

Locked In: Feminist Perspectives on Surviving on Academic Piecework

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ABSTRACT: While increasing media attention is given to examining the status of contract faculty on university campuses there is little note made of the pervasiveness of women in these positions. This paper, by drawing on Marxist and feminist theory ties the gender precarity faced by academic contract female workers to the historical practices of industries to use female labour to reduce labour costs. The textile piece worker system of the 19th century has found a 21st century form represented in the unlikely position of the female academic contract worker. The argument builds on the autoethnographic narratives of two contract women to demonstrate how the university administration's "economic pressure" justification is an economic myth to occlude the exploitation of female workers.

KEYWORDS: labour exploitation, gender and class oppression, capitalism

As long time academics, we have both taught women's studies and feminist issues. One of the topics we often teach as part of this field is the topic women and work. In teaching the history of women's labour we would always come to discussions of the female pieceworker. We would spend many classes talking about piecework as a feminist issue, often imagining piece workers as garment workers slaving away in their basements stitching together such items as designer coats or elegant party dresses. But in the past few decades, with technological innovations piecework has morphed into other professions such as telemarketing or data entry. At the core of piecework workers are paid for the piece of work performed, regardless of the amount of time to complete such work.

In the past few years it has dawned on us that we too are piece workers, and we are not exempt from Marx's observations on piecework and alienation

(1975). We are like the many women who have gone before us, getting paid per completed piece. But instead of this piece being a luxurious coat or a set amount of telemarketing calls, our piece is a university course at a postsecondary institution in Ontario. Here we earn our livelihoods each semester by trying to string together a series of pieces/courses. We are paid per completed course with as many students as possible slotted into tiny spaces. And like other forms of piecework, it is precarious labour often performed by female workers. It is also a system of work that offers little creditability which functions as a means to lock workers into a system of continued exploitation.

It is curious that in these times of expanding neoliberalism, contract academic work is quickly classified as precarious and yet there is little analysis of it as gendered piecework. The gender dominance of women in this segment of academic work is ignored

but so too are critical analyses of how this type of work parallels the piecework performed in manufacturing industries where women have been forced to eke out an economic life since the beginning of industrialization. In the following pages, we identify the fissures of intellectual inquiry when it comes to precarious work based on our own work. Building on a long tradition of feminism to question the realities of women's participation in paid labour, this paper will explore academic contract labour as a form of piecework. The underlying purpose of this paper is to critique how the institution of the university uses piecework as a way to reinforce a class based system of exploitation which functions to maintain layers of power for regular academic faculty (RAF) who are deemed credible scholars, while contract academic faculty (CAF), the pieceworkers, are positioned in financial and social distress unable to access such credibility.

What follow are our stories that tie the notion of piecework to the profiteering of education systems. We tell these stories not because we feel they are unusual or worse than others but rather, they reflect the commonness of these corporate systems. What all histories that tell the tales of challenges to dominant systems suggest is that resistance comes from the telling of stories in spite of the risks. Our experiences in this case are a reflection of a system that is now the norm but functions successfully because of the alienation and exploitation of a group designated as lesser. The heart of the success of this system is how labour costs are radically kept low, and yet the reputation that is marketed is one of its advanced practices as a teaching institution all achieved through the work of devalued pieceworkers. Ultimately the large number of students who have paid their tuition fees passing through the classes of teaching pieceworkers indicates that universities profit from our devalued status.

Helen's Story

As a middle-aged contract female academic I (Helen) find differing attitudes permeate in terms of my value as a worker in academy. In the broader non-academic world I am a confirmed university professor. On the inside of Academia I am reminded that I'm a sub-standard, failed academic. Why failed? I don't have

the accoutrements of value like tenure. Apparently after fifteen years I'm still perceived as "just passing through." While some regular faculty can admit the system is flawed, there are persistent verbal and structural evaluations of the lesser and more flawed identity of the contract worker or as Natalie and I see it – the pieceworker. I still experience a level of assessment that is shockingly explicit about my purported lower performance. The message I get is that I would have gained the coveted tenure job a long time ago if I had done it right. And doing it right means, somehow, producing a large output of publications in juried journals and books, getting research funding, being an extraordinary teacher and a committee member. All this assumes an objective and equitable hiring process. Of course the culture in academia functions so RAF feel at risk themselves for the same reasons but handle this threat by defining themselves against the most vulnerable – their contract colleagues. As long as they can exercise some power over another group they can take on the identity of being more deserving through a covert suggestion that they are smarter and more accomplished.

