



NATALIE ROBERTSON

TE AHIKĀROA
HOME FIRES BURNING

C.N. GORMAN MUSEUM
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA DAVIS

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The C.N. Gorman Museum would like to thank our dedicated membership
and sponsors for their generous support of this exhibition.



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Tikapa Marae. Pokai mahau looking out to Waiapu Ngutu Awa, 2010/2013
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 32 x 41

FOREWORD

The C. N. Gorman Museum extends a warm welcome to Natalie Robertson. We are honored to host her solo exhibition, *Te Ahikāroa: Home Fires Burning*.

I first became acquainted with Robertson's artistic vision and perspectives through our encounters during the Indigenous Photographers Gatherings (*Our People, Our Land, Our Images* in 2006 and *Visual Sovereignty* in 2009) hosted by the C.N. Gorman Museum. My first impressions were solid as Robertson introduced herself in te reo Maori, identifying through landscape, an oral topography of relationships, the introduction of connectedness to mountain, river, te waka (canoe), and te iwi (people). She proceeded to engage everyone with her extensive knowledge and practice of photography. From this memorable beginning, it was evident that the future would be full of creative collaboration and friendship.

When one sees the word 'photographer', the image brought to mind is often of one person, one camera, one perspective, travel and the exotic. Of course, I am referring to a 'western' description which is light years away from the realities of Indigenous photographers who are dedicated to maintaining images of family, community and visual translations of Indigenous philosophies. As a photographer and writer, Robertson resolutely cultivates the visual dialogue of cultural intersections.

It is important to state how well Robertson carries herself and her community. In 2007, she was the catalyst for *Nga Kaiwhakaahua*, a Maori photographic collective (John Miller, Aimee Ratana, Orewa Kingi,

Himiona Grace, Rochelle Huia Smith, Davina Monds) that received a Te Waka Toi grant to support the "Nga kaiwhaakahua Maori Photographers Marae Photography Pilot Project" documenting Marae and communities throughout Aotearoa.

I must also add a touch of personal connectedness. When one is in the presence of Robertson, Maui, the trickster is evoked, and unexpected events unfold, in a good way, as we say. The laughter, the conversations, being in the right place at the right time, all make for incredible stories.

Te Ahikāroa: Home Fires Burning exemplifies the mission of the C. N. Gorman Museum. For forty-one years, the museum has been dedicated to the creative expressions of Native American artists and artists of diverse cultures and histories. This also includes evoking the essence of K'e, the Diné philosophical understanding of relatedness, compassion and responsibility - not only to humans but also to animals, the environment and the immaterial. A predetermined connectedness to all that is complex and beautifully balanced.

Robertson's images and writings bring forth ancestral fortitude, political consciousness and a pellucid mindfulness of one's legacy to the forthcoming generations. Precious are these images. They fuel dreams and provide visual sustenance that includes us all.

Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie
Museum Director

"Te Ahikāroa: Home Fires Burning, is a stunning exhibition that captures the scenery, the people, the ebb and flow of the tide and of life on the East Cape/ Tairawhiti, Aotearoa/NZ."

Ani Pahuru-Huriwai, Community Activist,
Te Whanau-a-Tuwhakairiora

"Te Ahikāroa: Home Fires Burning: Natalie Robertson's photography beautifully encapsulates the essence of the coastal East Cape/Tairawhiti. She does this through a lens not of a stranger, but of one who belongs. She has a deep respect for tradition, observes local customs and protocols, and this comes through in her work."

Keri Kaa (CNZM), Tribal elder, Te Whanau-a-Takimoana



Keri Kaa on Tairawhiti mahau, Hinepare Marae, Rangitukia, 2012/2013
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 22 x 28

TE AHIKĀROA: HOME FIRES BURNING

Natalie Robertson

I.

