CHAPTER 9

A Practice of Connection

Applying Relational-Cultural Theory to Librarianship

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Introduction

In this chapter we apply relational-cultural theory (RCT) to librarianship through community storytelling and autoethnography. Autoethnography is a "qualitative, reflexive, ethnographic method where the researcher is also the subject of inquiry."[1] It is a relational method of research, helping us "understand knowledge in terms of relationships, in context, and not abstracted through the lens of borrowed theory."[2] What follows is a brief primer on RCT and a series of stories generated through conversation and linked through theory and collective reflection. This chapter models a way of building relational competence, "the capacity to effect change [through] relationship,"[3] which is how we hope to create positive transformation through connection and help others realize that possibility in their work lives. We first publicly shared our experiences with RCT at the

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2018 Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium (CLAPS) and the Association for College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) 2019 "Recasting the Narrative" conference and were heartened to hear how RCT tenets that had helped us make sense of our own work resonated with LIS workers' and students' experiences, values, and praxes. This chapter is a continuation of that conversation, honoring the work of RCT theorists by sharing applications of RCT to librarianship.

What Is RCT?

RCT is a model of human development that posits that "connection is at the core of human growth and development."[4] It has developed and expanded through a series of meetings, papers, conferences, and books held between and written by Jean Baker Miller, Judith V. Jordan, Alexandra G. Kaplan, Irene P. Stiver, Janet L. Surrey, Maureen Walker, and Linda M. Hartling. As clinicians, supervisors, and teachers, these women observed that dominant models of human development which stressed autonomy and independence had a detrimental impact on clients of all genders, but particularly women, who were pathologized as underdeveloped or overly dependent. They questioned the "usefulness of a psychology that elevates and celebrates the separate self"[5] and rightly characterized it as a tool of dominant white, cis male, middle-class, heterosexual culture. In RCT the "path of human development is through movement to increasingly differentiated and growth-fostering connection."[6] We all grow through and toward relationship, and those relationships are positioned within a larger sociocultural context where race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation all complicate connection.[7] RCT is a way of understanding our growth as people, our relationships to others, and the primacy of connection in our lives.

The central tenets of RCT have evolved over the years but are generally agreed to be the following:

Mutuality or *intersubjective mutuality* is an "appreciation of the wholeness of the other person" with whom you are in relationship.[8] It's a reciprocal acknowledgment and respect of the other person's humanity and unique, subjective life experience.

Empathy is a complex cognitive and affective process that requires "a well-differentiated sense of self," as well as an appreciation for the other person. It is a "temporary identification with the other's state" in order to better understand the other person and create growth in the relationship.[9]

Vulnerability is a person's ability to represent themselves more fully in a relationship. It is more accurately described as *relational authenticity*, which is "not the same thing as total honesty …it is about quality of presence."[10] It's about being genuinely engaged in the relationship, however brief.

Openness is not synonymous with a lack of boundaries. Boundaries are essential for self-protection, self-differentiation, "respect, clarity, and responsibility" in relationship. However, it is about using boundaries as meeting places to "open ourselves to being known, to being moved, and to moving another person."[11]

Power with, NOT power over is a frequent refrain within RCT. Within Western cultures, we tend to think of power as synonymous with authority, something to be wielded while lording over others, making people do as we say. Within RCT, Miller describes power as "the capacity to produce a change."[12] This can mean "moving one's own thoughts or emotions" or creating movement in relationship.[13] Power is about mutual empowerment rather than power hoarding, ensuring that all individuals in the relationship benefit.[14]

Growthful conflict is highly valued within RCT. It is a "necessary part of relationships, essential for the changes that must be made so that the relationship and each person in it can change and grow."[15] When conflict happens, we have an opportunity to learn from the disconnection and to do our best to move back into connection with one another.

RCT has been applied outside of the mental health therapeutic context to understanding workplace dynamics, higher education, teaching, assessment, and, most recently, librarianship.[16] The work of three of the chapter authors and Symphony Bruce, Torie Quiñonez, and Antonia Olivas has looked at reference work, teaching, instruction coordination, and librarianship as a whole through an RCT lens.[17]

Why Stories?