When I began the process of getting a PhD it never occurred to me that I would inhabit a secondary status or that I would have to justify my insecure income and work conditions. Increasingly academic work conditions have become more precarious for more people but for those of us moving into that later part of our careers, our age raises enormous concerns about what old age will afford us. Here I am in my 50s in a system that builds its status by producing more PhD graduates. More and more contract faculty graduate each year. I am also in a field that is threatened with closure because we aren't close enough to providing students with the security of a job once they have graduated. My regular faculty colleagues feel desperately tied to the demands of the administration. They want to be loved by the system to ensure the future of the program. What this means to someone with my status is that I can be sacrificed. They are not willing to fight for more equitable conditions for the contract faculty who teach the vast number of the students passing through the program and actually signify the economic reason for why the program should be maintained.

In terms of what this economic climate produces I am seen as too old to be hired into a permanent position, and not “current” enough. Why, in fact, would they want to hire me into a permanent position when I fulfill the needs of the institution and the program more cheaply as contract? I teach the big classes at a portion of the wages of regular faculty and while I build the program I get neither credit nor security for any of it.

I am a middle-aged woman. I raised two children who are now adults on my own. I have done so with no access to health care benefits or knowing from one term to the next how I would pay the rent and put food on the table. Today I am feeling increased stress. I know that the need for benefits and a pension is critically important for the health and living circumstances that are fast approaching. And yet as I write this, I know the likelihood of secure work is nil. And I would argue that I bring to the program I teach in and the university where I teach greater research and pedagogical skills from all my years of work. I am a practiced scholar and teacher. I have no voice on the decision-making committees of my program or the university. I have sat on many committees but have been locked out of voting processes. I have been told that contract faculty can't be trusted on curriculum committees to look toward the growth of departments and programs. We are an enemy depicted as self-serving and selfish. And because I am a woman who has had children the judgment leveled at me is replete with gender biases that go unaddressed or ignored. I have been told I can be on the fundraising committee or the events planning committee for the program but not in any place where the program framing decisions are made. I am considered a nuisance, even though their argument for my exclusion is often couched in the excuse that they don't want to “exploit” my labour. But strangely I have been encouraged to serve on the fundraising and the events planning committees. Because apparently I am inadequate, academic departments are justified in holding me at bay in terms of practice and pay. I am expected to volunteer extra time for students and the university to prove myself. I am supposed to publish even though I teach more than my regular faculty colleagues while just barely eking out economic survival.

I do piecework being paid by course and the number of students. If I want my wages to be at all augmented by special “add ons” for marking I have to increase the output of students passing through the classroom. This means I can't ruin the experience of any student in the class. They must all love me. I am at the bottom of the academic hierarchy. And yet it is my positioning that the institution can capitalize on to make itself profitable. I am the reason tenure faculty can arrange their work lives as they do and still have dental and medical care, sabbaticals, terms to do research, and not worry that if they speak out their department might replace them.

The attack is not necessarily overt or direct. Rather, the attack is embedded in a systemic ideological argument that creates an us/them binary leading us CAF into a state where we feel we must perform an image of gratitude to secure future contracts. I feel pressed to sell my wares as a good thinker and teacher. But as I do this, I individualize a problem that is both systemic and structurally established. And by defending my virtues I am participating in the ideologies that justify a hierarchical highly capitalist system based on the virtues of scientific management.

I no longer expect a permanent position. The statistics are clear. Contract work is done largely by women (Rajagopal 2002; Jacobs 2004; CAUT 2010) and not because they have chosen to have children which is the usual excuse, but because of gender identifiers that subordinate the output of their work, their thinking and their performance. The de-valuation of female contract faculty is done strangely enough by both women and men who claim to hold either a feminist or social justice activist position. There are CAF colleagues who are older than me with larger demands on their monies for personal care. Their worries grow more pressing every year as the social critiques they withstand seem directed at their bodies. They can't compete with regular faculty. They can't get the dental care they need much less the clothes that would allow them to present in another class that would accord them more authority.

