

Articles

Curricular Theorizing From the Periphery

ANGELINA WEENIE

*First Nations University of Canada
Regina, SK, Canada*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to propose theory and knowledge from the peripheral space. Through an analysis of historical and contemporary perspectives of curriculum, the intent of this article is to make explicit the story of curriculum, and the influence of poststructuralist, postmodern, and postcolonial paradigms on the development of Aboriginal curriculum. This article will explore the philosophical and ontological basis of Aboriginal knowledge and its implications for curricular theory.

*Journeying into the mystical
To the elusive and mysterious spaces
Into the subliminal, the womb, and the subjective
From the great mysteries of the self
We emerge refreshed and renewed
To seek and claim the spaces as our own.*

INTRODUCTION

The poem expresses my thoughts and emotions that are borne from the sweat lodge and the sun dance ceremonies, marking my place of knowing and being. My healing journey has taken me back to my roots, or my place of beginning, to help me to overcome addiction and dysfunction in my life. The traditional knowledge of the Elders and ceremonies helped me to regain a coherent sense of self, and an awareness of what should inform my research and practice. My notion of curriculum has evolved within the realm of my lived experiences and those of my students. The purpose of this article is to theorize and articulate a view of curriculum that is reflective of those experiences.

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I begin by telling about my “location” as a Cree woman and educator, and by naming the various curricular landscapes that I have negotiated and journeyed. Like the “Itinerant Wayfarer” (Verriour, 2003) I have encountered painful life lessons that have brought me to the depths of despair, but have also carried me to a place of renewal and hope.

I have Treaty Indian status, designated with a treaty number and reserve, which immediately places me in those peripheral spaces and connects me to a geophysical and geopolitical landscape. My parents, my sisters and my brother attended residential schools. For my own schooling I went to what was called Day School on Sweetgrass reserve. I completed grade three on my home reserve and then I attended school in North Battleford, Saskatchewan. This was the time when Indian children were being integrated from federal into provincial school systems. I completed my secondary and university education in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. I started teaching when I was 22 years old and it truly never occurred to me that teaching was going to be a life endeavor. The school has its own culture and politics and it is not always easy to function within those parameters. I taught for 19 years in a band-controlled residential school, and I am currently an educator and an administrator in a First Nations university.

MEMORY WORK

Memory work is a methodology that facilitates the “politics of self-knowledge” (Graham, 1991). In curricular theory, memory work can be used to “paint a portrait of what the field is like” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 3). I include my recollections as part of my intent to provide a “vivid and audible sense” of the realities of everyday issues related to curriculum (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 5). Fleener (2004) maintains that traditional curriculum posits the knower as one who can “produce the right answer or get through one problem to get to the next problem” (p. 211). This is consistent with my educational experiences and it also characterizes my teaching practice. The curriculum that I was teaching represented what Maxine Greene (2004) describes as “little more than an arrangement of subjects, a structure of socially prescribed knowledge” (p. 135).

Memory work provides that “snapshot” of lived curriculum, one that enables us to use our classroom stories as a basis of our research (Jones, 1991). Memories of the past inform our present and help us to “understand this place and [our] place in it” (Chambers, 2003b, p. 103). I have kept some photos, notes, letters, pictures and gifts from my students as reminders of my teaching days. It was the memories of my students that kept me motivated and helped to accept the challenges of teaching at the university level.

My students had grown up in northern communities and they liked to be outdoors. We would often go on nature hikes and field trips. I found that the students were happier and more motivated when they were engaged in

experiential learning activities. I also incorporated culture into my teaching. I have a photo of my students in their hoop dancing outfits. They are all smiling and happy in that photo. I am not a hoop dancer but I used to teach hoop dancing, and the students learned largely through their own self-motivation, heart and passion.

I have a few other particularly vivid memories. Whenever students were not cooperating or “acting out,” as we used to call it, they had to write lines in the detention room. I put one of my students on detention after a trying day, but she defiantly refused to go to the detention room. Instead of getting into a power struggle with her, I told her, “Fine. You will stay in the classroom and do your detention.” She stayed in the classroom, but she was throwing angry looks at me. I was observing her every move and yet trying to look busy with other tasks. I noticed that she had a clothes hanger in her hand and she had bent it. It became apparent that she was making a weapon. I was uneasy about the menacing way she was holding that clothes hanger, and thankfully, the half-hour detention passed and she was free to go. I recall another episode when a student was threatening to jump from the top of our building. He was high from glue sniffing.

