

Towards a Matricentric Feminist Poetics

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Abstract

The title of this article recalls that of Elaine Showalter's essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics," in which she posits "gynocritics" as a term for a mode of "feminist criticism ... concerned with woman as writer—with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women" (25). Here, I call for a matricentric feminist criticism, or "matricritics," where the latter refers to that area of literary criticism concerned with the mother as a writer and the attendant subjects. In attempting to draw up a matricritics, I begin by acknowledging the current rise in English-language maternal writing. I then, in the first part of this three-part article, list a number of formal tendencies common to this body of writing, drawing particularly on "Accumulations (Appendix F)" by Kate Zambreno. In the second part, in direct response to this taxonomy, I speculate on and begin to sketch out a critical methodology for reading maternal writing. The third part of the article is given over to a creative matricritical reading of "Appendix F"; this standalone piece is suggestive of how we might conceive of a matricentric feminist reading methodology in practice. An afterword highlights the matricritical elements at work in this alternative close reading.

"It's time to let mothers have their word," clamours Susan Rubin Suleiman in her 1979 essay "Writing and Motherhood" (120). Coming three years after the publication of both Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* and Jane Lazarre's *The Mother Knot*, this call was perhaps a belated one. However, forty years on from Suleiman's cry, the need for direct testimony to maternal experience remains a principal literary preoccupation. The recent spate of maternal literature, or so-called "mom-lit," in English-speaking countries testifies to the ongoing nature of this concern (Elkin; Sehgal; Skurnick). I would, however, like to suggest here that a number of these recent works of maternal literature assert a politics that supersedes the need for testimony: the writing of Joanna Walsh, Sarah Manguso, Jenny Offill, Anna Prushinskaya, Sara Ruhl, Andrea Brady, Maggie Nelson, Sheila Heti, and Kate Zambreno, to name but a few, performatively and creatively

rewrites motherhood. Irreverent and formally inventive, this “countercanonical” body of literature spans memoir, fiction, poetry, and autofiction; it often defies conventional genre classifications altogether and is as much an act of testimony as one of deliberately upending previous discourses (patriarchal, social, psychoanalytic, and feminist) around motherhood.¹ This body of maternal writing is significant for a number of reasons: not only does it situate itself at the forefront of experimental contemporary women’s writing in the UK and US and reimagine maternal imaginary, but it also—to adapt Rosi Braidotti’s words on speaking “as a woman”—potentially empowers mothers and activates sociosymbolic changes in their condition.² I argue, therefore, that this maternal writing positions itself within a wider matricentric feminist project and, as such, calls for a method of criticism that affirms this project.

The title of this article is taken from Elaine Showalter’s “Towards a Feminist Poetics,” in which she called for a “gynocritics”—a mode of “feminist criticism . . . concerned with woman as writer—with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women” (25). I draw on her essay to propose here a “matricritics,” a matricentric feminist criticism concerned with the mother as a writer and the attendant subjects. In order to do so, I first, borrowing Showalter’s words, “outline a brief taxonomy, if not a poetics” (25) of maternal writing. I begin by referring to “Accumulations (Appendix F)” by Kate Zambreno, an explicit example of the kinds of formal invention and subversion common to this countercanon in order to provide an overview of the strategies used in this body of writing and to delineate a poetics of maternal literature. I speculate in the second part of this article on what a matricritics may look like. How can we as critics, as theorists, and/or as mothers read this literature? What might a matricentric feminist methodology look like? I call for a gently postcritical inclination in our work—one that seeks to take maternal writing at face value to attend better to what the maternal texts

themselves are saying and making possible.³ The third part offers a potential close reading of “Appendix F,” which as a standalone piece is suggestive of how we might conceive of a matricentric feminist reading methodology in practice. An afterword elucidates the matricentric elements at work in this reading.