As we contemplated how to share the ways in which RCT has enriched our professional practice, we turned to both our interactions as a community of practice and the models of scholarship set by the originators of RCT. So much of our learning and processing of RCT took place through conversation. We shared experiences, related them to our reading, and found connections between theory and practice. This method was modeled after the originating RCT theorists, who practiced collaborative writing, conversational tone, and use of clinical examples and narrative in their essays. Their process of community knowledge building broadened our perspective on the forms scholarship can take. Each of our stories connects different aspects of academic librarianship to facets of RCT. Where there is overlap is where we come together as practitioners and scholars to further our understanding of the primacy of connection and relationship in our work.

Power with/Establishing Boundaries—Joanna Gadsby

My engagement with RCT, particularly the idea of *power with* rather than *power over*, has taken place primarily through teaching and learning. To share power is to create energy and movement in learning, which serves the essential goal of teaching.[18] When we examine power sharing from the perspective of instruction librarians in the classroom, we often reveal a lack of agency. Teaching faculty typically set the tone and determine the content for their class, even those sessions that involve library instruction, without consultation or collaboration. Our efforts end up feeling disconnected or dropped in. We need more narratives surrounding what it looks like for faculty and librarians to contribute equally to instruction in the classroom, and this requires intentional effort to move toward mutually empowering relationships. If the work we do together is built on mutual respect, this enhances the experience for everyone involved. There is relational work to be done before the lesson planning even begins, particularly in how the program is structured.

My library's instruction department often starts this relational work through setting boundaries via policy. One such policy is a requirement for two weeks' notice from faculty in order to schedule a class. The lead time exists as a general courtesy to the librarians with busy calendars, but it also allows time for planning and thoughtful integration of the library session into the course's curriculum. Unofficially, in the past, many of our department's more seasoned librarians, myself included, would honor a last-minute request from a faculty member to work with their students the next day or after another length of time shorter than two weeks. The librarians who chose to schedule these classes did so due to their own comfort level with teaching as well as an interest in accommodating faculty and their students. This created inconsistencies with the librarians who chose to enforce the department's policy.

As the department's instruction coordinator, I could have decided to either discard this policy or insist on its enforcement. However, we do our best work together when we function as a community of practice; utilizing the principles of relational-cultural theory would help us reach community agreement. A unilateral decision on my part would reduce the strength and power of our group,[19] so I organized a meeting for us to work through these inconsistencies. We agreed that everyone would remain consistent on the two weeks' notice as a way of drawing a clear boundary. In doing so, we create space for those who need the additional time without them having to ask for it.

This conversation led to discussion about other scheduling policies that would help our teaching librarians feel more empowered as a unit and allow us to do our best work without risking burnout. We developed a policy that states that all classes must be scheduled and on the calendar by the midpoint of the semester; sessions can take place later in the semester, but the teaching faculty need to make the request before midterms. After that deadline, classes cannot be added. We felt that continuing to add classes later in the semester did a disservice to our department and did not allow us to do our best teaching. It is easier to get through what can be an exhausting time line when you know what lies ahead, which becomes more difficult when responsibilities are continually added to the pile.

This process allowed members of our teaching team to be vulnerable by asking for consistency in policy, to show support for one another and give the program greater strength in solidarity, and to set some clear boundaries for our time and energy. These boundaries "potentially include the capacity to authentically represent one's needs and feelings in a context that holds some promise of mutuality."[20] Although our new policies were not a definitive guarantee that instructors would enter into a professional relationship with teaching librarians from a place of mutual respect and openness, it did set a necessary foundation for mutuality and relational authenticity.

Onboarding Is Relational—Lalitha Nataraj

Four years ago, I started reflecting on how collegial and validating relationships could contribute to a sense of empowerment within the workplace. I had just made the transition to academic librarianship after working as a public librarian for over a decade; this was largely motivated by a desire for greater agency and autonomy in my work. I also wanted to leave behind dysfunctionality, which included incivility, mission creep, and resilience narratives[21]—these problems were systemic issues in the public libraries in which I worked, exacerbated by dwindling budgets. Staff felt pressured to demonstrate value by increasing productivity despite dwindling resources, which led to burnout.