These memories recount the socially related issues we encountered on a regular basis, and they convey the ineptness of the disciplinary methods we were using to work with emotionally troubled children. They relate how power relations tended to play out in the classroom and could be attributed to larger societal issues. More importantly, these accounts relate the resistance that we had to deal with on a daily basis in our school, and the dilemma that it posed for us, in terms of developing a curriculum that would be relevant to these children and the worlds that they knew.

THE STORY OF CURRICULUM

A historical consideration of curriculum, or an accounting of how certain knowledge has been given credence (Fleener, 2004), is essential to curricular theorizing. The story of curriculum as a “grand narrative” or “collective story” (Graham, 1991) encompasses an array of philosophical views that serve as foundations for how knowledge making came to be structured. The story begins and is predicated by the Western male theorists, the canons of knowledge like Dewey and Tyler, whose ideas permeated traditional curriculum (Pinar et al., 1995). They conceptualized what is commonly referred to as the technical-rational or factory model, wherein curriculum was designed to create an efficient and scientifically oriented society. Radical theorists like McLaren and Giroux examined “relations of dominations,” and their ideas, along with feminist discourses, precipitated the reconceptualization era (Ellsworth, 1989).

The collective story of Aboriginal people is entrenched in colonialism, patriarchy, sexism and racism. This is reflected in the different processes

of segregation, integration and assimilation that have constituted federal policy on Aboriginal education. Various government-initiated studies, namely the 1967 Hawthorne Report, the 1969 White Paper, and the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (Abele, Dittburner, & Graham, 2000) have directly impacted Aboriginal curriculum development. The impetus for more locally and community controlled curricula came from the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) policy paper on Indian Control of Indian Education. This development precipitated Indian Teacher Education programs. The First Nations University of Canada (formerly the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College) began its teacher training program in 1976. These programs and initiatives created a place for First Nations content, processes and perspectives.

New studies in critical pedagogy, cultural studies and emerging post-colonial, poststructural and postmodern thought constituted the “sociopolitical, geophysical, and imaginative landscape” of contemporary Canadian curriculum (Chambers, 1999, 2003a). Included in this new conceptualization were liberal notions of phenomenology and hermeneutics (Aoki, 2003; Chambers, 2003a). The field of curriculum theory has been shaped by these various competing discourse and can be understood within a framework of “language games,” “paradigms,” and “discursive formations” (Gazetas, 2003, p. 189).

The curricular experiences of Aboriginal people have been defined by the colonial relationship. Colonization has worked to eradicate Aboriginal languages and cultures, and to oppress, subjugate and marginalize Aboriginal people. During the residential school era, the church and the state worked together to “civilize and Christianize” Aboriginal people. My parents related stories of not being allowed to speak their language and of being away from their families for long periods of time. My father, Joseph Weenie, was interviewed in the *Globe and Mail* on August 18, 1990 (“Memories haunt native,” 1990). The headline read, “Memories Haunt Native,” and in the interview, my father states, “They called our parents savages, but they were the savages. . . . They should have treated us like humans.” Their experiences and their stories reflect the processes that were intended “to have the Indian educated out of them” (Miller, 1996, p. 151), and further demonstrate a complex set of interconnecting systems of patriarchy and racism at work.

Given the complexities of these various discourses that have been presented, the concept of Aboriginal curriculum is one that has yet to be clearly articulated and defined. As Chambers (1999) states, the issue “is about asking what knowledge and whose knowledge is to be recognized” (p. 141). This was an important issue that has brought forward understandings of Aboriginal epistemology and pedagogy. Aboriginal artist and educator Willie Ermine (1995) captured the essence of two opposing worldviews and philosophies when he stated, “Acquired knowledge and information were disseminated as if Western voyages and discoveries were the only valid

sources to knowing. The alternative expeditions and discoveries in subjective inner space by Aboriginal people wait to be told” (p. 101). His work was groundbreaking in creating a place for Aboriginal knowledge in curriculum.