Maternal Poetics

“Our first breast-feeding friendly piece!” tweeted an editor of *The White Review* when “Appendix F” was published. The essay was printed online as a thin column to make it easy to scroll and read one handed while breastfeeding. As such, it both established the nursing configuration, and with the insertion of a screen into the shared mother-child gaze, it gave permission to break it. A maternal act and one of maternal distraction, hovering closely to one of maternal finitude, the screen marks a pertinent and provocative incision in the nursing dyad. Similar provocation occurs in a conversation between Zambreno and writer Marie Darrieussecq, published in *The Paris Review* in 2017, which is peppered with references to a “baby crying in background” (Darrieussecq and Zambreno). This performative mingling of the maternal day-to-day and highbrow culture seems to be Zambreno’s signature. *The White Review* piece continues this provocation: “I’ve been keeping a mental list of all the pieces of art that I’ve nursed Leo in front of this past year.” By placing maternal experience in spaces that have long overlooked (if not denied) it, Zambreno establishes a political position—one that foregrounds maternity as a central concern.⁴ It is no longer beside, or outside, the point.

Already, this brief introduction to “Appendix F” offers a glimpse of what a maternal poetics may look like: it is written in the first person and situated in everyday experience; it testifies and gives voice to maternal subjectivity; and it resists conventions and does not fit

neatly into genre distinctions. But let us take a step back and begin this taxonomy with that first and still necessary act of testimony.

Maternal writing begins with an “I”; in a deft step, it pulls the mother out of the third person into the first. By positioning the mother as subject, it begins to unravel those discourses, notably patriarchal and psychoanalytic ones, that have long held “mother” in the third person as an object or “other.” These are discourses that, as Marianne Hirsch argues in *The Mother / Daughter Plot*, feminism has often colluded: “Feminist writing and scholarship continuing in large part to adopt *daughterly* perspectives, can be said to collude with patriarchy in placing mothers in the position of object—thereby keeping mothering outside of representation and maternal discourse a theoretical impossibility” (163).

Indeed, Hirsch queries the feminist “reliance on psychoanalysis as a conceptual framework and [the] psychoanalytic construction of mothering,” wherein psychoanalysis has tended to hold mother in position of “other” (167).⁵ Crucial to the matricentric feminist project and by inhabiting a maternal “I,” this writing repositions the mother as a speaking subject and a desiring social subject—thus making stories, to paraphrase Hirsch, that begin with the mother and that grant her agency, subjectivity, and initiative (175).

Yet Andrea O’Reilly observes in *Matricentric Feminism* how difficult it can be to speak as a mother and to “unmask” or “out” oneself, since the maternal paradigms are so insistent and motherhood is so idealized. Nor should we make light of this here. To inhabit a maternal “I” is indeed a nerve-racking, doubt-inducing position. As Zambreno says, “I was nervous to take my breast out... I felt panicky and self-conscious.” This difficulty poses an equally important question to us as writers, theorists, and mothers in the matricentric feminist project: how willing are we to dismantle the myths around motherhood? If Adrienne Rich is a forerunner in this project, it is heartening to recall her words in “Some Notes on Lying,” where she urges us to delve still deeper:

Women are only beginning to uncover our own truths; many of us would be grateful for some rest in that struggle, would be glad just to lie down with the sherds we have painfully unearthed, and be satisfied with those. Often I feel this like an exhaustion in my own body.... The politics worth having, the relationships worth having, demand that we delve still deeper. (191)

To delve deeper still, despite the exhaustion, gives an added charge to this maternal “I”: establishing that the project of writing as a mother is a politically committed one. To occupy in what it suggests of political protest becomes an appropriate term here: writers do not so much inhabit as occupy a maternal first person. Their feminist position challenges previous inhibiting discourses and rewrites debilitating maternal representations. It seeks to do so without replacing old myths with new one: the task is not to construct a new good mother.

How then do these texts occupy the “I”? There are four main strategies of political engagement that this body of writing employs: misreproduction, queering, formal engagement, and new materialist and phenomenological approaches. Misreproduction relates to a practice in which normative representations are deliberately reproduced imperfectly, thus destabilizing normative discourses. Representations of maternity that do not conform to idealizations, which are spattered with irreverence or humour, not only testify more exactly to the experience but also confront those idealized versions. “I became used to taking my breast out in art spaces ... in front of the El Greco ‘Holy Family’ at the Met ... her straddling me ... I figured if there were so many penises in that room it was okay to have my breast peek out through my leather jacket, like a floppy blue-veined sac of a sculpture, scratched and sad.” Here, for example, the juxtaposing of the El Greco “Madonna and Child,” the toddler straddling the mother, and the phallic sculptures obliges a discomfiting reimagining of the maternal imaginary—one that recalls the misreproduction at work in the visual art of Cindy Sherman and Catherine Opie.⁶