It wasn't until I reached adulthood that I began a corporeal relationship with my grandfather's Ngati Porou tribal homeland, a place that occupied so much of my imagination. Boulders have gone, dynamited for road metal; houses and buildings of Port Awanui township have long since been pulled down or relocated. Bullock tracks have overgrown and the road has washed into Waiotautu stream, now passable by four-wheel drive vehicles only. Rolling out of my mouth now are place names once spoken by Grandad - Omaewa; Port Awanui; Waiapu; Tikapa; Waiomatatini - vowels and soft consonants of the Maori language, our mother tongue.

Stories of place can become magical, mysterious even mythical when recounted face to face. My grandfather's storytelling of his childhood at Port Awanui came to occupy my teen imaginings, where on the beach there were boulders as big as houses. In storms, mammoth tides would come right up to their house and huge waves would smash against their log retaining walls. He told a marvellous and scary story of a huge stingray (always pronounced sting-a-ree), gliding above his small body, silhouetted against the light as he swam in the ocean. In his oral account, Grandad's arms would stretch out wide to show the scale of this creature.

An endless bounty of seafood was recounted along with wretched stories of drownings in the Waiapu River, or horses stuck in quicksand on beaches. Comings and goings of sea vessels into the small

but busy port, and bullock and horse drays traveling overland were fuel for many recollections. His tales involved walking, horse-riding, running, swimming, fishing, all along the beach, from the mouth of the port to the beak of the river.

If he were still living, my grandfather David Hughes, third son of Mabel and Charlie Hughes, would be 110 on October 2nd 2014. By the time this great storyteller was born in 1904, the number of Europeans or Pakehas recorded by the census, north of Uawa, in the districts of Waiapu and Te Araroa, East Cape, Aotearoa (New Zealand) was 858. I wonder if my grandfather and his mother Mabel, the eldest child of Scotsman George Gillespie Boyd and his local Maori wife Riria Kawhena, were recorded as Maori or European in the census of 1906? In addition to raising 13 children, my great grandmother Mabel worked hard to secure her rights to Maori land inherited from Riria and her parents, through the newly established Maori Land Court system. This Court had supplanted customary Maori land titles and tenure with the passing of the Native Lands Act 1862. My grandfather David saw value in land and ensured he inherited his mother's shares. He passed the trusteeship of the land to my cousins and me, in the hope we would retain it and take care of it.

II.

Our beach stretches at one end from a headland known as Port Awanui to the south bank of the Waiapu River mouth, known locally as the Ngutuawa, the beak of the river. From the river mouth, the wide,

open valley with its constantly changing braided riverbed heads inland to the west, where mountains Hikurangi, Whanokao, Aorangi, Wharekia and Taitai dominate the skyline of the Raukumara Ranges. According to our tribal lore, the people of the land have been here since Maui Tikitiki a Taranga fished up the island out of the sea, his canoe Nukutaimemeha coming to rest on the summit of the highest mountain, Hikurangi. From the mountains to the sea, this is a geologically volatile place with measurable change occurring in a lifetime, with earthquakes and tectonic plates shifting. However, it is human impact that has wrought the greatest change to the ecology of this region, most taking place since C19th British colonial settlement.

There is a gap between what is imagined and what is real. If this gap could be measured, perhaps it would be similar to the distance between what was, then, and what is, now. If we measure in mass, our unit might be cubic yards or meters of earth moved. If we measure in weight, it could be the tons of silt washed down the river and out to sea. If we measure in distance, it might be the ever-widening riverbed or beach. If we were to quantify, it might be the number of native trees cut down or the number of unique species lost. If we measure in chronological terms, it might be 150 years.

We cannot measure the disparity between the mind's eye and the extant. The gap, a loss, may be a small fissure or an abysmal chasm. There is no calliper or measuring stick that can account for the loss of an imaginary place or of a real place that has been irrevocably altered.

III.

150 years ago, in 1864, my Ngati Porou great-great grandmother Riria Kawhena was born at Koira, her parent's home at Tikapa, in the Waiapu Valley. 1864 is notable for the escalation of war-mongering assaults by British settlers and Government troops upon Maori and their land in other parts of the country. Born on the cusp of colossal change, Riria was the youngest child of six born to Rawinia Haupehi and Riwai Whatikino, both members of local Maori tribal groups.

