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# Black Women Students at Predominantly White Universities: Narratives of Identity Politics, Well-Being and Leadership Mobility

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This narrative inquiry study uses personal experiences as a method of ethnographic research among Black women student leaders. The collegiate life stories of six African American women undergraduates experiencing gendered racial battle fatigue are described and analyzed. Combined are participant journaling, lived experiential interviews, and organizational observations within various organizational situations. Participants' narratives are presented to understand the process of enacting leadership within varied organizational contexts while experiencing racial and gender-racialized aggressions. A three-dimensional narrative inquiry is utilized to restore field texts. In this instance, narrative inquiry is applied to demonstrate how participants respond to the effects of cumulative racial stressors in ways that positively influence their practice of leadership. Emergent themes were as follows: (a) buffered leadership and (b) holistic leadership. Participants spoke of avoiding gender-racialized aggression by using buffered leadership to create proximal distance between themselves and adverse racial interactions with White males. Participants used holistic leadership to describe nuanced Black womanhood to White women peers to dismantle stereotypes and increase rapport.

The range of subjective Black women's experiential knowledge, juxtaposed to deficit majoritarian constructions as insufficient "other" or able to overcome college impediments, has been problematized by various scholars at the intersections of racism, gender, and class oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2011; hooks, 1981). Using predominantly White institutions (PWIs) as the context, varied topics concerning Black women have been broached and include feelings of not belonging and loneliness (Arminio et al., 2000; Robinson-Wood, 2009) to being bombarded by racial microaggressive environmental indignities (Pierce, 1985; Sue, 2010), all while actualizing academic success and degree attainment (Charleston et al., 2014; Charleston, 2012; Museus, Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). Black women collegians have overcome a variety of academic and systemic impediments that pose unique challenges due to racial and gender components that place them in "double jeopardy," or more likely to be a target of oppression due to being both Black and women (King, 1988; Robinson-Wood et al., 2015). For instance, while occupying student leadership roles in predominantly White organizations, Black women experienced feelings of having to assimilate (Arminio et al., 2000). In contrast, participating as leaders

had positive influences on Black women's leadership development (Fleming, 1984; Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001), especially if the organizations are historically Black, which is partly why Black women have practiced leadership in nearly racially homogeneous Black Greek Letter Organizations (Bonner, 2006; Kimbrough, 1995; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998) during the past century.

As it pertains to navigating predominantly White organizations, I submit that developing proactive coping objectives increases the likelihood that Black women not only thrive holistically but also assures their ability to experience retention in positive ways across both community colleges and highly selective four-year institutions (Davis, Nagle, Richards, & Awokoya, 2013; Lichtenstein, Chen, Smith, & Maldonado, 2014). The findings of this study acknowledge the use of proactive coping objectives by Black women students to counter racial battle fatigue (Harris, Haywood, Ivery, & Shuck, 2015) due to exposure to racial microaggressions (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Sue, 2010). Subsequently, a continual place of positive persistence for Black women who are involved in college is cocurricular organizations, which play a significant role in influencing their retention (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hotchkins, 2014; Patton et al., 2011; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001), especially if their membership includes a leadership role.

This narrative inquiry study uses participants' experiences as an ethnographic method of research with Black women student leaders. Respectively, the collegiate life stories of six participants, who experienced *gendernoir* racial battle fatigue, are articulated. The term *gendernoir* describes the nuanced experiences of racial battle fatigue at the intersection of being women (e.g., gender) and Black (e.g., race). The composite narrative of Lynn C. Clark is used to restory the narratives of participants through a three-dimensional text that centers participants' perspectives to understand how they lead while averting racial stressors. It is imperative that Black women's perspectives are communicated in differing and compelling ways that center their intersectional identities as not only meaningful but also non-peripheral. Finally, composite restorying amplifies the voices of Black women in relational ways that explain how they make meaning from and strategically transition through patriarchal, misogynoir, and sexist institutional structures in higher education.

## METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

Six African American women student leaders participated in this study. Purposeful sampling criteria required the following: (a) self-identifying Black woman, (b) PWI attendee, and (c) held leadership positions in predominantly White organizations. Narratives about family racial and gendered socialization, researcher field notes, descriptive participant journals detailing leadership experiences, individual participant interviews, and three observations of participants during organizational meetings, socials, and community service were included in the data corpus. A three-dimensional narrative inquiry process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) was applied to focus on participants' leadership and social interactions; past, present and future lived experiences for continuity; and situational context for the purpose of restorying their narratives in a chronological sequence (Ollerenshaw & Crenshaw, 2002). Participants' narratives were deconstructed through applying interrogating dichotomies (Czarniawska, 2004) and analytical strategies to detail emergent themes, which provided subjective meaning to the stories presented (Huber & Whelan, 1999). Lynn Clark's

composite narrative is offered to unpack life as a Black woman organization leader who experiences racialized gender microaggressions that led to *gendernoir* racial battle fatigue.

### Researcher as Instrument

As an African American, heterosexual, Christian male scholar who does work about how organizational climates, context, and culture influence the identity development of persons therein, I have spent the last few years examining my numerous forms of intersectional privilege. Consequently, I explored my positionality, biases, and personal preconceived notions about how racism and sexism function juxtaposed to the ways Black men are complicit in the racial and gender oppression of Black women (e.g. patriarch and misogynoir). To address this issue, when analyzing the data, I recognized participants' experiential differences with racialized gender oppression. Finally, I employed reflexivity to expose how I understand the epistemological differences between participants and me.

### Study Context

Participants attended a public and a private PWI. University of Midwest (UW) is situated in the Western Region of the United States, while Midwestern Private University (MPU) is located in the South. The first is comprised of 32,456 students, where only 2% of those enrolled are African American, while the second is a highly selective institution comprised of 14,040 students, of whom nearly 5% are African American.

### Participants

There were six Black woman participants in this study. Each of them held leadership positions at their PWIs. Participants were members in 15 predominantly White organizations where three held the office of president, two served as vice presidents, and the final participant was selected to be social media chair.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Students participated in four open-ended, audio-taped interviews lasting 60–90 minutes. In order to reduce data into categories with supportive evidence (Stake, 1995), I used the data analysis spiral as I reviewed field notes, observations, interview data, and journal entries. Data analysis spiral processes (Creswell, 2007) require researchers to maneuver from reading and memo loops into describing, then classifying, and interpreting data before beginning code or category formation. This process allows for descriptive interpretation to occur within the context of participants' setting, places, or events as an *in situ*. Constant comparative, open-ended, line-by-line coding was used to identify salient themes and patterns that were then cross-case analyzed (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Yin, 2009).

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study had two specific limitations: (a) transferability across institutions is difficult due to each case being grounded in ahistorical and contextual situations with personal, conceptual structures, uses, and problems (Stake, 2005); and (b) due to my “insider” status as a an alumnus of UW and MPU, participants may have communicated their narratives in a manner that they believed would be relatable.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lynn Clark’s narrative inquiry is framed by Crenshaw’s intersectionality (1989, 1991), understanding that an “intersectional analysis argues that racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing” (1991, p. 1283) based on intermingled systems of oppression where the multiple dimensions of Black women’s identities are racially sexualized (Hill-Collins, 2004; King, 2007). Further, I am mindful of the racial battle fatigue construct that “racism and racial microaggressions operate as psycho-pollutants in the social environment and add to the overall race-related stress for Black men, Black women, and other racially marginalized groups” (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011, p. 67). Therefore, the intersectional identities “Black,” “Woman,” and “Leader” were examined while interacting with White men and women who were the sources of racial microaggressions (Sue, 2010). This study elucidates two points: (a) the intersection of Blackness (e.g. race), being woman (e.g. gender) and leadership identity is influenced by *gendernoir* related stress; and (b) proactive coping strategies decrease exposure to race- and gender-related stress.