DEFINING CURRICULUM

The word *curriculum* is a widely used term, the parameters of which are difficult to define. Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford (2003) maintain that each thing “is all the rains, all the breaths, that passed it along” (p. 43). Similarly, curriculum has been conceptualized in various ways. Aoki (2003) makes the distinction between “curriculum-as-plan/curriculum-as-live(d)” (p. 2). In structural theory, the slash and the hyphen are significant in designating, the “lines of power” (Olsson, 1992), or “privileging presence over absence” (Aoki, 2003, p. 3). Curriculum, from this perspective, occupies the “in-between” or “intertextual” space of “ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty” (Aoki, 2003; Hurren, 2003).

Pinar and Grumet (1976) consider curriculum as an autobiographical text, positing narrative as a theoretical basis for curriculum. Nolan (2001) states, “Theory resides in the spaces between these stories, just as countless stories reside in the spaces of educational research theory” (p. 27), while Hurren (2003) asserts that curriculum is “the medium that creates the space for telling” (p. 120). Curricular theorizing, from these poststructural and postmodern notions, is about acknowledging lived pedagogy and the “site[s] of chaos in which dwell transformative possibilities” (Aoki, 2003, p. 6).

Colonialism is tied to notions of power and knowledge and it frames the historical and contemporary conditions for Indian people. Curriculum as mindfulness is a methodology that would “recognize that voices from the past—both our own and others—break through our thoughts and inform our current thinking” (Russell, 2003, p. 97). As part of working toward a more definitive understanding of Aboriginal curriculum, it is essential to critique notions of power and knowledge as part of “an ongoing project to dismantle the cultural and epistemological heritage of Eurocentrism” (Powell, 2003, p. 152).

Postcolonial discourse provides a new consciousness and a conceptual framework that challenges and deconstructs structural inequality, and resists relations of domination. Aboriginal curriculum, in this time and in this place, is about overcoming colonial mentality by creating an emancipatory framework and confronting what St. Denis (2002) calls the “messiness.” Chambers (2003a) refers to this as the “curriculum of difficulty.”

Indigenous interpretations of curriculum have been presented within medicine wheel teachings and circular frameworks (Cajete, 1994) to signify that all of life and learning is a process. All things are contained in the medicine wheel and it provides a mechanism for finding our place in the universe (Storm, 1972). The use of the circle is inclusive and all encompassing. We gain wisdom as we reflect on our lives and make our walk through the

medicine wheel. Similarly, Fleener (2004) states, “all of life is a nexus of becomings as we continually renew and recreate ourselves” (p. 204). This understanding facilitates an appreciation of the natural processes of life, on what Foucault (1979) has called the “calm knowledge of the animals, plants or the earth” (p. 226), and on that which is sustaining and enduring.

From the outset, Aboriginal people had a vision, one articulated by Chief Shingwauk in 1832, of having a “teaching wigwam” or education institution which would help Aboriginal people “learn European ways and adapt to the new age” (Miller, 1996, p. 6). This was a vision that worked out much differently, however. The understanding of curriculum that I am putting forth is one that is representative of the historical, social and political context described, and one that is reflective of Aboriginal worldview and philosophy.

CURRICULUM AS VISION

Curriculum as vision may be an overworked term that is embedded in “objectivist ideology” (Nolan, 2001), but it can be utilized as a way of envisioning new possibilities and examining the various ways that curriculum and vision have been applied in curricular theorizing. This notion of curriculum as vision fits within postmodernism and poststructuralism, which is preoccupied with new “poetic possibilities” (Hurren, 2000, 2003). Fleener (2004) relates this as the “dynamic process of creative advance that will never end” (p. 204). Curriculum in this sense also includes the artistic and imaginative realm of understanding.

The “posts” of postcolonialism, poststructuralism and postmodernism take up positions that deconstruct hegemonic discourse. With these approaches all knowledge becomes suspect, and is open to new interpretations and new possibilities. This takes into consideration the process of knowledge production and not only the content or product of knowledge. This approach is analogous to Aboriginal worldview and philosophy, which assumes that learning is a lifelong process.