They were the first generation of Maori to see the influx of European settlers, consequently experiencing first hand the impacts of colonialism. Many of the newly arrived settlers joined the Militia, a volunteer force. One young migrant who joined the militia in 1864 aged almost 16, would become Riria's husband. By 1874, there were only twenty Pakeha (European settlers) in the Waiapu Valley. One of these was ex-militia Scotsman, George Gillespie Boyd. According to census figures, by 1878, a year before Riria met my great-great grandfather the number of settlers in the region had increased to 109. Perhaps G.G. Boyd was 110th European settler to arrive in the area?

Arriving into the Waiapu Valley at a time of considerable colonial expansion, my great-great grandfather's story aligns with the trajectory of other settlers and the impacts they would have upon indigenous communities and the natural environment. By the time he died, G.G. Boyd had fathered eleven children to three women, all Ngati Porou Maori. A photo of G.G. is the only image of a Pakeha man hanging in our Pokai tribal meetinghouse at Tikapa, perhaps testimony to his many Maori offspring. Riria died prematurely of an introduced



Grandad at Omaewa, Port Awanui, 1995

disease (probably typhoid) on 6th February 1898, 58th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's nation-state founding document. In the thirty-three years since her birth, change had been swift. Riria's burial site at Tikapa Marae has a commanding panoramic view of the Waiapu River out to the mouth where it meets the Pacific Ocean.

Over the intervening 150 years the river has widened significantly, a consequence of land management practices enacted in Riria's short lifetime. Hundreds more European settlers had come. Along with rapid expansion of settlers, came wholesale slash and burn deforestation of native bush, followed by large-scale erosion and landslides. Despite a relatively small catchment area, in the span of 150 years, the Waiapu River now records the highest sediment yield of any river in the world.

IV.

The geography of this place Waiapu is where sea meets land, river meets sea. A tectonically active landscape with a base of tertiary mudstone, it is now ecologically precarious. Mullet and kahawai (a type of salt water salmon or trout) are a once-populous fish species that come into the river mouth on incoming tides. Fish are netted using techniques developed for this river mouth. On the northern side of the river is a hilly range, Te Kautuku, site of an old fortified village. Surviving mass deforestation are a few ti kouka (cabbage) trees. These trees are markers for fishing grounds, triangulated with corresponding trees on the hill to the south of the river, Pohautea. Those ones have been chopped down now in favour of pasture.

During winter floods, the bulk density of sediment flow exceeds the density of seawater, affecting marine life. A plume of silt is often visible way out to sea. If mullet and kahawai disappear, so too shall the way of life, and the ability to feed our manuhiri, our visitors. The resources we need to be able to host include access to our land and seas. We must understand our natural world to be able to harvest and hunt sustainably. When can we gather seaweed and when do the mullet run? What blossoms on which trees indicate that kina, sea urchins, are fat?

V.

While 'Ahi kā' literally means 'site of burning fires', Te Ahi Kā Roa, long burning fires, is a concept of land tenure through continuous occupation or seasonal maintenance of customary rights. It is a deliberate political maintenance of land title claims to ensure rights are not extinguished. It is now often used to refer to people who live all year round on tribal lands, who work to maintain cultural tribal practices. They are Ahi Kā, keepers of the fires. My tribe of Ngati Porou people maintain their ahi kā rights and responsibilities within a specific geographic boundary. Those who live within these boundaries are called ahi kā in recognition of their role in keeping the home fires burning, while those of us who live away are sometimes called taura here, in reference to metaphoric binding ropes that connect us to home.

'Ka wera hoki i te ahi, e mana ana anā. While the fire burns the mana is effective.' This aphorism links together two concepts, Ahikāroa and Manaakitanga, around which my photographic practice circulates and always returns to. Ahi is the Maori word for fire. It is a Pacific-wide word, as is Mana. Mana is a concept to

do with personal power, prestige, authority, influence and charisma. First word of the compound Manaaki, it translates into 'support, take care of, provide hospitality, to protect.' Manaakitanga includes host responsibilities of care and guest responsibilities of reciprocity.