My fifteen years as a pieceworker driving the output of students and courses in classes too large to establish a more significant relationship with them, has forced me to live with little hope for a secure

future in retirement. I might be the old, less interesting, less inviting professor beside the new graduates who are the sexier choice as I once was too, but I fear that they unfortunately will also occupy the space I know intimately now.

Natalie's Story

I (Natalie) started teaching on contract at a university about 12 years ago, when I had just finished my comprehensive exams and moved from out west, back to Ontario. Teaching a few courses every semester was great at first. It gave me some income to support myself and it allowed me to connect with people as opposed to feeling locked away in the solitary confinement of dissertation writing. But slowly I began to see what this “part-time” teaching was. It was work that took me away from the valuable time I needed to write my dissertation and gain the legitimacy of being a “real scholar,” and it slowly sucked me into being reliant on it to support my studies.

When I started doing it I thought I would only have to do it for a few years until my thesis was closer to being done, but I am still doing it. I used to think of myself as a “part-timer” since I got paid per course. I even once proudly wore a button with the statement “part timers give full value” during a strike at my university. Sure, I thought at the time, being CAF was being a “part-timer,” what I was getting paid clearly seemed like part-time wages in comparison to my fellow non-CAF colleagues. And I never knew what courses I would be teaching the following year or sometimes even in the next semester. I worried, how would I make ends meet through the summer? It all seemed so “part-time.”

But it was not part-time and I am not a “part-timer,” I am a full-timer. I am a professional university teacher, this is my job, my career and my livelihood. I teach full time, not as RAF, but as a contract worker getting paid per course/piece. I spend my entire week, preparing, marking and teaching three classes every semester; in between marking I slog away at turning my PhD thesis into something publishable so that I can maybe have enough on my CV to land an interview and maybe even that elusive tenure track job, or even just to keep myself relevant and competitive for the contract labour market. This is my full time

profession but I work under part time conditions for part time pay. As a contract worker I get paid only for the courses I teach. I do not have medical, dental or any other benefits. I do not have a pension and when I gave birth to my children, I stayed home without any sort of maternity leave.

When I started doing this 12 years ago, long time sessionals like me were anomalies. I watched as most of the CAF's I knew eventually snagged the coveted tenure track jobs. Well this is no longer the case, now, many of us are permanent contractors, with little chance of getting out. The structures of the system keep us locked in as newly minted PhDs compete with us on the job market with fresh publications and encouraging referees. I, like Helen, am wary of the possibility of a full time job. I also see how it is almost impossible to stay competitive. The job market is so saturated with PhDs and the university relies on our exploitation so heavily that I cannot see a way out.

The Conditions of Academic Piecework

As permanent contractors we float from semester to semester getting paid for each university course. We find out what courses we teach just a month or two before the semester starts. We never know if we will be able to teach these courses the following year. We have to buy our own materials to support our work; we buy our own computers, we pay for our own books and pay our monthly fees for the internet that is critical in being able to do our jobs from our own homes, since we rarely have legitimate office space. We are pieceworkers who perform “just in time” labour. The university has no obligation to ever commit to our courses or to us as employees for more than one semester at a time. Often we only find out what courses are available to be taught once the enrollments are confirmed and once our RAF colleagues decide what they will teach. We get the leftover courses, the ones that our colleagues see no particular value in but at the same time pile huge numbers of students into. We are told by our administrations that students are our academic consumers and we need to service them even though we have no resources to do so either in the class or outside. We are computer-less, office space-less, time-less workers. We allow the university to provide a product

at the lowest cost to service the greatest number of consumers.