Many of the aforementioned issues, particularly resilience narratives, stem from entrenched bureaucratic practices in libraries[22] that compound fundamental organizational problems.[23] Bureaucracies withhold information to maintain power structures and force employees to manage their expectations and emotions around work, as well as adopting a scarcity mentality of doing more with less.[24]

Norms were often unstated, and I frequently learned the "correct" way to do (or be) after committing gaffes and being on the receiving end of judgment and criticism from my coworkers. Such feelings lead to low morale and manifest as "work dread …reduced professional confidence, reduced ability to concentrate, self-censorship, and depression."[25]

In each job where I had such discomfiting experiences, I observed that onboarding processes were minimal, poorly defined, or nonexistent. During onboarding, a new employee is "introduced to the organization, its work culture, and its mission and values. Much of the tone of new staff members' supervisory, departmental, and administrative relationships is struck in this period."[26] When it's done properly, the onboarding process allows an employee to fully realize what Morandin, Russo, and Bergami refer to as the future relational self, which encompasses the types of relationships one hopes to foster and sustain with colleagues in the workplace.[27] Research has shown that affective experiences at work contribute to positive outcomes for the employee and the organization. The onboarding process potentially forecasts a person's capacity to "adjust to the social dynamics of the new workplace …and to develop a clear understanding of the expectations associated with their new role."[28] But when it's done poorly, onboarding is an aspect of what Kendrick refers to as an overall *enabling system* within the organization that reifies low morale.[29]

I vividly recall my very first day of work as a public librarian; I arrived just before the library opened, but I didn't have my card key yet, so I waited for my coworkers to let me into the building. Two passed by, and when I smiled and tried to make eye contact with them, they hurried into the library while I ended up walking in with our patrons. Later, those colleagues admitted that they didn't realize who I was; this minor interaction, as well as the fact that my direct supervisor was unavailable to meet me, cast a pall on that day. I was also scheduled for a solo shift on the reference desk and expected to intuitively figure out the catalog and shelving system while delivering stellar service to our library patrons.

Jordan writes that the "need to connect, and the need to contribute in a meaningful way, to be competent, productive, and creative, optimally flow together."[30] This stark lack of an onboarding process was one manifestation of "power-over" dynamics in this library. In a power-over relationship, one person (or specific group) sets the "rules for discourse and the direction that the relationship will take."[31] In that first month, I was told by several colleagues (including managers) about previous employees who had not passed probation, and no one knew why. These pointed disclosures unnerved me such that in the first twelve months of this job, I spent a lot of time feeling as if I had to engage in preemptive damage control. Onboarding is part and parcel of a psychological contract between the

new employee and the employer where formalized socialization impacts a person's capacity to develop enduring relationships and be successful in their job.[32]

While my career in public librarianship was replete with such experiences, I found a supportive environment in the academic library. But here also, the formal onboarding process was somewhat lacking; my office space was not set up appropriately—I used a conference room chair for several weeks as my desk chair—and it took me several months to understand the campus governance structure. Interdependence between various library units is vital to relationship building and collegiality, and that took me a while to understand. The crucial difference between this job and my previous ones was that my colleagues in the academic library did not judge me harshly for the mistakes I inevitably made; on the contrary, they encouraged me to lean into discomfort and to forgo self-consciousness for the sake of improving my skills. I learned that the teaching and learning department had a relational awareness, or attentiveness to others' needs,[33] and prioritized the collective well-being of its members. As an adjunct lecturer librarian, and later a tenure-track librarian, I was acknowledged as a fully contributing member of the department, helping to shape norms and teaching practices. However, these contexts were clear only after I spent significant time within the department. Several of us agreed that we needed a more explicit onboarding process for new lecturers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, one of my colleagues, April Ibarra Siqueiros, drafted a relational onboarding document that extended beyond a "transactional and informational onboarding …to make space for the existing expertise and skills of a new librarian to share with the department."[34] This document describes our current anti-racism efforts, our reflective teaching philosophies, and even the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) affinity groups we have formed in our library. Here, we have a "power-with" dynamic, where the primary focus is on creating connections to enhance existing relationships and empower one another.[35]

Navigating Workplace Conflict—Alana Kumbier

RCT has helped me, as a white person who was socialized to "avoid, ignore, and deny conflict,"[36] learn to navigate—and even welcome—growthful conflict in the workplace. The conflict that shines brightest in my memory is the one where I felt the greatest sense of disappointment in myself. I was in charge of a hiring process to expand a cohort of alumni fellows working with the library. The cohort included multiple Black, queer, transgender, and nonbinary people. In order to

give prospective hires a sense of what the fellowship involved, I asked current fellows to meet with the candidates for question-and-answer conversation time. I envisioned the meetings as nonevaluative, as the cohort members would not be on the hiring committee.