Second, since “Appendix F” plays with who or what is an object, who or what is a subject, and who or what is artwork, the work asks to be read as a queer text. “To queer

motherhood,” writes O’Reilly, “is to destabilize patriarchal motherhood, particularly its ideological mandates of essentialization, normalization, naturalization, and biologicalization” (100). Non-normative (LGBTQ, single, adoptive, to name just a few) representations of motherhood help to undo patriarchal ideals. Although Zambreno’s text does reference a number of queer artists, it is not explicitly counter-heteronormative. However, the destabilizing of boundaries and bodies that happens in it recalls one of queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s statements as to what queer could mean: “That’s one of the things ‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made or can’t be made to signify monolithically” (*Tendencies* 7). As with many of the countercanonical texts, “Appendix F” is gappy and dissonant; it presents as an open mesh of possibilities and could thus be read as a queer reclaiming—where queering becomes a formal device not directly related to gender or sexuality.⁷ To queer as such becomes a useful tool in re-representing motherhood without asking it to signify monolithically.

Queering would be one formal device among the many that are used as a tool or a medium through which writers disturb previous notions of motherhood. Even though form can be used mimetically, it could also be used subversively by upsetting the language that supports the discourses and undermining them. The third strategy is, therefore, that of formal engagement. Formal aesthetics common to this maternal writing include bittiness, gappiness, interruption, splintering, fragmentation, polyphony, multiple figures, and shifting of pronouns. These texts frequently frustrate any attempt to produce a coherent subject and resist the possibility of a singular interpretation. As such, this countercanon enacts a politics that works to demythologize and de-essentialize the mother, all without creating a new bounded maternal subject. Formal innovation becomes a feminist practice. “We need

accounts of maternal experiences that move the mother away from containers and receptacles altogether, that have other shapes and contours,” writes psychologist Lisa Baraitser (21). I would like to suggest here that this body of writing inhabits these other shapes and contours.

Fourth, the renewed engagement with the body enabled by new materialist and phenomenological approaches is forming a space within which writers can once more dwell in this long bracketed-off arena of maternal experience. By taking a “perspective not of biology, but of experience” (Hirsch 163) or by championing phenomenology over ontology, texts depict maternal embodiment without essentializing it and forge versions of maternal subjectivity that arise from everyday practice: “it had taken all of our energy to get there on the subway, and it was almost closing time, and I couldn’t find anywhere comfortable to nurse” (Zambreno). These texts are more concerned with a mother does, not what she is; they situate the maternal in the everyday, multiple, disparate, and episodic experiences of mothering, and, as a result, they evade essentialist and biological approaches to motherhood.⁸

Our countercanon could, thus, be defined as joining a maternal first person with a number of the political strategies discussed above. This brief taxonomy, or poetics, recognizes the occupation of a maternal ‘I’ in texts that are formally inventive, that give voice to maternal subjectivity in its variety, and that are often hard to grasp and hard to fix. Through acts of testifying, writing back and rewriting these texts fashion alternative maternal imaginaries; it uses a feminist stance to maternal interests and advances a matricentric-feminist project.

Perhaps here we as critics, theorists, writers, and mothers need pause once more, for it would be easy to gather together and then gloss these commonalities but harder to respond in kind. Texts that are hard to grasp and formally difficult ask us to read them differently and, perhaps, to respond to them with an approach close to their own.⁹ Hirsch writes that “the

psychoanalytic frame in which we have been thinking has made us unable to hear” maternal stories (174). I would also suggest that the many frames—historical, social, psychoanalytic, patriarchal, and even feminist—with which we have been thinking might mean we cannot hear these maternal stories. It would be too easy to co-opt or neutralize these maternal forms or to try and fit them into the already known and into conventional histories of literature. I would like to propose instead, in the second part of this article, that we adopt alternative methods for reading maternal writing. My hunch is that this countercanon looks to us, critics, to reangle our ways of reading and to tune out the hefty discourses that may be preventing us from reading these text; instead, we must tune in as matricentric feminists.