As part of curricular theorizing, it is important to address the way we view curriculum and to acknowledge our vantage points, in terms of the biases and assumptions, and the interpretive lens we bring into curriculum. Our immediate vision is limited by our own historical conditioning (Graham, 1991). There is a need to “see ourselves clearly as we really are . . . [as] that clarity is a source of our strength” (hooks, 2002, p. 139). We are “embodied” knowers (Hurren, 2003; Campbell & Gregor, 2002) who are influenced by race, gender and class positioning. Campbell and Gregor (2002) maintain that “[w]e enact the world we inhabit and know about” (p. 23). It is important to interrogate “historical, cultural, and linguistic assumptions” (Russell, 2003, p. 95).

Foucault (1979) describes the panopticon as an ingenious method of surveillance that worked to establish the power of the state and its knowledge systems. The panopticon, initially used in penal institutions, became

“a subtle, calculated technology of subjection” (Foucault, 1979, p. 221). This phenomenon sanctioned the viewer and knower with a God-like presence, creating a technology of the soul that was “born out of the methods of punishment, supervision, and constraint” (Foucault, 1979, p. 30). In the Cree language, the word *Okanaweycikew*, which translates as *The Keeper*, most accurately conveys the significance and function of the panopticon and its ensuing array of technologies, bureaucracies and systems that continue to monitor and control what is accepted as knowledge.

More recent notions of representation from Nolan’s (2001) kaleidoscopic images of math and science curriculum offer another inventive way of seeing curriculum. Poststructuralist and postmodernist theories encourage personal and aesthetic representations of curriculum (Russell, 2003). The kaleidoscope is one such representation. It gives a controlled view and allows one to view only what one wants to see and imagine. Nolan (2001) states, “With each turn of a kaleidoscope, light’s reflection engenders new patterns and emergent designs” (p. 1). Aoki (2005) claims that “these portrayals . . . although illuminative, are all distanced seeing in the images of abstract conceptual schemes that are idealizations, somewhat removed, missing the preconceptual, pretheoretical fleshy, familiar, very concrete world of teachers and students” (p. 189). The image of the kaleidoscope, however, allows for inventive representations and offers a tangible way of conceptualizing curriculum.

Chambers (2003a) maintains that “the phenomenology of the vision quest is one that renders a new phenomenology of schooling for Aboriginal students” (p. 224). Norman (2003) has also represented curriculum as dream, placing curricular theorizing in the mystical and the metaphysical realm. Vision questing can be associated with an “elaborated form of connected knowing that uses the self as an instrument of understanding” (Belinky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 141). It is within these theoretical perspectives that curriculum as vision, and curriculum as a form of vision questing, is proffered.

Cajete (1994), a well-known Indigenous scholar, has developed a model of Indigenous knowledge that is attained through a process of connected rings of visioning. The vision quest is conceived as a holistic process of self-sacrifice and introspection and was considered in traditional Aboriginal education as a way of knowing. Indigenous vision questing provides an epistemological site that creates a space for inner knowledge and insight. This is the interpretation of curriculum as vision that is in keeping with Aboriginal thought and one that needs to be further examined and utilized in curricular theorizing.

ABORIGINAL CURRICULUM

Understanding curriculum entails an understanding of “place as a mental, emotional, physical state of being” (Norman, 2003, p. 248). The landscape

of Aboriginal curriculum involves the colonial history, worldviews, philosophies, languages, cultures, stories, songs, literature, art, spirituality, ceremonies and ethos of Aboriginal people. These are the “things” or objects that make up our embodied ways of knowing. They form a body of knowledge that represent the order of things in the worlds we live and work in. They constitute an Indigenous model of curriculum that can no longer be disregarded. They cannot be mere add-ons or supplementary pieces but the core components of Aboriginal curriculum. Curricular theorizing from this standpoint needs to be “an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and our anticipated future” (McAdam, 1993, p. 12). Using a feminist perspective, it is time to “speak/write our way into existence” (Davies, 2000, p. 54).

