Using Art to Open Post Colonial Dialogues with Pre-Service Teachers

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In 2005, Canadian scholars Carol Schick and Verna St. Denis published an article entitled "Troubling National Discourses in Anti-Racist Curricular Planning." In it, they describe encountering the same problems in their respective practices with pre-service teachers when addressing Indigenous and post-colonial curricula; namely, resistance. The authors identify four key areas of resistance offered by pre-service teachers: 1) there is a perception of loss of liberty in course selection when a required anti-racist course is mandated; 2) students perceive an affront with the possibility that they are morally lacking in some way that necessitates a course about the "other"; 3) most pre-service teachers do not see themselves as teaching aboriginal students and think they don't need to learn about aboriginal people; and 4) students are afraid of feeling uncomfortable about the conditions of the "other" and their own implication in that power structure. The authors address these concerns through an autobiographical assignment that locates students within the matrix of political, historical and cultural power structures in Canada. In a precursor to their 2005 article, Schick and St. Denis (2003) published a similar treatise in the *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* entitled "What Makes Anti-Racist Pedagogy in Teacher Education Difficult? Three Popular Ideological Assumptions," in which they provide anecdotal evidence of pre-service teacher resistance. Taken together, these two articles point to an important and difficult arena in the process of opening dialogues around post-colonial power relations embedded in the narratives of Canadian identity. As a Métis woman working in the field of education, I am particularly interested in expanding this dialogue to resolve the tensions the authors describe.

This paper explores how we might move beyond the text-based strategy used by Schick and St. Denis to view the problem of resistance through the multimodal lens of social semiotics, drawing on the critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach provided by Gunther Kress (in Rogers, 2011). In particular, I suggest that looking at Indigenous art, especially contemporary art with political undertones, opens up opportunities for engaging pre-service teachers, and subsequently their students, in a dialogue with both the art work and the issues that feed it. The aim is to encourage a critical questioning approach by inviting students to identify key assumptions about the artwork and the political context within which it is situated. Students can then work to relate these assumptions to their own experiences. In this way, the often divisive tropes of post-colonial discourse may find more fertile ground within the reflective practices of the students and therefore within the larger discourses that take place within and outside of the academy.

There is little question that the project of bringing Indigenous perspectives on colonialism into the academy is a timely and important one. Authors from various disciplines and practices acknowledge that the roots of our current cultural power imbalance are deeply engrained in the telling of the Canadian story.

Strangers in a strange land, European squatters quickly crafted an easy narrative that ignored Native humanity and reduced Indians to instruments of divine punishment. In an elegant amalgam of desire and doctrine, colonizers framed Indian attacks not as consequences of colonial arrogance or mutual misunderstandings, but as God's way of making sure that his chosen people were paying attention. (King, 2012, p. 23)

Here, Canadian author Thomas King points directly, if somewhat cheekily, to the historic locus of current power imbalances. Colonialism itself, and the matrix of dualisms and dichotomies it entailed, persists in influencing modern thought and identity building. But its mechanisms are both pernicious and difficult to tease out precisely because of their deeply embedded and entangled nature. According to John Ralston Saul, "the single greatest failure of the Canadian experiment, so far, has been our ability to normalize – that is to, internalize consciously – the first Nations as the senior founding pillar of our civilization" (Saul, 2008, p. 21).   Clearly, Canadians on both sides of the colonial fence can see the problem, and it is no small one.

The project, then, for those who wish to engage in post-colonial anti-racist discourses is to help others see how they are implicit in the fundamentally problematic way in which Canadian identity has constructed itself. The trick, however, lies in finding a methodology that can bring this problem to the forefront in a way that is at once honest and genuine in its approach while at the same time easing the divisiveness that often arises in the ensuing dialogic analysis of imbalances of power. Especially since the 1971 adoption of Canada's policy of Official Multiculturalism, Canadians see themselves as willing and able to embrace the other. But the very perception that this optimistic type of pluralism is evidence of a racism-free-meta-narrative indicates our collective blind-side. In the construction of the national narrative of a pluralistic society, the assumption is that the cultures that multiculturalism seeks to include are not 'us,' but most certainly 'other.' In practice then, multiculturalism becomes a kind of tokenism through which cultures are encouraged to perform their differences under contained conditions and at acceptable times that can be managed easily by the normative white centre. The cost of this for society as a whole is dear. As Homi Bhabha wrote:

The Other is cited, quoted, framed, illuminated, encased in the shot/reverse shot strategy of serial enlightenment. Narrative and the *cultural* politics of difference become the closed circle of interpretation. The Other looses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse. (1994, p. 31)

Given that Bhabha was positing these problems and questions twenty years ago, it is clear that the process of opening the discourses multiculturalism, colonial influence and the presumed neutrality of whiteness, is a slow and painful business.

In their 2003 paper, Schick and St. Denis refer to the work of Norman Fairclough in critical discourse analysis (CDA) to situate their discussion. The authors create a clear picture of the way in which they guide their students through new understandings

of themselves as "social subjects in a social, economic, and political process and practice in which knowledge/power is germane" (Schick and St. Denis, 2003, p. 58), by engaging in critical theory readings and providing opportunities for students to identify and unpack biases. They assist students in questioning the construction of "whiteness" as a neutral subject position by showing them, through the readings and class discussions on the construction of race, gender, class, sexuality, that whiteness is also a construction that sublimates assumptions about the nature of power and privilege in Canada. According to Schick and St. Denis: "The construction of whiteness depends on a contradictory process familiar in Canadian society: whiteness seems to be invisible even while being the necessary standard against which otherness is marked" (2005, p. 298).

That the process has begun speaks volumes for the vision and determination of those who are pioneering (so to speak) this work. There is no question that Schick and St. Denis are welcome voices to others of us who have met with the same resistance they describe. But in reading their work I am conscious of two fundamental difficulties: first, that their approach is necessarily limited by remaining rooted in a strictly text-based format, which in itself carries a certain set of assumptions, and second that no progress can be made in this area until the four areas of resistance defined by Schick and St. Denis have been addressed and passed through.

In looking for a method of addressing these difficulties, I turn to the work of Gunther Kress in social semiotic discourse analysis, a form of CDA. Kress offers a broader approach to the issue of resistance to post-colonial education.

> *Discourse analysis* has by and large assumed that language – usually as writing - is the material means for the realization of discourses. In its uses in education, this has meant that discourse analysis offered, on the one hand, theoretical/conceptual tools for the 'opening' of pedagogic spaces and practices; while in its normalized assumptions about the centrality of language it tended to maintain and reinforce yet again the problematic exclusionary focus on language as *the* means for making meaning – and learning. (Kress, 2011, p. 208)

Like Bhabha's closed loop of intercultural interpretation, Kress points out that maintaining adherence to and reliance on a single means of knowledge building and meaning making is necessarily limiting, creating a similarly closed loop. Kress argues for the use of multimodal approaches for knowledge building. "*Multimodality* poses a challenge to the long-held and still widely dominant notion that 'language' is the resource for making meaning that makes possible the 'expression' of all thoughts, experiences, feelings, values, attitudes; in short, the pillar that guarantees human rationality" (Kress, 2011, p. 208). The social semiotic approach allows for a multitude of opportunities for sign making and therefore dialogic knowledge construction, usually in an exchange between learner and subject material, and between learner and teacher. For example, in the context of a classroom, the communication between teacher and students is highly nuanced, involving everything from body language and eye contact, to seating arrangements and dialogic opportunity. In Kress' expression of the idea, we are all social agents who both receive and make signs in various modes, which taken as a

whole effect a kind of communication that offers much greater affordances than language taken alone.

In extrapolating on this method, Kress offers two examples that show the importance of both situation/situatedness, and of the interest, investment and agency of the learner/sign maker. In the first example, Kress (2011) looks at the communication that happens in the learning environment of an operating theatre. Here, it is the proximity of the surgeon (teacher) and resident (learner) to both one another and to their project (the surgical patient) that create the ground for their interaction. "Communication here is multi-modal: by *speech* at times; by gaze; by actions – passing an instrument, reaching out for an instrument; by touching" (p. 213). It is clear that education (knowledge building) is not merely confined to exchanges of and interactions with language based texts, but that a range of prompts can be read as texts for the purposes of analyzing communicative interactions. In responding to the prompts of the instructor, the student makes an epistemological commitment to prior knowledge that is then transformed into a response (or sign) incorporating newly formed knowledge attached to the old. In this context the learning is relational and therefore the situatedness of each agent (teacher/student, surgeon/resident, expert/novice), in addition to the place in which the interaction occurs (formal training arena), are all interdependent in the matrix of meaning making.