### Lynn’s Understanding of Leadership

Lynn Clark was the fifth person in her family to attend UMW. Her desire to be a television show producer stemmed from participating in Jack & Jill of America, Inc., learning about media from her mother who was an executive at CNN, and her grandmother who always told Lynn “you have to work twice as hard to be equal for White folks.” Lynn C. Clark lamented the defeat of her White peer Gwendolyn for the position of President for the Association for Women in Communications (AWIC) at UMW. Lynn’s “White female peers,” in her words, were “desperately needing cultural educating” and Gwendolyn was one of few “White girls who gets it.” Experiences like these led Lynn to become frequently involved on campus because often she felt socially isolated. She joined the historically Black Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. to find a sense of cultural belonging and racial acceptance, which were two experiences she was unable to secure in predominantly White organizations. She defined leadership in these terms: “leadership as being is central to a leader because it is words in action. I am a leader because of what I have accomplished.” Lynn learned what it means to be a leader by participating in three youth leadership organizations during her high school years.

Lynn’s passion to be a leader extends to the AWIC where she is an active member who has learned that “although membership prepares me to navigate the real world, it does not necessarily teach me how to deal with difference [racial], which presents its own set of problems.” In fact, infrequent exposure to racial difference in AWIC has afforded Lynn numerous opportunities

to directly interact with White woman peers personally and professionally. These interactions allowed her to engage in leadership activities with an increased frequency; however, these interactions are a source of trepidation at the intersection of gender, race, and leadership: “As a woman leading in White majority organizations I need to be careful because I don’t know how they interpret my Black. Do they see it as intelligent or threatening? Is my intellect threatening? Too much to consider!” Negotiation of these intersectional identities has led Lynn to believe that avoiding hindrances like racism and sexism is central to effective leadership: “Then there is the White male issue. For the most part, I need their support in order to create group consensus. I have learned that they can either be friend or foe for real!” Lynn also understood that the act of leadership is a cyclical process dependent upon learning and relearning how to navigate moments, situations, and membership. Her informed insight about the role race and gender play in leading has assisted Lynn across a variety of organizational contexts and was the primary reason for her leadership success during the last two years of college.

As a Black woman student who understands how to lead in predominantly White organizations, Lynn expressed her concerns about interacting with condescending White male peers. Lynn lamented: “the usurping of my authority is a frequent problem. Some days I want to quit due to the disrespect, but being in these [predominantly White] organizations has afforded numerous opportunities like the Presidential Ambassadorship I won.” She continued: “attempting to be a leader in this sea of Whiteness is rather challenging! My Sorors have my back, but in the White orgs, on this White campus, I rarely feel completely accepted as a Black female or a leader.” As a study participant, Lynn kept weekly journals to reflect on her leadership experiences in predominantly White organizations, the frequency of interactions pertaining to race and gender, and their effects. Although Lynn’s narrative was told out of chronological sequence, it problematized the apprehension and advantages associated with occupying leadership positions. Further, her framing of leadership worth was complex because the definition lay at the intersection of her identities, organizations, and an inability to “bring all of myself to leadership spaces as a Black female who is a leader. White males, and females invalidate me differently. My worth as a leader is connected to my ability to lead them. It’s a delicate situation.”

Explanations like these were specific in description, and identified certain peers, instances, and situations that informed what amounted to a detailed narrative about “being around White people everywhere, always!” Specifically, while explaining her interactions in meetings and social situations, Lynn frequently mentioned a “White male tool” named Stanley, with whom she stood in complete opposition. Lynn defined a tool as a White male who is purposefully rude to women because he thinks they are inferior. They never found a place of common ground in Young Advertisers of America (YAOA) to the point where Lynn described their relationship as “emotionally taxing.” When I asked her for an example of what happens in YAOA meetings, she paused, gathered her thoughts, and responded: “I dim my light to avoid it being put out! If I shine too brightly it’s a problem!” Although Lynn viewed organizational meetings as places where her leadership was literally questioned, she figuratively perceived those organizations, and the White peers therein, as a monolith that, combined, “policed” her development.