Maternal Methods

In their introduction to a recent issue of *Feminist Review* on methods, editors Yasmin Gunaratnam and Carrie Hamilton underline that “feminist research and knowledge-making [demand] a distinct approach to empirical inquiry” (1).¹⁰ Likewise, I propose that matricentric feminist research and knowledge making demand a distinct approach to empirical inquiry, in which “empirical” refers not to an outmoded single methodological approach but to a breadth of modes of academic inquiry and knowledge seeking.

Motherhood has long been prey too misreadings and misinterpretations, as much within the academy as outside it, but motherhood studies today incites us to develop alternative models of critical approach. The terrain of motherhood studies remains an unsettled one (O’Reilly), yet this indeterminacy arguably offers more scope for experimenting with methodologies, specifically matricentric ones. Drawing once again on Showalter, I understand matricritics to involve “[constructing] a [maternal] framework for the

analysis of [maternal] literature, [developing] new models based on the study of [maternal] experience” (28).

What then might our new models of analysis look like? My sense is that we might find an approach among those current academic modes that tend towards the postcritical. The turn away from hermeneutics and towards other modes of criticism, specifically to attentive and affirmative methods, offers a number of suitable models for reading maternal writing. The ethical and political stances asserted by many of these methodologies chime with those at work in the countercanon itself. Could a reparative, postsymptomatic, close, or vulnerable reading orientation better affirm the politics of these source texts? (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling; Love; Page*).

Following Showalter, I propose a mode of inquiry that is informed directly by the experiences, ethics, and aesthetics attested to in the maternal texts without “build[ing] new models for subjectivity that solidify and reify experience, processes to which ‘the mother’ as metaphor, figure or trope is particularly vulnerable” (Baraitser 3). If we look again to those facets of maternal writing enumerated in the second part of this article and join those to the reading orientations above, we can begin to construct a potential theoretical framework of matricritics. This framework remains undefined, and as with the writing, it seeks to try a variety of approaches in order to create a set of methods that could be more widely circulated. Pragmatically, however, some steps we might try out include the following:

First Person

As with current maternal writing, we might turn to a first person or confessional register in our criticism, thereby furthering the project of maternal subjectivity. In addition, the intimacy

born from a dialogue between two maternal “I’s” begins to counter the previous “othering” of mothers.

Political and Ethical Position

We might take into account the politics and/or ethics proposed in the source text and seek to reproduce this in our own work, affirming the matricentric-feminist position inhabited by the author.

Describe Not Interpret

We could resist the common critical tendency towards pathological, symptomatic, and in-depth readings, and revel instead in taking the source text at face value, our role being only to describe not interpret (Love 375).

Beside, Neither Beneath nor Beyond

Similarly, we could explore methods of close reading that are positioned beside the source text—not seeking to reveal what is hidden beneath or to transcend to what is beyond (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 8).

Read Reparatively

We could replace a paranoid critical stance with a reparative one (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 123-51)?

Acknowledge Our Own Vulnerability

We could strip ourselves of our status as all-knowing critics, and acknowledge our own vulnerabilities as researchers. We could have the courage to “question assumptions and forms of certitude, to return to materials and change our minds” (Page 16).

Listen in to the Lesser Beats

We should listen to the lesser beats of the texts to help create works of criticism that “[stress] the lesser beats, the parts of life that do not get heard, or are misheard, ignored or erased in forms of remembering and in modes of telling” (Page 23).

Refrain from Essentialization and Biologicalization

We should refrain from the essentialization or biologicalization of mothers in our own work while finding modes—be these new materialist or phenomenological approaches—that allow for bodily and biological maternal experiences to be studied and written about.

A New Good Mother?

The critical process should challenge us to dismantle our own myths about maternity, even to out ourselves as flawed mothers. Holding to our aspiration to not reconstruct a new good mother, we may fragment, undermine or queer them, which mirrors the techniques at work in the countercanon itself.