In the second example, Kress draws attention to the importance of the interests, investment and agency of viewers in the Natural History Museum in Stockholm, Sweden. Here, the data gathered relates to how well visitors understood the narrative of the exhibition as constructed by museum curators. In this instance, the information gathered by the visitors took two forms: visitors were asked to draw a map of the galleries they had just visited and they were also interviewed in pairs so that a sense of the dialogic process of knowledge construction could emerge. In the analysis of both maps and interviews Kress (2011) points out that "*selection*, *attention*, *framing* and *interpretation*" (p. 221) play key roles in the epistemological commitments visitors make as they demonstrate their understanding of the exhibition, especially around what information is included or excluded from their renderings. Visitors recalled best those things that most interested them. While some maps were quite sparse, depicting only one or two objects, others were quite detailed and included floor plans. Conversations between viewers indicate a similar range of expression in terms of what they recalled and what affected them. Because they were free to interpret and access the displays according to their own interests, the viewers' retelling of their experiences indicates a rich array of sign making/learning, clearly guided by selection, framing, attention and interpretation. Here again, we can see the degree to which an exclusively language based approach to assessing learning is essentially inadequate to the task of getting a sense of the breadth of all the dialogic processes of coming-to-know something.

With the flexibility of critical discourse analysis in a social semiotic mode in mind, we can return again to the project of Carol Schick and Verna St. Denis. In their 2003 article, Schick and St. Denis locate themselves as instructors at two different Saskatchewan Universities; the former, a white instructor teaching at the University of Regina, and the latter a Cree and Métis instructor teaching at the University of

Saskatchewan. The focus of both women's work is anti-racist education, and both have written and taught extensively in this field. Further, and this occurs in the 2005 article as well, the authors point to the situatedness of their work in Saskatchewan, where the population has been relatively stable for the last century or so, comprised largely of white immigrants and the aboriginal 'other.' As a Métis woman who has worked with pre-service teachers in Vancouver, British Columbia, I have encountered similar types of resistance as those described by Schick and St. Denis when engaging in pedagogical discussions here, where the population is less stable and more culturally diverse, suggesting that the problems as described by Schick and St. Denis are not unique to Saskatchewan. In fact, it may be argued that the inclusion of post-colonial anti-racist pedagogy is even more important in areas where the population includes high numbers of relatively recent immigrants. For new Canadians (both white and other non-white 'others') who have received their elementary and/or secondary education elsewhere, the opportunities to learn about indigenous people and their relationships with Canada are necessarily limited, so this knowledge cannot be assumed to be present, even in the nascent form sometimes found in second and third generation Canadians.

Other authors too, such as Susan Dion in her book, *Braided Histories: Learning from Aboriginal People's Experiences and Perspectives*, note the subversive effects of unexamined assumptions. There, Dion describes a similar dilemma: "Ignoring post-contact history from First Nations perspectives promotes an image in the minds of young people that the white Euro-Canadian dominant culture is superior to other cultures and that members of that cultural group deserve advantages not provided to 'inferior Others'." (2009, p. 8). Clearly, Schick and St. Denis are not alone in their perceptions and consequent struggles.