We rarely receive extra money for the countless hours of marking even though we are often allocated the biggest classes and the most inexperienced TA's. Nor do we get compensated for extra student demands like letters of reference or plagiarism cases. At Canadian universities CAF earn between \$4000 and \$8000 per course, much less than our RAF colleagues and often with no benefits (CAUT 2013). Yet with this we are expected to exceed work requirements and be grateful for what we have been given. There is no extra salary for the preparation of new courses that we desperately grab to beef up our workload but which eliminate the possibilities of attaining seniority. And, like traditional pieceworkers, we are expected to dedicate spaces in our homes as workspace since we don't have offices. Our dining room tables, our living rooms, our kitchens become offices. We have no role in department decisions and during our working day, we move through the university space with no office or place to establish any legitimacy. Our office hours are held in small, shared rooms, often away from our departments, that we can only access for an hour or two. In this isolation our regular academic colleagues rarely accord us a conversation or a meaningful encounter that initiate an exchange of ideas. Some of us have seniority in a specific course but it is a seniority that is largely meaningless as it just takes one new hire, whether it be tenure track, limited term, the dreaded new teaching only positions, or a decision to restructure the curriculum, to bump us out of the courses in which we have the coveted status of "seniority." Seniority pits us against other contract academics who like us, are also fighting to secure a modicum of economic security in their lives. The point is that in order to survive we gather as many courses at as many universities we can in order to provide ourselves with basic living expenses. We run from one university to the next hoping at one of them someone will accord us value but on the whole just have us selling ourselves to a new market in order to service the aims of a corporate entity that is intent on servicing as many consumers as possible and promising them a stable work future. We are as Indhu Rajagopal says "road scholars."

Piecework as Alienation

Our two stories, while individual, are the result of one powerfully divisive economic system. Our individual experiences even though we are positioned differently merge under the same structural and systemic exploitations of our labour. It is in comparing our experiences that we have come to recognize that the economic and political contexts of our work are the same. Our feelings of isolation, inadequacy and hopelessness, are not the outcomes of personal failings, but are instead the byproducts of a university labour market that is structured upon our exploitation and alienation as workers. Our fears are used by our regular faculty peers but even more by the administrators of this corporate academic structure in such a way that we are compelled to take whatever work we can without complaint.

Alienation, as Marx noted, is built on the dual forces of marginalization and powerlessness in the labour market in which the worker is objectified as an instrument by the means of production (1975). In this case the means of production is not the factory, but the university, which produces intellectual labour. We are objectified, and thus alienated, in many ways within the structures of the university. Alienation from production is not a new phenomenon. It has been core to the operations of capitalism but it has moved in new directions and forms as we see by the ways in which it operates in academia.

Alienation has been sustained by the use of ideological justifications based on gender (and also often on race) that are meshed with supportive arguments about capitalism that function as an effective power tool keeping women slotted into the vulnerable positioning of the pieceworker. Since the 19th century what was wanted was a worker base that could decrease the cost of labour and concurrently maintain the dominance of white men with high profit levels (Benoit 2000). The solution in the garment industry was forcing women to work either from home or in factories where they were paid not by the hour but by the production piece. Women needed to work to feed themselves and their families and therefore they helped to maintain a system based on the competition of a surplus population. Employers in the nineteenth century had no particular reason

to fear an uprising or mass exodus of workers, they knew there was always someone eager to be exploited (Benoit 2000). And while women did organize and protest they knew there was a line up of other women, outside the company doors begging for work. They also knew that if they were identified as problems or should they organize a union, they would be fired and their names would be passed on to other employers who would deny them employment. Economic security was at risk.

Piecework in the 19th century was part of the shadow workings of a power system that hid the illegal and unjust practices of economic engorgement behind an overt ideological argument. The same occurs today. In the academic system there are levels of unspoken practices that allow women in at one level but limit them as they seek entrance into other levels. At the same time universities are profiting from the large female base. More and more women are going to school and graduating with their PhDs causing universities to present themselves as practitioners of equal and just systems. It raises their marketing profile. The hidden message once women are working as academics is that they aren't as smart and aggressive as men. Even the culture among students is one that values white, straight men as the true purveyors of legitimate knowledge. Women as they reach the halls of some privilege, like women who were pieceworkers seek ways to maintain their positioning. They often adopt the shadow justifications of the system in order to secure their own future. The competition is immense. If more women than men dominate as students then what is being produced as universities open more and more graduate programs is a surplus of women vying for positions and trying to maintain any advantage they might be able to accrue. But we remain the workers who reproduce or will reproduce and so not considering us for tenure track or tenure positions is generally attached to the hidden agenda of hiring committees. And because women might have children the assumption also is that their commitment to research is less and their teaching strangely enough less embedded in the real knowledge of the discipline. Give women more teaching because they are "naturally" good in a role that fosters a pseudo identity of "nurturing" but keep

the barriers in place for where real decision-making occurs (Kemp 1994). Because the culture of family has yet to change significantly, women are tied to families, meaning that as they struggle to complete PhDs and find permanent positions while holding down demanding teaching course loads, there is little time for research and publishing.

