information literacy skill.

Indigenous librarian and researcher Deborah Lee gives us a starting place, rooted in Indigenous values, for librarians to conceive of our responsibilities and roles within the research relationships we nurture with students.[43] By expanding her ideas about building relationships between librarians and those who use our services, I hope that librarians can recognize when research may be a violent, traumatic experience. As academic librarians, we teach students how to assess, critique, find, and use resources; we must also instruct them on the lasting effects of doing traumatic research and give them tools to take care of themselves in this process.

wâhkôhtowin as Radical Love

Critical librarianship allows us to humanize processes, to think about the unquestioned assumptions of our profession. In many ways, Indigenous perspectives on information and Indigenous ways of knowing dovetail with this work. Yet relationality, the defined roles in how we are related to each other, and reciprocity, who we are accountable to and responsible for, informed by our relationships to the land, are often missing from discussions of critical librarianship. Relationality and reciprocity animate the work of information literacy as Indigenous resurgence: this kind of project "is inanimate without an ethics of love and kinship as a guiding principle. True deliverance from settler colonial occupation finds its foundation in Indigenous knowledges that understand land, love, and life as one and the same."[44] Is there space in critical librarianship for Indigenous kinship, for wâhkôhtowin? The space is overwhelmingly white in many cases. The language is academic, woven through theory that is largely inaccessible to the communities that librarians serve. The canon of critical librarianship, even when it considers race, is firmly rooted in American perspectives and in America, discussions of race rarely include Native Americans. Though critical librarianship prompts us to ask who is missing from these conversations, I still don't see my people's voices being amplified. Where are the Indigenous people in critical librarianship?

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43 Lee, "Aboriginal Students in Canada," 265.

44 Nixon, "Visual Cultures."

To truly "Indigenize" the library as an institution would be to transform academia beyond recognition: educational institutions have played an unmistakable role in the genocidal project of the Americas. Indigenization must go beyond beautifying the place or engaging in more accountable collection development; instead, it must make room for Indigenous ways of knowing, while recognizing that Indigenous knowledge has been systematically discredited by academia. This violent process is at the core of much research and as librarians teach information literacy without acknowledging that history, we continue to disregard the emotional and spiritual health of student researchers. Librarians should see building kinship and the resulting responsibility to create capacity for self-care during research as a fundamental component of Indigenous information literacy that combats the historical and ongoing violence experienced by Indigenous researchers in universities.

Conclusion

Creating capacity in student researchers for self-care as they navigate challenging research is essential to an Indigenous information literacy framework. Librarians who perceive their research relationships through kinship in a nêhiyaw (Cree) and Michif (Métis) worldview have defined roles by relationality which structure the accountability towards their students. In our roles as teachers, we are responsible for students' holistic health while researching.

This approach creates more questions for us: relationality is a complicated concept and librarians are already pushed for time. So the prompt to "do more" is challenging. With what time? With what resources? wâhkôhtawin, a nêhiyaw concept of relationality that defines roles and responsibilities, may give us clearer guidelines on who librarians are accountable to and responsible for — a chance for further research.

In his study of historical Métis trauma, Jesse Thistle noted that the self-care strategies used by other scholars dealing with intergenerational trauma ranged widely.[45] Detailing specific self-care strategies is beyond the scope for this particular chapter and although strategies vary widely from individual to individual, kinship dictates that librarians, in their research relationships with students, create space in research for self-care, particularly when research is traumatic and violent. This is a component of information literacy: how to find good research, how to assess it, but also how to assess its effect on our lives. We do not do research only mentally; emotional, spiritual, and physical health must be factors in how we teach students about accessing information.

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45 Thistle, "Vicarious Trauma."

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