In a Maori worldview hosting includes sharing ones resources with guests, especially food, as generously as one can, even if it means going without once guests have left. People who are renowned for their hunting and gathering are often referred to as Mahi Kai. It has been said providing seafood is one of the highest mana enhancing mechanisms known to the Maori psyche. Once daily activities, the capacity to provide food directly from the environment is now restricted. Customary skill sets required to fish, hunt, or put down a hangi (in-ground oven cooking) that were once common amongst rural people are no longer widespread, as the vast majority have migrated to urban centres.

VI.

In early summer, in the year 2000, I stood on the edge of the land, river and sea at the Ngutuawa, the beak of the river, waving goodbye to my grandfather David Hughes. We had buried him next to my grandmother the day before, some 250kms to the south in Wairoa.

As he lay dying, some four or five days earlier, he talked to me about the confluence of river and sea several times. He told me a story of karaka trees that were once abundant here on the bank of the Waiapu River, about how as a boy of about eight, he would ride down here on his horse, to meet the mailman who would row across the river to give him the

mail. As he waited, he would feel shivers down his spine as the karaka seedpods and branches on the trees made an uncanny sound. Telling this story, my grandfather would rub his dry, wrinkled ninety-six year old hands together to make the noise. He called it the Whispering of the Karaka Trees. When he asked his mother why karaka trees whispered in this way, she told him not to worry, this was the pathway of recently deceased Ngati Porou spirits who were passing through here on their journey from twin peaks of our ancestral mountain Hikurangi, on their return to the spiritual homelands of Hawaiki.

Thus he was taught that this tribal lore was different to other tribes who have different leaping places for departing souls. It was also home to a taniwha, Taho, a mythical creature who claimed a life a year, drowning those who crossed his path in the river. We agreed between us, that I would meet him at the foot of our sentinel mountain Pohautea by the river mouth, as he took his final journey from the place he had spent his childhood. I said I'd wave to him and asked him to wave to me, to give me a sign. In true dramatic style, he made his presence very clear to me, leaving with a great rain shower that misted over distant Whangaokena Island and then, streaming light through clouds akin to biblical paintings, the sudden rain passed.

VII.

I have returned to East Cape each summer since my grandfather passed, camping with family and friends at Port Awanui where the Boyd/Hughes family home 'Omaewa' once stood. Omaewa is now ten acres including coastal accretion, a combination of a grassed area, wetland, extensive introduced wild gorse

and native trees. The heart of Omaewa is an ancient pohutukawa, a huge sprawling native tree that has taken root in a semi-circle.

Returning frequently has deepened and affirmed my relationship to land and sea here and maintains te ahi kā, burning fires to declare our intergenerational occupancy. The politics of return wasn't without tensions, resolved now through regularity of return and formation of new family relationships.

Connecting shared ancestry is an ingrained Maori cultural practice. Pivotal are the Atkins family who have big-heartedly shared food, hearth and knowledge. My relation Graeme Atkins, an award-winning conservation worker, is what is called a 'mahi kai' fulla, a hunter-gatherer food provider. He, his wife Makere, a Maori sciences educator, and offspring Ashlee, Kimiora and Oriwa are the Ahikā people of today. Their intimacy with and collective knowledge of the natural environment is coupled with extraordinary commitment and generosity, always hosting with locally harvested food. There is nothing quite like a fire and seafood delicacies to create legendary stories of hospitality. Recurrent messages 'back around our fire, wish you were here' warm my heart and call me home to the Coast, along with other cousins and friends who join the annual summer camping.

The land my grandfather lived on has changed enormously over the past one hundred years. There are no more karaka trees along the banks of the Waiapu at the foot of our mountain Pohautea. Birds, fat kereru wood pigeons that would once have been prolific, no longer have a home there. Change is afoot though. Afforestation is underway. Invasive plants such

as gorse are used as nurseries for native trees, such as pohutukawa, protecting them from wandering stock.