Once again the university wins. It has a surplus of applicants at a fraction of the cost of tenure faculty and the capacity to close the door on any course or work life of a woman still battling outdated assessments and barriers. She is the alienated pieceworker who can be made to disappear as a new candidate, who will eventually learn quickly how fragile their standing is, takes her place. Women are trying to survive in a work life based on insecurity.

Alienation from being visible

Our work is invisible and based on a lie. The lie that the university tells our students is that what they are "buying" is equal; that the work by all professors is equal. It is of course a misnomer and profoundly dishonest against what is promised to them at graduation – their own dream job. Our students rarely know which one of their professors is a CAF, and which one is an RAF. Some of the more astute students can tell based on offices. As one of my colleagues told me, "they know – if you have bookshelves full of your own books and an office to yourself you are an RAF." But for the most part, the students do not know who is working precariously, and who is not. Nor do they understand the implications of piecework. They don't know that the reason we are not available on the days that we don't teach, is that we are teaching elsewhere and have no access to office space that would even allow us to meet them professionally if we could. Nor do they understand that their future might also hold the same precarious features.

Students don't understand why we cannot tell them what we will be teaching the following year. They have trouble appreciating why, when we are no longer around, we might not want to write them reference letters or that the value of us writing these letters is lesser than if a RAF were to do so. Students are often surprised to find out who is contract labour, or that contract labour means we do the heavy lifting

of teaching, often teaching one third more or even sometimes double the course load of our RAF colleagues. In many universities we teach more than half the student body.

Alienation from making change

Secondly, we are alienated from making change. The constant precarity of the pieceworker means that we are vulnerable to the whims of our departments. We cannot complain; instead we know employment is based on being silent and demonstrating gratitude for the courses we are given. Our silence is strategic. The hope is that if we aren't seen as a problem we'll be given the courses we need to support ourselves and our families, or maybe, just maybe, be seen as the type of contract faculty that can transition to RAF. We know that if we complain, there is a large pool of our peers more than anxious to take on our courses. Our security to meet the demands of living gain increased fragility so our desire to endanger whatever minute privilege we might have gained becomes less possible.

Alienation from our humanity

Thirdly, we are alienated from being people. As pieceworkers we become numbers. We are simply seniority numbers assigned to course numbers. We're tools to achieve institutional goals. When it comes to "part-time" hiring committees, in the complex systems of seniority, our personhood is erased. Decisions are made based on points and credits, which often benefits some CAF over others. Departments fail to include these points and credits in curriculum decisions. Courses are cancelled, moved or even axed, without any consideration of CAF seniority in these decisions. Instead of acknowledging that all department decisions have direct impact on those of us who rely on these courses for our livelihoods, our access to teaching is reduced to course codes and seniority points. This erasure of our personhood is made possible, not because RAF are jerks, but because the alienation of the precariat as individuals is structured right into the university system and many don't see their own complicity in our exploitation. And the offices we use are symbolic of this positioning. Most only indicate that they are CAF offices but have no names on them again erasing both our presence and legitimacy.

Alienation from producing professional capital

Finally, we are alienated from producing the professional capital that we need to be considered "successful" in our careers. We are alienated from the negotiable currency of our work, from the prestige and credibility that comes with research publications. We have no access to funds to pursue our research. We have no access to sabbaticals, or research leaves, or even course stipends. We are often not eligible to apply for internal or external grants, and even if we were eligible without a home institution they are nearly impossible to get. We often have to work in the summer to make ends meet, losing valuable research and writing time. But even more than that for many of us, when we do manage to complete research and publish there is rarely any celebration or formal recognition of our research achievements within our institutions.

Perhaps more critically, what gets denied in all this is the knowledge and expertise our time of service and research have brought. Even if we are doing the most innovative teaching and research our status and longitude bar us from secure inclusion. We are simply cheap labour confirming the power hierarchy. It is a system that uses our labour but accords it little creditability. In not offering any real acknowledgement of our work, which takes place for the most part during unpaid time, the structure of academic piecework functions to lock workers into a system of continued exploitation. Without the professional capital, there is little opportunity to escape the CAF stream and move into RAF. But without this institutional credibility, we are less competitive for other contract teaching positions, making us even more reliant on the precarious whims of our home departments who see us as less enticing than the new candidates emerging.