As such a tentative but ethically and politically appropriate matricritical framework begins to take shape—one that aligns the literary critical project with the practices of the literature it is considering. And writing now, I begin to imagine this critical practice being one of care, which seems not to be talking about the work of a critic at all but the work of a mother.

In her book exploring the turn away from a hermeneutics of suspicion, *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski concludes with the following: “I want to move on: to try out different vocabularies and experiment with alternative ways of writing, to think in a more sustained and concentrated fashion what other moods and methods might look like” (193). In this vein, I will finish by experimenting with a matricentric feminist reading of Zambreno’s breastfeeding friendly essay, “Appendix F.” This first person maternal piece reads “Appendix F” as it asks to be read—while breastfeeding. The text in italics is quoted directly from Zambreno’s “Accumulations (Appendix F),” whereas the words in regular type are mine.

A Maternal Reading

I’ve been keeping a mental list of all the pieces of art that I’ve nursed Leo in front of this past year, the essay begins, I am reading, my daughter is feeding, balanced between my upper thigh and left arm, I became used to taking my breast out in art spaces, and began to savour it with sometimes a fatigued perversity and other times something more sacred, my phone’s in my right hand, in the corner of the nearly pitch-black room where gold thread made geometric curtains, right thumb caressing screen to scroll downwards, or recently on a bench in front of the El Greco “Holy Family” at the Met, the way in which Mary presses down on her breast and points the nipple towards baby Jesus, both her and Joseph gazing downwards

at the central point of the baby, the baby's little hand on his mother's hand, left hand supporting my daughter's head, my palm meeting the bald patch at the back of her head where the hair has rubbed away, people were staring, I read, listening to the glug of milk as it hits the back of her throat, I nursed Leo outside the bubblegum phallic Franz West sculpture at MASS MoCA, amidst the industrial landscape and grey cool light, her straddling me, downy head bobbing back and forth between each breast, feeling my right breast savagely empty, and this fall in front of a Harry Dodge video at the New Museum's gender show, because there was a bench to sit on, I lose my place, people were staring, reread the same lines, her straddling me, downy head, at the noise of air being gulped with the feed I stop reading and put down the phone to better her latch, I figured if there were so many penises in that room it was okay to have my breast peek out through my leather jacket, like a floppy blue-veined sac of a sculpture, scratched and sad, my jumper is slipping down, I wonder whether to change side, but keep her on the same side to make sure she gets all the hind milk, scratched and sad, aware of my daughter's hot creamy skull skin against the skin of my palm, the two skins not unlike, I still felt shaky and strange occupying public space in the city with a baby. A maintenance worker told me I could sit on the wooden pews in the atrium that were part of the exhibit, she's pawing at my breast, I still felt shaky and strange, and I'm leaning the phone on her head, just beside her beating fontanelle, but the security guard told me I couldn't as I approached, I wince as a nail catches my skin, if Louise Lawler were there she probably would have let me breastfeed on the pews, because isn't her work about critiquing these institutional spaces, I lose my place again or the screen slips, and points the nipple towards baby Jesus, I read, I'm still on the first paragraph, but the security guard told me I couldn't as I approached, I apologized, I don't remember that apology, but I recognize it, I used to be so aware of people staring at me when I took my breast out, her head drops back into my hand, I stroke her cheek with my forefinger to encourage her to feed a bit more,

They might look at me, she's finished feeding, but I don't look any more at them looking at me, her head lolls, I've stopped even thinking about someone staring at me, falls away, at least when with the baby, she's bleary, It's just the two of us, dazed, together, so am I, and there's a freedom to that, her eyes just visible beneath the lids trying to close, the screen blurring, I sit her up to burp her before letting her fall asleep on my chest so that I can continue reading. She wraps her fingers around mine, a dribble of milk spills out of her loose mouth and runs down her cheek, runs down my still bare breast.

Afterword

Our response to a passage of criticism where nothing appears to happen, where the critic appears to be almost inert, is perhaps one of deflation. Although I am resistant to the need to explicate, hopeful that the methodological elements are visibly mobilized by the example above, I am aware that for such a reading to gain traction these points are reliant on identification. I would like to conjecture here then, that within this example, a number of acts of matricritical analysis are occurring.