Three ideological assumptions held by largely non-Aboriginal student teachers are explored in Schick and St. Denis' 2003 article and are central to the focus of their paper, elucidated by the author's paraphrasing of common responses to their efforts to help students locate themselves politically, socially and culturally. The three assumptions are: 1) race doesn't matter; 2) everyone has equal opportunity; and 3) good intentions can create innocence and secure superiority. Offered as evidence of the embeddedness of these ideological assumptions among non-Aboriginal students are statements such as: "The problem is that their values and beliefs are so different from ours," (p. 62); "People are victims because they choose to be victims," (p. 63); and, "Why do they always bring up the past? I wasn't there." (p. 65) While these statements (just three of the 12 included by the authors)[1] certainly paint an unflattering, albeit accurate, picture of the tacit modes of racism as a set of imbalanced power relations, they also evoke a strange pathos. What is most painful about these and the other statements is the knowledge that the process of mining and unpacking the underlying assumptions implicit in them as a practice of critical reflection is bound to be difficult. One cannot un-know the realities of one's place in the Canadian narrative, so knowledge gleaned as a tonic to such sentiments can take the form of a bitter pill.

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[1] Other statements include "How could I be a racist? I don't even know any Aboriginal people," (p. 62) "My family started with nothing and we worked hard to get where we are now. They just want everything given to them," (p. 63) and "I am fascinated by all the cultures. I love learning about them." (p. 65)

Having established that there is indeed a problem, let us turn the discussion to the question of how whatever success those scholars have experienced might be improved upon. If we accept Gunther Kress's social semiotic theory of communication that is not entrenched in textual analysis, which represents an expansion of the available modes of meaning making, then introducing non-textual elements to the dialogic process of examining assumptions about race and managing areas of resistance is a worthy avenue of exploration.

The goal of Schick and St. Denis' project is to show students the importance of examining their own subjectivity as they embark upon the path of teaching. In particular, they are asked to look at the national discourses of both whiteness and multiculturalism in order to see more clearly what power structures are at play and why they should care. More importantly, Schick and St. Denis have evidence, through student assignments, that it is paying off. But it is not without its struggles:

> It is from student *resistance* and *trauma* that we see the extent of what is at stake for them in learning about the implications of being a white teacher. In the autobiographical assignment written by each student, we have evidence that, indeed, something has been taught. However, we are more excited when we read evidence of student learning we have not taught – more importantly, learning that students have taught themselves. (Schick and St. Denis, 2005, p. 312) (emphasis mine)

Two key themes emerge from this assertion by the authors. The first is that taking students through this process is met with *resistance*, which is overcome through *trauma*. The second is that the most valued knowledge in their analysis is not to see in students a mimetic reflection of their own sign making, to use the parlance of social semiotics, but that students are producing knowledge (signs) on their own. The resistance tells us that the project is indeed a necessary one. The results tell us that it is working. But what does the *trauma* associated with this practice tell us? Knowledge building is necessarily a social process that often results in shifts of paradigm, and can be painful. The trauma experienced by students as their resistance to anti-racist education is eroded is perhaps a necessary part of their transition from old ways of thinking to new ones, but perhaps there is another way.

Homi Bhabha (1994) grapples with precisely the problem of overcoming resistance in its abstract form. In arguing for a model of cultural interaction that produces hybridity, Bhabha (1994) promotes the lens of cultural *difference* over cultural *diversity*. While *diversity*, he argues, perpetuates canons and conventions, *difference* forces the discussion of cultural authority and rejects totalizing narratives.[2] According to Bhabha (1994), "the problem of cultural interaction emerges only at the significatory boundaries

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[2] It should be noted that Schick and St. Denis actually argue against the discourse of cultural difference in their analysis, but their framing of the term is different. To them, cultural difference "connects educational failure to the 'other' by shifting the emphasis away from how dominant identities are implicated in the production of 'difference.'" (2005, p. 306) In Bhabha's case, while difference functions in a similar way, his use is more active in that difference then becomes the fulcrum to mine precisely those tropes of identity production that Schick and St. Denis are concerned with.

of cultures, where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated" (p. 34). Bhabha's solution to this problem of interaction is the introduction of the *third space* which he describes in an interview:

> The importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom (1990, p. 211).

My suggestion is a new approach to complement the methods Schick and St. Denis describe in their classes. Rather than introducing students to the difficult work ahead of them by asking them to look inward, I suggest the students be asked to look beyond themselves towards the art (signs) produced by the 'other' and let the questions that arise lead them back to their own situatedness and its baggage. If, as Schick and St. Denis assert, the most valued student learning takes place in areas of learning *outside* of what is discussed within the context of their course, then perhaps the introduction of art is precisely the approach required to reduce the resistance and associated *trauma* inherent in the process of examining the implications of our socially constructed selves.