### Lynn’s Understanding of Organizational Continuum

As a Black woman who led in predominantly White organizations, Lynn’s ability to negotiate leadership roles was connected to combative experiences with members. When describing an

upcoming advertising planning debrief about the UMW “U Wanted” campaign, she was anxious about interacting with Stanley. In this particular meeting, which I attended to conduct an observation, 11 people were in attendance, 3 of whom were women. Lynn was the only Person of Color present. Appearing to be nervous, she said with angst, “I now open the floor to discuss the campaign,” and Stanley was the first to comment: “I think we focused too much on messaging for Students of Color, and not enough on the general student body.” Lynn interjected, “the purpose of doing so was to increase Participants of Color, not the general community. They clearly participate because...” Stanley interrupted, “We know. We know. The fact is less Students of Color attend every event so there is really no need to target them specifically, and doing so is biased.” Lynn’s voice heightened when she responded, “just because Black students don’t go to the events you go to doesn’t mean they are disinterested.” “See, she always dominates the conversation with the social justice commentary, why can’t we just be all inclusive instead of allowing for special targeting of her group?” responded Stanley. Lynn placed both of her hands on the table, stood, and said to her White peer Janet, “please handle this situation before it gets ugly.” Attendees looked perplexed, and the accompanying silence spoke to the paralysis of group members. Janet reframed the discussion: “What can we do moving forward to better this campaign?” Lynn slowly surveyed the room, packed her book bag, and left the meeting.

Afterward Lynn described this instance as an example of drowning in Whiteness: “I can appreciate anyone who differs in opinion, but he [Stanley] always argues against my points, which makes me angry to the point where I can’t function.” Although Lynn experienced anger in response to continually being confronted, she was mindful that being temporarily angry does not constitute being a stereotypical angry Black woman. “Even when I am justified for being angered, I hesitate to avoid being seen as the angry Black woman.” She paused and then elaborated by invoking an air analogy:

It is the difference between breathing polluted and clean air. Although both enable you to live, only one doesn’t damage you. Sooner or later bad air results in irreversibly damaged lungs and even though you may not die you’ll always be in harm’s way. Knowing this, I try to breath polluted air as little as possible, barely inhale and wear a scarf over my mouth. All I can do is make overt adjustments and hope they work. No matter how harmful the air, I have to breath it.

Lynn’s analogy framed her leadership experiences as akin to being engulfed in air or Whiteness and maleness, which surround her in every aspect of college. Further, she made it clear that White peer resistance to her leadership was an inevitable part of the process of emerging as an outstanding Black, woman leader—her ultimate goal.

### Lynn’s Unpacking of the Organizational Continuum as Boundless

The reach of YAOA was not confined to a single meeting room, location, or event where Lynn was scrutinized and had to defend herself—to her, the organization was an extension of the UMW. Black leaders in this study each acknowledged their need for validation and worked to broaden followerships to include a range of diverse members. Lynn’s narrative is representative of the sustained ability to positively cope with racialized gender microaggressive interactions in predominantly White organizations while dealing with continual triumph and catastrophe. She explained the latter by describing instances when she felt YAOA members engaged her in

conflict because they viewed her in Black gender terms by making comments like Stanley's *The Walking Dead* television show reference: "we're like Michonne and the Governor, except this time the man wins!" Stanley's comment is an example of a threatening *misogynoir*, and his disdain for Lynn is connected to a deficit bias at the intersection of her race and gender. *The Walking Dead* Governor character is a White man who is killed by Michonne, a Black woman, thereby making his comment not only racialized sexism but also a thinly veiled threat. Lynn responded to this particular occurrence by reminding Stanley: "a professional environment requires a professional behavior," which she exhibited in order to disrupt racist and sexist behaviors. Lynn defined being professional as "taking the high road" through verbal correction or ignoring the instances when her authority is usurped.

As a proactive coping mechanism, Lynn viewed her resilience as an outcome of fixing situations that expose her to the intersections of racism and sexism. Olivia Pope, who is the central Black woman character on the television show *Scandal*, is Lynn's fictional reference point for making situations better. Despite hearing comments like Stanley's, Lynn viewed her ability to fix blatantly racist and gendered situations as a marker of successful endurance. She views herself as a "Gladiator, Olivia Pope style!" Examples of Lynn experiencing racialized sexism and responding by being committed to fix her circumstances speak to how Black women navigate hostile predominantly White organizations at the intersection of their identities. How Black women students conduct intersectional leadership is important "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). Applying an intersectional construct allows for understanding why participants shared similar perspectives about being Black, woman, and a leader as attached to a sense of layered pride that encompassed each identity. To illustrate, Lynn employed two emergent thematic tactics: buffered leadership and holistic leadership to distance herself from perceived racial and gendered harm.