The secondary text posits the source text, "Appendix F," as site of experience and the critical reading as maternal encounter. It seeks to trace what is already at work in the text and to do so with a lightness of touch: the critic positions herself attentively close to the text, but at no point does she claim to see through, beyond, or beneath it. We may speculate then that the apparent inertia here is not so much a failing but a deliberate and gentle affirmation of the source text itself.

The intimacy created in the original is further intensified for the reader of the secondary text who partakes both in the public scene of the writer-mother nursing in a variety of museums and the private scene of the reader-mother feeding her baby while reading. The

position of witness or voyeur allocated to the reader becomes even more salient. The very pragmatic details offered as to the logistics of reading while feeding highlight the logistical difficulty of the writer's own project of engaging with art in public while nursing a young child. The text, thus, urges the reader to take into account the various precarities and complexities of everyday maternal praxis.

=Moreover, the entrance into the text of two further bodies—the reading maternal body and feeding infant body—creates a visual heterogeneity in which bodies, infants, breasts, body parts, subjects, and objects proliferate. Each is perceived as further removed and is conveyed through the mediums of prose and visual art, and this profusion brings to the fore the vexed question about maternal representation that is staged in the original text.

The fragmentation and blurring present in the original is dramatically heightened by both the presence and the response of the maternal reader in this secondary text. This is echoed and thus compounded in the splintering produced by the counterpoint between the two maternal “I’s” (italicized and non).

As we become aware of the analysis being performed by this secondary reading, I wonder if that feeling of deflation is replaced by others, maybe one of consolation, perhaps, or even hope, which can open us up to a plethora of critical possibilities within the arena of matricritics.

Endnotes

¹Elkin argues the following: “The new books on motherhood are a countercanon. They read against the literary canon with its lack of interest in the interior lives of mothers, against the shelves of ‘this is how you do it’ books, and against the creeping hegemony of social-media motherhood.”

²Braidotti says that “one speaks as a woman in order to empower women, to activate sociosymbolic changes in their condition” (25). The paucity of matricentric-feminist theory obliges me once more to borrow and rephrase feminist theory.

³The postcritical here refers to that endorsed by Felski: “We are seeing ... the emergence of another regime of interpretations: one that is willing to recognize the potential of literature and art to create new imaginaries rather than to denounce mystifying illusions. The language of attachment, passion, and inspiration is no longer taboo” (187).

⁴As such, Zambreno's work could equally be read as an analogy for the work being done by motherhood studies to forge a place within academia.

⁵The work of Lisa Baraitser and Alison Stone has done much to revise the psychoanalytic "othering" of the mother. Petra Bueskens also makes "the argument that mothers are contiguous, contextual subjects who pose a potent alternative to the disembodied, individualist models of subjectivity founded in the post-Enlightenment, western canon, including in the canon of psychoanalysis."

⁶Here, I refer to "Self Portrait/Nursing" by Catherine Opie and Cindy Sherman's "History Portraits" series, which includes several revisions of Madonna and Child paintings.

⁷Moreover, Maggie Nelson says the following about the queerness of the pregnant body: "Isn't there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one's 'normal' state, and occasions a radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—one's body? How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity?" (13-14).

⁸This is a method used by Sara Ruddick in her book *Maternal Thinking*, where the experiential and everyday maternal is championed over ontological representation; similarly Lisa Baraitser's work relies on anecdote to think about the psychology and ethics of being a mother.

⁹Kristina Darling writes: "In recent years, a vibrant artistic landscape, populated with multifarious hybrid writing by women and non-binary authors, has taken a turn for the dense, the difficult, the forbidding and the inaccessible ... the sentences fit together, but the words don't cohere in the way that we think they should. We are offered clean syntactic constructions that resist the implicit logic of grammar. Disorder begins to inhabit the orderly linguistic structures we once thought we knew."

¹⁰Yasmin Gunaratnam, and Carrie Hamilton describe a feminist approach to research and knowledge making as the following: "one that recognised and overturned systemic gender disparities, validate women's 'experience,' rejected hierarchies between the researcher and research participant, and had emancipation and social change as its purpose."

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