Before exploring what the strategy of introducing art to the equation might offer, it may be useful to outline a bit more of the theoretical framework that informs my thinking here. Maxine Greene spent her life engaged in this project in her own way. In her writing in support of the arts in education, Greene asserts that, "we do not engage with artworks to find copies of an objectively existent world but to experience the art works' capacity to enable us to see more, to discover nuance and shapes and sounds inaccessible to us without them" (1995, p. 102). That is, interaction with art encourages exactly the kind of semiotic process of knowledge making that Kress describes. But the mere viewing of art is not sufficient to describe what occurs in the dialogic engagement necessary for meaning making to occur. In fact, it may be said that the experience of looking at art, as suggested by John Dewey, could be construed as an *aesthetic experience*, a term that offers more flexibility in describing the dialogic process of engaging with art. According to Dewey, "the uniquely distinguishing feature of aesthetic experience is exactly the fact that no such distinction between self and object exists in it, since it is aesthetic in the degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute and experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears." (1934, p. 259) Though less focused in its potential applications, in Dewey can be found support for the framework of Bhabha and his project of describing the function of the third space in the creation of the kind of hybridity necessary for knowledge production. Both men describe the ways in which the intersection of ideas, or of people and ideas (art), creates new understanding. Both Dewey's aesthetic experience and Bhabha's third space are potentially transformative because they involve not a clash in ideas, but an emergent potential for the creation of new ideas through a dialogic process, such as that described by Kress.

The suggestion of having students look outside themselves towards art as a means of entering into dialogues about post-colonial power structures (and its underlying assumptions), could be viewed as a strategy of diverting the responsibility for meaning making and placing the burden back on the artist, in this case, the Aboriginal 'other'. This would indeed be problematic as the implication is then that the 'other' must continue to perform their own identity to meet the needs of the dominant culture, thereby locking in existing narratives and power structures, making the whole project pointless. However, the ideally neutral arena of the third space, of the aesthetic experience in action, supported by critical pedagogy, is precisely why there is so much potential for success in this approach. It should be noted, too, that the selection of contemporary art is an important component, as part of the function of the art is to disrupt the status quo of representation.[3]

In order to determine if this is true, let us put this activity into practice. Below is a single image, offered as an example of how such a practice might work.

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Guardian Spirits on the Land: Ceremony of Sovereignty, 2000.
Acrylic on canvas

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[3] James Clifford (1988) has written extensively on display practices related to historic Indigenous material culture and tourist art, which is what I refer to here as the canon of traditional display practices. By way of example, Natural History and Ethnography museums often display material culture items out of context in glass display cases as curated by cultural 'experts', contributing to the impression that Aboriginal cultures are dead or dying. Further, items such as spoons, bowls, carved crests and regalia come to represent the 'otherness' of Aboriginal people, without ever referencing the fact that many Native people live modern lives as well. In contrast, art galleries offer opportunities for self-representation to Aboriginal artists that museums never could. A short list of those who have risen to the fore and whose work is of interest to this project includes such artists as Teresa Marshall, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Ruth Cuthand, Cory Bulpitt, James Luna, and Brian Jungen.

In this painting, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun offers a representation of Aboriginal people that is laden with signs and the potential for meaning making. Paul's work brings to the fore the many complexities that form the relationship between Aboriginal people and the land, Aboriginal people and Canadian narratives and Aboriginal people and themselves, to name just three large arenas of discourse. In the example above, we see a landscape populated by humanistic forms that seem to have been pieced together out of the formal design elements of North West Coast art (ovoids, split U forms, and so on). They each occupy themselves with the land on which they stand, some rolling parts of the land up for storage, while a drummer looks on, ready to sing or dance the process on as required. In addition, there is a reference to sovereignty in the title, which adds another layer of complexity to the task of the viewer. This is a challenging image to the uninitiated. It is not a remote and austere totem pole in the forest, nor intricate beadwork under glass. It has something to say, and it is up to the viewer to determine what that might be.