Ngati Porou as a tribe has a goal to alleviate the environmental damage done. In one hundred years from now perhaps there will be forests again and native birds can return. I imagine a place where trees, birds and fish flourish. I imagine people who are caretakers of the land and their circadian rhythms of the day, food gathering, fishing, cooking and eating. I imagine their home fires burning. I imagine stories told by the fire of those who loved their land. I imagine a coastline rimmed in summer with crimson flowering pohutukawa, from the mouth of the port to the beak of the river.

There is a gap between what is real and what is imagined. If this gap could be measured, perhaps it would be similar to the distance between what is now, and what will be. If we measure in mass, our unit might be cubic meters or yards of earth stabilised. If we measure in volume, it could be the cubic feet of clear water free of suspended sediment. If we measure in length, it might be the miles of fences constructed to protect restorative planting. If we were to tally, it might be the number of native trees planted or the number of introduced pests eradicated. If we measure this gap in the current era of the Cenozoic geological timescale, it might be the wing-beat of a piwakawaka, a fantail.

-- September, 2014

FROM THE MOUTH OF THE PORT TO THE BEAK OF THE RIVER

This series depicts fishing and seafood gathering along a stretch of beach about 30kms south of East Cape. Tikapa Beach is approximately 5km long stretching at one end from a headland known as Port Awanui to the south bank of the Waiapu River mouth, known locally as the Ngutuawa, the beak of the river.

Each summer, this isolated area becomes a temporary camp for a number of families. Intergenerational knowledge of the land and sea is incrementally transmitted to the children through food gathering activities. Te Mahi Kai refers to all the activities associated with finding, preparation and cooking of food. This includes fishing, hunting and gathering as well as cultivating.

The project is concerned with the use and self-determination of indigenous land and knowledge. These images focus on the activities on the south side of the Waiapu River in the rohe of Te Whanau a Hineauta, Te Whanau a Pokai. The rights to collect seafood and fish are maintained through the principles of Ahi Kā Roa.

These works are part of a larger on-going project. The threats to the ecology of traditional food sources and sacred sites through global warming, rising sea levels, post-Fukushima radiation, pollution, deep-sea oil drilling, over-fishing in addition to policies that continue to erode access rights, bring a degree of urgency to this project.



Mussel Gathering, Tikapa Beach, 2014
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 31 x 42



Net fishing, Ngutuawa, Waiapu River (1 of 2), 2014
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 31 x 42



Net fishing, Ngutuawa, Waiapu River (2 of 2), 2014
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 31 x 42



Rock fishing, Port Awanui (1 of 4), 2014
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 31 x 42



Rock fishing, Port Awanui (2 of 4), 2014
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 31 x 42



Rock fishing, Port Awanui (3 of 4), 2014
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 31 x 42



Rock fishing, Port Awanui (4 of 4), 2014
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 31 x 42



Camp, Omaewa, Port Awanui, 2014
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 31 x 42



Pirate camp, Port Awanui, 2014
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 31 x 42



Canadian Goose flapper feathers, Tikapa Beach, 2014
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 18 x 24



Waiapu Kahawai, 2014
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 18 x 24

THE HEADLANDS AWAIT YOUR COMING

In Te Ao Maori, Ahi kā is a cornerstone principle of land rights. In an era during which urban drift and migration abroad depopulates small rural communities, the people who remain on tribal land continue the long burning fires of occupation. Others return seasonally or when occasions call, to contribute to keeping marae 'warm' through usage.

This body of work approaches marae (communal and sacred place that serves cultural and social purposes) and surrounding tribal lands as a lived space in which intergenerational use keeps the fires burning. The people who figure within the frame are of this time, but the practices of maintaining ahi kaa are longstanding. New and often provisional approaches to establish and maintain occupancy emerge along with formulations of sovereignty and resistance, not always visible.

Cities are beginning to displace the agricultural past of the nation-state with increasing isolation from and declining empathy for rural ways of life. Laws developed by urban politicians affect food preparation and exchange, building practices, and water usage, threatening the sovereign right to provide shelter, food and water. Practices in rural communities such as building temporary structures for summer fishing camps, provision of food for large gatherings, and unfettered access to water are all subject to new codes of compliances and laws. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, regions such as Te Tai Tokerau in Northland and the Te Tai Rawhiti (East Cape) where these photographs were made are becoming something of a blind spot when decisions are made by central government.