I didn't realize, until a fellow spoke with me about the process, that I'd basically created a situation of fake inclusion. The fellow, a Black queer person, shared their experience of meeting with candidates for several hours of their workweek, acting as a workplace representative, and developing a stake in the hiring process without having structural agency or decision-making power in the outcome. This was especially hard for the cohort members because they cared deeply about their work, the future of the project they were supporting, and the students who these candidates would support. I had included BIPOC fellows in the process in ways that benefited the candidates and the organization, but by excluding them from the decision-making process, I reproduced racialized and role-contingent structures of power and value in the library.[37] For BIPOC, this practice of fake inclusion and racialized exclusion can contribute to traumatic stress and the experience of a work environment as unsafe.[38]

As we moved into our conversation, I reminded myself of the RCT perspective that these moments can be generative and that they are normal. As Bergman and Surrey argue,

> Constructive conflict and *struggling with difference* are inevitable in relationships. They stimulate growth when the creative tension of *staying with the differences* is supported by the relational context. What Miller has called 'waging good conflict' (1976) can lead to growth and enlargement of relationships.[39]

Approaching a conflict with this perspective allowed me to focus on listening with openness and empathy, for understanding.

I appreciated that this was a moment for building our connection: as the cohort member shared their experience, I better understood how the situation made them feel and what it meant to them. I also maintained awareness of the cultural contexts for our conversation. As a white supervisor and person in solidarity with BIPOC coworkers, I am responsible for interrupting histories of racial violence that result in harm, separation, and disconnection. When white coworkers dismiss or otherwise disrespect BIPOC coworkers' experiences and perspectives, BIPOC coworkers have reason to withdraw from connection (in the present and in the future) because their authentic expression has resulted in "isolation, devaluation, and disconnection."[40] By listening with openness and

empathy, I followed psychotherapist Roseann Adams's guidance to "[take] responsibility for the co-creation of a context of safety within a racially unsafe culture."[41]

As I listened to the fellow and heard what they shared, some of my familiar conflict feelings surfaced: strong disappointment in myself for creating the situation, anger that I was having to navigate a conflict, panic about not having a solution, dread at the thought of sharing my faults with my supervisor, and defensiveness. My emotional responses resonated with a larger set of power-over moves I'd witnessed and experienced in my work with other white managers: reasserting the status quo ("that's just how it is"), trying to name a deficiency on the coworker's part, minimizing the situation ("we all experience that"), or encouraging them to calm down as a way to foreclose authentic sharing. These are all common ways power-over culture shows up in conflicts, including cross-cultural or interracial conflict. As I noticed what was coming up internally, I was also aware that these intense feelings, and my disappointment at having them, made me want to cry.

I knew, as a white person, that my crying in response to feedback from a Black person about racist actions would be (intentionally or not) a power-over move: white people may employ our tears to signal our status as the hurt or victimized party in a conflict, to dodge accountability, and to garner empathy that might otherwise be directed to a Black person sharing a grievance or experience. I couldn't stop my physiological response, but I could own it and acknowledge where it was coming from: my anger and disappointment at myself—not the fellow's feedback. The fellow and I had been in our relationship long enough that they knew I was prone to expressing all kinds of big feelings through tears, but still: recognizing the power dynamics that could play out in this particular crying moment was essential to maintaining mutuality. As we continued our conversation, I acknowledged the harm the fellow experienced and shared my heartfelt appreciation for their trusting me with their story. I asked if we could spend the rest of our meeting time talking through their ideas for what should happen so I could gather information to bring to others involved in the process. We didn't come up with a solution to the problem in that meeting, but we left the conversation having grown our mutual respect, trust, and empathy.