Participants used buffered leadership to create distance between themselves and perceived racial and gender microaggressions through avoidance. Lynn discussed averting the usurping of her leadership as a Black woman, specifically by White male counterparts who frequently challenged her during meetings. To avoid being targeted by what she deemed as "hostile exchanges with White men," Lynn selectively used passive behaviors that she believed White male peers would perceive as less threatening in their construction of her as "being a combative Black woman," which she interpreted as inaccurate and bound by racist and sexist false perspectives. She explained:

I get tired being told not to "go off." I've been framed as too passionate, told I should have been parliamentarian instead of vice president, and even told "you're the most intimidating female I've worked with on this campus." How do I combat all of that? The best way is to find allies, usually White girls to communicate, and follow through on my agenda. White boys never disrespect them.

By appearing to be passive to White men and empowering White woman peers to enact leadership in her "perceived absence," Lynn was able to run her organization from afar by creating a buffer. Furthermore, she acknowledged that when acting in a passive manner, her responses were welcomed by White males who behaved less aggressively in those instances.

Although responding to hostile gendered interactions by seeming passive limited Lynn's exposure to gendered combativeness, aligning herself with White women peers mediated



gendered stress. Selecting specific White woman peers to buffer White male confrontation was only achievable if Lynn had a previously established relationship. These relationships were created through employing holistic leadership, defined as using a leadership role to create closeness between participants and perceived sources of non-racial and gender microaggressions through bonding. Relationships with White women peers allowed Lynn to be seen holistically as a Black woman leader who was powerful, intelligent, and worthy of being followed. Lynn revisited her purposeful interactions with White woman peers in social environments like residence halls, clothing drives, and parties where she could reveal layers of herself within the context of other Black women who were also leaders on campus. Although creating opportunities for White women peers to experience the whole of Black women was important, it was the personal one-on-one stereotype demystifying discussions that served to counteract previous deficit notions of what it meant to be a woman who was Black.

Lynn described a relationship she developed over the last two semesters with a White woman named Charlize:

Charlize is coming around to finally understanding that how she was socialized to see Black women was completely a fallacy! We came in as freshmen, but never really worked together until joining the Association for Women in Communications (AWIC). Initially, we operated at a distance, but once we were on the same committee, we clicked. It led to us hanging out and having really great conversations about race, gender and being leaders. Eventually, she moved into my inner circle, which is filled with only sistas. Now she better understands, and advocates for us.

Lynn's relationships with White woman peers were motivated by what she thought would benefit other Black women who led in predominantly White organizations: support for members of the Black student community and reduction of racial microaggressions between herself and White women.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### Study Generalities

I problematize racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2011) as harmful since "racism and racial microaggressions operate as psycho-pollutants in the social environment and add to the overall race-related stress for Black men, Black women, and other racially marginalized groups" (p. 67). I recognize racial microaggressions are denigrating to People of Color, and these study findings show female participants experienced racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) resulting in a *gendernoir* racial battle fatigue. Finally, participants associated microaggressions with race and gender positionality as leaders.

### Microaggressive Effects

This section explores linkages between microaggressive acts by White peers and how participants practiced leadership. Even though participants lamented about being exposed to racial microaggressions, they also discussed individual gendered aggressions. To elaborate, participants described meeting rooms as physical locations of apprehension, which confirms Sue's

(2010) postulation about environmental microaggressions. In this study, environmental microaggressions are coupled with specific places and are representative of an organizational continuum.