It is from these vantage points, and “intellectual impulses” (Geertz, 1973, p. 25), that one can begin to articulate a theory of Aboriginal curriculum, and put forward ideas that have not been acknowledged or examined, and to seek an understanding of time-honored and revered traditions. It is from these perspectives that a theory can begin to be articulated and formulated, employing what Johnson (1989) has referred to as “a context-sensitive exercise of imaginative capacities” (p. 364).

Within Cree worldview and philosophy imagination is fundamental to epistemological and pedagogical perspectives. Imaginative and inventive capacity is manifested in stories, prayers, songs, oral tradition, vision quests, sweat lodge ceremonies, fasts, sun dances, artifacts and beadwork. These all provide self-understanding and deeper connection to spirit and soul. They originated from our relationship with the land and the animals and each other. Imagination is not a singular activity but one that is part of a collective and part of a context. Creative approaches were necessary to survive in the physical world. From the youngest ages, children were trained to use imagination to see how things were done before. Visualizing was a necessary part of their existence and survival. It served a purpose.

Aboriginal people came to know and understand their world through imaginative endeavor and this was most evident in the oral tradition. A summit on Indigenous Knowledge Translation was held on March 2, 2006, at the First Nations University of Canada. Danny Musqua, a Saulteaux Elder, participated in the summit and he explained that “[a] lot of the teachings come from stories. . . . They aren’t stories by themselves; they teach you about the ways of life, the way things are and the way things will come to be” (Kaplan-Myrth & Smylie, 2006, p. 9).

The categories of stories that can inform content include *atayokewina* (sacred stories, legends), *acimowina* (everyday stories), *wiyatacimowina* (humorous stories), *kiyas acimowina* (old stories, reminiscences) and *acimosowina* (autobiographical stories). These stories along with personal, family and community stories provide the content to First Nations language courses at the First Nations University of Canada, as there are enduring lessons in individual and collective stories (Cajete, 1994; Gold, 2002).

The medicine wheel concept expressed as *Nehiyaw Pimatisowin*, which is the Cree word for *Cree way of life*, may be seen as one of those “idealized abstract schemes” that Aoki (2005) refers to; however, medicine wheel teachings are a constructive framework for Aboriginal curricular theorizing. The medicine wheel, or sacred circle concept, is derived from traditional beliefs about how our world is organized (Bopp, Bopp, Brown, & Lane, 1984). Through time, the medicine wheel has come to be recognized as a way of understanding and making sense of our world. It represents the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects of self.

There are four domains of learning in the medicine wheel framework. The physical domain can be understood as learning about the environment and “knowing about the land—the places where the rabbits and partridge live and where the bears dig their roots—knowing how to distribute food, smoke it, and dry it, and cook it, is all important knowledge” (Kaplan-Myrth & Smylie, 2006, p. 12). The mental domain is the “world of symbology, metaphor, pictorial thinking. The world of visualizing, intuitive knowing” (Kaplan-Myrth & Smylie, 2006, p. 16). The emotional domain entails understanding our relationships with other human beings. Brown (2004) states, “the development of the affective capacity is essential to the development of the cognitive capacity. . . . This concept [is] essential to the development of a curriculum that support[s] and encourage[s] affective development and healing” (p. 19). The spiritual domain is held to be the “capacity to have and to respond to realities that exist in a non-material way such as dreams, visions, ideals, spiritual teachings, goals, and theories” (Bopp et al., 1984, p. 30).

All of these concepts are valid and need to be recognized and acknowledged as valuable components of Aboriginal curriculum. As Ermine states, Indigenous knowledge “is right here, with the old people. How they work with the land, work with the family, work with the relationships. The active humanity that they do, that is Indigenous knowledge. . . . Indigenous knowledge is alive and it needs to be practiced” (Kaplan-Myrth & Smylie, 2006, p. 9).

I attended a Gift of Language and Culture Conference on November 24, 2005, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. The call for revitalizing Aboriginal languages and cultures remains strong. St. Denis (2002) maintains that such practices romanticize and valorize the past of Aboriginal people and further serve to hinder the educational success of Aboriginal people. Arguably, what is limiting is that the revitalization of Aboriginal languages and cultures is being implemented within the same structures that worked to oppress them, therein making ourselves, what St. Pierre (2000) would call “complicit in the production of ourselves” (p. 504). It can be inferred from Butler’s (1995) discussion of agency within traditionalist perspectives that “[t]o be so grounded is nearly to be buried” (p. 135). Abu-Lughod (1991) also believes that such approaches “preserve the rigid sense of difference based on culture” (p. 144).