What's Legal Advice Anyway?—Anastasia Chiu

As a scholarly communications librarian, I staff an informational consultation service on copyright and fair use in research and teaching. One of my first

consultations was with a team of instructional designers building an online course for faculty members. I had just transitioned from cataloging and metadata to scholarly communications, and the work was a big change in terms of relationship building and interpersonal dynamics. Although I wasn't new to talking about copyright and fair use with colleagues and library users, it was my first time reinforcing the line between an informational consultation and legal advice.

The team I spoke with in this consultation sought to understand whether they could rely on fair use, a commonly used exception to copyright, to provide access to copyrighted materials in various ways and for various class uses on the course site. My goal in the conversation was to give general information about how to think through fair use. As we moved through the conversation, many of the team's questions became more specific and began to range into legal advice territory, including questions like "Is it fair use to do X or not?" or "How much legal risk is there in doing Y?"

Although I am not a lawyer and it's impossible for anything I say to be legal advice, my manager *is* licensed as a lawyer but is not positioned to provide legal advice in this role. It is important that both of us provide consultations with similar openness and boundaries. Therefore, I began reframing some of the team's questions to speak more generally about fair use. When team members insisted that I answer their question specifically as framed, I expressed that the question required legal advice. I could help them understand copyright and fair use, but decisions about whether and how to use copyrighted materials were theirs to make based on their own knowledge of the materials and the course needs. In most of my consultations, which are usually with faculty members, this is generally met with acceptance, if tinged with slight disappointment. In this case, it was met with gently expressed but unmistakable frustration and tiredness. Members of the team emphasized their positionality as staff members and expressed their frustration in being responsible for seamless course design, but they did not consider themselves institutionally empowered to take risks of any kind in doing so.

Although I expected that the team might experience vulnerability in asking for help, I did not anticipate their range of sentiments. Our consultation service's goal is to build power with scholars and teachers, but it seemed clear that they were not experiencing our interaction as mutual, and my overtures toward openness in the conversation were not aligned with where they experienced need or desire for openness. From a relational-cultural perspective, I understood that the instructional design team members emphasized their positionality in part because they wanted reciprocally authentic responsiveness—"movement into fuller and deeper connection with the feeling-thoughts of the moment."[42] At

first, I struggled to do this within my boundary of providing general information without entering legal advice territory. I saw from the team members' frustration that simply stating "I can't give legal advice" in response to a question, especially after they had given voice to vulnerability, was understood as a refusal to meet them with mutuality. I sought to build more openness into my responses, sometimes by providing further examples and analysis and sometimes by pointing them to a source that provided further clarity. Eventually, over the course of many follow-ups, we began to establish a less stumbling rhythm of conversation with a stronger sense of how to ask questions of each other and answer each other's questions.

In reflection, and over the course of more consultations like this one, I came to realize that I could insist upon my boundary while also explaining it more clearly. It is not always self-evident what kinds of questions require legal advice and how they can be reframed to empower all parties to engage. Many people, including myself, often navigate the legal advice boundary by bumping up against it more than once. Although having this particular boundary bumped into does not harm me, the memory of this interaction reminds me that it can be frustrating for library users to move through a consultation with the sense that they have to navigate an important boundary through trial and error. Since that consultation, I have worked on providing explanations around what kinds of questions I can speak to most directly and on building the skill of framing questions and answers in ways that ensure that both users and I can engage in an open conversation together about copyright and fair use.

Connection in the Classroom—Veronica Arellano Douglas

In February 2021 winter storm Uri hit Texas, pushing the state's aging power grid to a breaking point and leaving much of the population without power and water in freezing temperatures. Classes at the University of Houston, already held virtually in response to COVID-19 pandemic precautions, were canceled, as students and instructors struggled to meet basic needs for the week. When we all finally returned to our virtual workplaces and classrooms, we were weary, a little jittery anytime the lights flickered, and thankful that we were lucky enough to get through the storm when we all knew that some folks did not.[43]

My first class after the storm was a research workshop for a psychology research methods course. It was scheduled at a time when the instructor expected all students to have selected a research topic so that they could begin to engage

with the research literature in support of a final research proposal. Not surprisingly, none of us were in the curricular, emotional, or cognitive state we thought we would be in when I first scheduled the workshop with the instructor. We'd all just been through a traumatic event, one we could not just ignore and push past during a sixty-minute class. Instead we took time at the beginning of the workshop to check in with one another and offer words of affirmation and care. I began with the following:

> I'm glad we're all here today. Are you doing ok? How is your house? Any burst pipes? Do you need anything? I know, it was awful. We aren't where we thought we'd be in the semester and that is totally OK. We will just work with where we are right now. I'm so happy to see you all here today.