Participants perceived racial microaggressions as problematic to practicing leadership and reinforcing stereotypical attitudes toward Black women. To illustrate, Lynn discussed experiencing both gender (e.g. Stanley repeatedly asking her to not “go off” when voicing a counter opinion) and racial (e.g. Charlize questioning whether the organizational scholarship qualifications should be decreased so more Black students would apply) interactions as sexist and racist or *gender-racialized aggressions*. Recognizing *gender-racialized aggressions* advances Minikel-Lacocque’s (2012) theory about the intentionality of perpetrators through coupled gender and racial lenses, and speaks to how Black women experience intersectionality when dealing with microaggressions. Participants coped with gender-racialized aggressions by: (a) confronting perpetrators by requesting they clarify the meaning of comments like “I see you Olivia Popeing me, luckily there are several Jakes here today...”; and (b) taking advantage of moments to explain the scope of Black womanhood in terms of historic deficit reframing and combating misogynistic perspectives. Unlike participants in Minikel-Lacocque’s (2012) study, my participants did not view their organizations as fixed communities based on a particular location and activity. Participants viewed the entire university as a boundless continuum that encompassed any and every space where White peers congregated, met, or interacted.

Lastly, in utilizing the evidence offered by Robinson-Wood et al. (2015), Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000), and Gomez, Khurshid, Freitag, and Lachuk (2011) about the adverse effect of racial microaggressions on Black women, I applied the postulation offered by Smith, Yosso and Solorzano (2006), “the stress of unavoidable front-line racial battles in historically white spaces leads to people of color feeling mentally, emotionally, and physically drained” (p. 301), which explains the cumulative outcome of participants’ experiences in this study. This application allowed for a better understanding of how Black woman participants experienced gender-racialized aggressions.

### Microaggressive Stress Responses

The race-related responses were manifested in two specific ways as *buffered leadership* and *holistic leadership*. Participants used buffered leadership to create proximal distance between themselves and adverse racial interactions with White males. Lynn purposefully deferred to her woman organizational president during meetings to create space to work apart from perpetrators. This confirms previous research by Solórzano et al. (2000) and Smith (2008) about Black student avoidance due to feeling threatened. Employing holistic leadership by educating White women about the wholeness of being Black and a woman not only identifies a corrective response to disrupt pejorative notions of Black women, but also adds to intersectionality and leadership literature. The application of holistic leadership within the context of race and gendered experiences of Black women to avoid being subjugated speaks to King’s (1988) postulation that “it is mistakenly granted that either there is no difference in being black and female from being generically Black (i.e., male) or generically female (i.e., White)” (p. 45).

Participants used holistic leadership to describe nuanced Black womanhood to White woman peers to dismantle stereotypes and increase rapport. Proactive coping strategies aided participants in decreasing the frequency of responses associated with *gendernoir* racial battle fatigue,

but enacting buffered and holistic leadership also truncated participants' ability to participate in organizations. Participants inextricably practiced leadership with the intention of presenting both their Black and woman identities as tethered. For this reason, it is important to differentiate between racial and gendered ripostes of racial microaggressions and gender-racialized aggressions by explicitly identifying the variance of proactive coping strategies, which allowed them to successfully mediate stressors.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This particular study represents the importance of using composite narrative inquiry to restore the effects of gender and race on Black women's leadership identity due to organization type and White peer actions. Administrators must pay attention to how institutional climates converge with intersectional identities of Black women when providing supports that could potentially expose them to racial microaggressions and gender-racialized aggressions. Consequently, how PWIs nurture Black women leaders is fundamental to determining their success, and doing so is the responsibility of administrators, and organization advisors.

### CONCLUSION

My engagements with Black women leaders elucidated their perceptions about Whiteness as a continuum and the threat of *gendernoir* racial battle fatigue as looming in perpetuity. Preoccupation with this continuum was central to not only participants' construction of what it meant to lead in an organization, but also how to lead effectively despite knowing that doing so would ultimately end in being harmed. Considering the intersections of race, gender, and leadership identities as interwoven with organizational environments, it becomes difficult to glean the ease of existing in places that present racialized gender detriments. Participants' adaptability, which was communicated by their purposeful use of buffered and holistic leadership, suggests that *gendernoir* racial battle fatigue can be alleviated.

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