The daily reality of life in remote rural communities, globally, is in sharp contrast to the city realm. Here, meat can be acquired through hunting and it's always organic; water comes from the sky to the rainwater tank or from a spring, no chlorine added; and if a camping shelter is needed, it can be made from driftwood logs washed up on the beach, found materials or locally milled timber.

Environmental problems such as the impact of deforestation causing massive silting of seafood sources, on diminishing land as it crumbles into the river and roads that shift and move, are oblique and out of frame, not easily discernable to the outside eye. To the insider eye, the practice of cooking in the ground, using rocks that have firstly been heated in the fire above ground, has regional difference, according to the materials available. Volcanic rocks are common in some areas, whereas in non-volcanic regions, these practices may now utilize steel car parts to achieve the heat.

In heavily deforested regions, the only wood available is to be washed up on the beaches. Other areas with sandy porous soil use polythene to keep the heat in. Whenever it rains heavily, landslips frequently block roads, or roads crack open. In summer dust blows so thick and hard from the silt that it forms clouds that roll kilometers inland. These photographs take stock of local cultural topographies through looking at food gathering and rural practices.



Gathering mussels for the tangihanga for Ralph Hotere, Mitimiti, 2013
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 22 x 28



Shovelling sand back from the hangi. Te Wake unveiling, Matihetihi Marae. During the tangihanga for Ralph Hotere, 2013
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 22 x 28



Last basket on hangi fire, Matihetihi Marae, 2013
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 22 x 28



Deer head drying, Te Rimu, Tikapa, 2013
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 22 x 28



Boiled pig head, Te Rimu, Tikapa, 2012/2013
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 22 x 28



Hangi fire, Rangitahi Marae, Murupara. On the occasion of the 60th birthday of Takawai Murphy, 2010/2013
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 22 x 28



Hangi fire, Rahui Marae, Tikitiki, 2013
Inkjet prints on Ilford Gold Silk paper, 22 x 28

CONTRIBUTORS

Natalie Robertson (Ngati Porou, Clan Donnachaidh) was born in Kawerau, New Zealand, and is an established exhibiting photographic and moving image artist. Her practice engages with conflicting settler and indigenous relationships to land and place, exploring Maori knowledge practices and cultural landscapes. She also writes on photography in Te Ao Maori. Much of her practice is based in Te Tai Rawhiti, the East Cape region of her tribal homelands.

Senior Lecturer at AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand, Natalie received an MFA (First Class Honours) from the University of Auckland. She has exhibited extensively throughout New Zealand and internationally (including China, USA, England, France, Canada, Mexico, Germany, Lithuania, Denmark, Brazil, Rarotonga, Australia).

Robertson is a member of the collective Local Time established in 2007. Local Time participated in the 5th Auckland Triennial *If you were to live here...* (2013). Local Time facilitates site-specific projects, which hone in on local and indigenous contexts.

Veronica Passalacqua is Curator at the C.N. Gorman Museum, University of California, Davis. As a writer, curator, and scholar of Native North American art for the past 20 years, her research focus is contemporary Native American art with an emphasis in Native American photography. She has curated exhibitions nationally and internationally featuring contemporary artwork by Native American and Indigenous artists at the Autry National Center, Eiteljorg Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum, Navajo Nation Museum, and Barbican Art Gallery.

Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie was born into the Bear Clan of the Taskigi Nation, and born for the Tsinajinnie Clan of the Diné Nation. Exhibited nationally and internationally, Tsinhnahjinnie claims photography and video as her primary languages. Creating fluent images of Native thought, her emphasis is art for Indigenous communities.

She has been a recipient of the Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art, a Chancellor's Fellowship at the University of California Irvine, the First Peoples Community Artist Award, and a Rockefeller artist in residence. She is Director of the C.N. Gorman Museum and Associate Professor in the Department of Native American Studies at University of California, Davis.



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