Some students really wanted to dig into research, but most were still trying to gather their thoughts after an incredibly stressful week. The instructor herself was frazzled and off schedule. It was a rare moment of almost instantaneous trust in the classroom fueled by a shared experience and need to connect. More than anything we all wanted to come together that day to regain a sense of connection and routine during an already stressful time made even more intense by an unexpected winter snowstorm. It was a moment of what Judith V. Jordan refers to as "supported vulnerability."[44] We all, in that moment, experienced a need for emotional acknowledgment. We wanted to be seen and briefly share what we had all been through. In doing so we were quite vulnerable, as we were "letting people directly know about our need."[45] Yet by expressing and maintaining a sense of openness to one another—a mutual desire to speak, listen, be heard, and connect—we were able to honor that vulnerability and support one another through the process. The conversation was not without boundaries, as even in supported vulnerability boundaries are a necessary method of cultivating trust. No one was asked to share anything. No one was made to express anything they weren't able or willing to express, and some people did choose to remain silent. Yet those who needed to discuss the events of the last week were able to come together at their boundary, their place of meeting, and move forward together by acknowledging a shared event.[46]

One thing I take from that event and the sharing that took place in the classroom after it is the way in which mutuality was at the center of healing and connection. Students later expressed, as they brainstormed ideas for research topics, that they were anxious, unable to sleep, nervous, and stressed out. These were all very normal reactions to an acute moment of trauma in a year of

pandemic isolation. In "Relational Resilience," Jordan states that as a society we "cannot continue to pathologize individual adaptations to socially destructive patterns."[47] Rather than pathologize students whose ideas around research were being informed by an event caused by government, economic, and infrastructure failings, we as a class decided to validate those feelings and explore them as nuanced ideas for research informed by experience.

In that moment we were relationally authentic, present "with the thoughts and feelings occurring in the relationship."[48] There was a sense of mutual empathy, of openness and willingness to engage with one another. Without that trust and confidence it was highly unlikely that any kind of learning could have occurred in that workshop. Irene Stiver states that "authenticity is a process in movement."[49] By moving together we were all able to create a learning space where we could set our own boundaries, express a need for help when it was needed, and maintain a sense of openness to learn and grow. Although this particular instance of connection, trust, and relational authenticity was born out of a shared experience, it continues to inspire me to seek moments of connection and relational authenticity in all of my teaching opportunities. As teacher librarians we need to ask ourselves how we can create a safe haven for supported vulnerability in our classes and how we can foster confidence in the relationships we create in our learning environments. "Relationship [is] the site and source of learning"[50]—so how can we make sure these relationships are healthy, connected, and capable of creating change?

Conclusion

Centering relationships and connection in library work, though complex and difficult, can be a transformative practice. RCT can provide an important framework for critically thinking through how our work affects ourselves and others. It stresses the development of significant skills to be able to hold relational priorities of mutuality, empathy, openness, vulnerability/authenticity, power with, and growthful conflict, all in balance with other goals for our work. In a broader political economy that values productivity above all, and values relationality only insofar as it encourages productivity, these relational skills are rarely intentionally cultivated. And because library work is a part of this broader system of ideals around labor, the work that goes into relational aspects of library work is often made invisible or labeled as "the soft stuff" despite the centrality of relationships and connection to library services. Much of the connection that we, as a community of practice, have forged with each other has grown by illuminating the invisibilized relational aspects of our work together. Through our

shared reading and conversations, we learned to articulate the acts of moving through relationships within our work—with our students, our colleagues, and our organizations—and seek ways to build the types of relationships that we aspire toward with each other. The wideness and variety of ways in which we have already begun to apply RCT consciously in our work indicates that there are many nooks, crannies, and crevices for this framework to show up in LIS. As this thread of scholarship and practice grows, we eventually hope to see the field develop practices and priorities acknowledging that, in fact, the soft stuff *is* the real stuff.

Notes

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