The signs and symbols that constitute language and culture revitalization efforts in Aboriginal communities are those that were used to create “essentialized and fixed identities” (Munro, 1998). Some like Chambers (2003a) have criticized the “imaginary geo-physical landscapes” and the ethics of authenticity. St. Denis (2002) has challenged that “a cultural difference approach to understanding educational inequality suggests that Aboriginal failure and/or problems comes from their being alienated from their culture” (p. 319). This assumption might be considered as yet another form of silencing and denying. There are those, too, who believe that every time we speak our language, we are decolonizing ourselves. There is a distinct worldview in language (Goulet, personal communication, October 14, 2004) and to dismiss or discount this is no longer acceptable. The word order and structure in Aboriginal languages is indicative of a different way of seeing and experiencing the world.

I interviewed Elder Vicki Wilson, who is Nakoda, on October 16, 2006, on how to address language and culture in curriculum development. She helped me to understand how we can be working toward “sorting out things in our language” (Vicki Wilson, personal communication, 2006), rather than relying on the English language to interpret our knowledge. We need to incorporate language and use that as a basis of understanding. Vicki mentioned the *Wihitokan*, or the contrary spirit, and it made me consider how Aboriginal educators can be incorporating more cultural concepts in their work as a way of reversing the effects of being marginalized. Aboriginal thought embedded in Aboriginal languages is what must be cultivated and nurtured in Aboriginal curriculum.

With its challenges and dilemmas, Aboriginal curriculum is experiencing a transformational period, and poststructuralism and postmodernism offer those alternate forms of inquiry and interpretation. From a postcolonial perspective, “decolonization . . . does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all theory . . . or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centering our concerns and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” (Smith, 1999, p. 39). Durie (2006) also maintains that “an important aspect of human capability building—and especially germane to indigenous resilience—has been the incorporation of indigenous world views into education. . . . It is no longer acceptable that education and training should lead to the abandonment of an indigenous identity” (p. 7).

An art exhibition at the First Nations University of Canada, which highlighted the “tradition, spirit and function” (Farrell-Racette, personal communication, November 15, 2005) of Aboriginal art, was affirming. The works of art emanated from the spiritual, the cultural and the practical. They symbolized the conceptual beliefs that speak to my location and positioning as an Aboriginal educator, and characterize aspects that I have incorporated into my own teaching. For instance, I have used the medicine wheel as a basis for teaching and inspiring writing. The medicine wheel is

a basis for self-reflective practice in the Educational Professional Studies that the Indian Education Department at the First Nations University of Canada offers.

A compelling reason to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives in curriculum is the need to rectify the problems brought on by historical trauma and disadvantage. Aboriginal students continue to fail miserably in mainstream education and it is necessary to strengthen and redefine Aboriginal curriculum. Durie (2006) states, "Aligning cultural worldviews and Indigenous knowledge with other knowledge systems and exploring the interface between them has unrealized potential" (p. 7). There is a potential for knowledge expansion when we draw from both traditional and contemporary forms of knowledge.

I continue to be attentive to the words of Elders and others who show us the way. The Elders continually remind me about the importance of language and culture. They are speaking their truth and are expressing their ideas of the world, and in essence, articulate my beliefs of what should inform and formulate Aboriginal curriculum.

The ideas thus presented justify and shape a theory of Aboriginal curriculum based on the worldview and philosophy of Aboriginal people that will be of benefit for all levels of Aboriginal education. Despite centuries of colonialism and oppression, language and cultural knowledge remain as veritable sources of knowledge that reinforce and validate Aboriginal identity. This has been my own cultural reality and lived experience. As Vicki Wilson (personal communication, October 16, 2006) has suggested, we need to be more "aggressive" in putting forth our own approaches and notions about Aboriginal pedagogy. It is posited that Aboriginal curriculum based on Aboriginal thought and experience can contribute to the landscape of curricular theory.

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