In a process of active engagement similar to that required of students by Schick and St. Denis in their analysis of texts, the student teacher/student viewer can begin to develop a bank of questions guided, in part, by their own interests. As we saw in the social semiotics analysis work of Kress, it is precisely these interests that guide learners through the process of knowledge building/meaning making. In a practice similar in the way in which one might analyse a piece of text, students can be asked first to perform the task of *locating* the work, that is, identifying the author, determining the cultural origin, and looking for political and social context. Using the example above would require students to do a little research. But because the task is necessarily ambiguous, their own interests become the mechanism by which the criteria of the search is determined. For example, one student may be exclusively interested in empirical terms (when and where did the artist live?, what materials does he use?, to which nation does he belong?, and so on), while another student may immediately make more esoteric connections to the idea of location by focusing on the socio-political circumstances of the artist, and a third may be engaged by symbology or connections to mythology and narrative. In any case, the importance is not the depth or the breadth to which each student is able to formulate their response, but more that it was their own, in Kress's (2011) words, "*selection, attention, framing, interpretation*" (p. 221) that guided their interest.

From this emergent, organic place of asking the questions one's self, students can next be asked to consider what might be at stake for Lawence Paul Yuxweluptun in representing himself, his politics and his culture, in the manner he has chosen. This further act of locating his work, very much in line with similar analytic strategies associated more often with text, students can then begin to uncover their own assumptions, supported by critical readings. In investigating the art of the *other*, students are gradually drawn into the artist's version of a national narrative, ultimately realizing that their 'version' of Canada may not be reflective of everyone else's reality. Returning to Bhabha and Dewey, it is in this space that the potential for real knowledge building exists. At each of the points of intersection between the student's worldview and the artist's, there is the potential for hybridity, for an equally informed merging of self and other that results in the production of new knowledge of self and other.

Artists such as Lawrence Paul, and authors, such as Eden Robinson and Drew Hayden Taylor, have a vested interest in bringing the lives of modern Aboriginal people to light, to point to systemic inequities, and the legacy of colonial oppression. By assisting the student to be gradually drawn into seeing the worldview of the 'other' and then comparing it with their own, the areas of resistance earlier defined by Schick and St. Denis may be lessened. While I think the mandatory nature of the course they describe is both necessary and necessarily problematic, framing the course differently, as a multimodal project rooted in dialogue, students are introduced to post-colonial discourses from a source *outside* of themselves – more importantly, through acts of self-representation on the part of the artists. By reducing the threat to students' sense of self and moral good, more space is created for continuing the process. This may still force a crisis in students' sense of self as far as their own perceptions of being good, and rightly so, but seeing the problem from the other side through an act of art may ease the way in to the kind of self reflexiveness that is necessary for meaning to be made. If the practice is recursively and reflexively attended to, the line of questioning will lead the viewer to the same critique of self and socially constructed identity work that Schick and St. Denis' enterprise leads to. But, by providing some additional scaffolding in the process for students, hopefully lessen the *trauma* of an exclusively text based approach.

Maxine Greene elucidates the project of education aptly.

> We should think of education as opening public spaces in which students, speaking in their own voices and acting on their own initiatives, can identify themselves and choose themselves in relation to such principals as freedom, equality, justice, and concern for others. We can hope to communicate the recognition that persons become more fully themselves and open to the world so they can be aware of themselves appearing before others, speaking in their own voices, and trying as they do so to bring into being a common world. (Greene, 1995, p. 68)

The practice of anti-racist education is to assist students in seeing the ways in which national narratives create a normative version of white identity, which reinforces existing power structures. The goal of the practice is moving through a third space process towards a cultural hybridity that is informed by neither one nor the other, but results in knowledge that is co-created by both. Increasing opportunities for multimodal engagement in existing anti-racist curricula can only serve to increase the availability of accessing difficult knowledge for students and their instructors. If students can be afforded the distance to identify discourses outside of themselves as the beginning of a process through which they can eventually locate themselves within those dialogues, the potential for resistance may be greatly reduced. Further, and finally, the potential for growth may be exponentially increased.

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