RAF in the Process of Alienation

Today there is an accepted critique of the corporatization of the university and our RAF colleagues are able to identify many of the ideological and systemic barriers we, as CAF face. Many of them are friends and supportive colleagues. Some of them are our allies and they might even walk with us while we are on strike, but they will not fight for our rights where

it counts on a daily basis in their own departments or on the councils and senates where they sit. There are two basic reasons for their distancing from our fights. Firstly, keeping the conditioned nature of our labour invisible is part of what maintains the power of the corporate education system and so the privileges that come with being RAF are often based on our exploitation. For example, part of the reason that departments can afford to have an RAF on leaves and sabbaticals is that their teaching load can cheaply be replaced by a CAF. The small, seminar classes that our senior colleagues teach are funded by the megaclasses that we teach. Secondly, as Sarah Kendzior rightly points out in her article on this issue, RAF don't consider us their peers (2013). The reasons for this are complex, but one of them is that the more we are alienated from the professional capital of research and publications, the less we are seen as being equal. This alienation from professional capital actually then works to justify our position; we can't get the jobs because we don't have the publication record; of course, our RAF colleagues forget, we can't have the publications because we teach huge course loads in their departments that do not allow us either the time or the financial freedom to do so. Our knowledge and expertise in teaching is disregarded and seen as lesser than research. What RAFs don't realize is that they base their value not on their luck in a commodified system but rather on them being overt in their devaluing of us. Their worth is maintained in this system by having a lesser other. This vicious cycle keeps us locked in as CAF, tied to a cycle of perpetual precarity. And it means that the university is organized on a class based system which functions to maintain layers of power for some workers who are deemed credible scholars while others are positioned in financial and social distress unable to access such credibility.

Recently there has been a shift to address the precariate class and precarity of the current labour market that has grown in the neoliberal society of the 2000s. The university is not just perpetuating the class based inequalities that exist in society, it is creating them and validating these inequalities. Universities need to take a hard look at themselves and recognize their participation in a system that,

like other industries, functions on accruing economic profit through a precariate class. Our RAF colleagues must also recognize that their positioning is based on our subordination so they are complicit in the systems of our exploitation that they benefit from. Changing the system may require them to give up some of their professional privileges and to acknowledge the value of teaching. Many of them have the kind of job security that would in fact allow them to fight with us without endangering themselves. We on the other hand are forced to fight at great risk to our economic and labour future.

Conclusion

Change can only come with getting rid of the claim that piecework is part time work. For a substantial majority of us, it is our full time job. Change can come by slowly trying to drill away at ending the conditions of our alienation. Firstly, students need to become aware of our positions of our labour, and they need to be educated on how this negatively impacts their learning experiences and the value of their university degrees. Secondly we need to get access to making change, we need to be invited into unions, departments and committees as equals to our RAF with concerns that require the same amount of attention that our colleagues receive. We need to get our RAF colleagues to use their power more effectively. They need to value justice ahead of the "sexiest" newest hire that sells them to the administrator as more valuable. Thirdly, we need to be equal partners in department decisions that impact our ability to earn our livings. Fourthly, we must be able to access professional capital through our teaching expertise. And finally we need to get to the governments on who are administrations depend. We must unite across universities so that we have greater influence and power to direct change at a government level and not just "piecemeal" at a local level. We must protect ourselves, but also our colleagues across the country as well as those coming through the system now by being collectively courageous.

Our personal descriptions of performing piecework in the academic marketplace are only two stories out of the tens of thousands of others that now dominate the landscape of academia (invisibly)

across Canada and more globally. Women make up the majority of the precariat connecting our history to women through many generations. It shows all industries have discovered the economic benefits of precarious work and how easy it is in a sexist system to target women. Our stories reveal the economic and political structures of the system that reinforces class and gender divisions. They trace the fabric of a system across age and generation that convincingly justifies its own dominance to the detriment of others who are marked as less. We write our stories fully aware of the risks of doing so. We know we aren't supposed to complain and silence is expected of us. We write this article together knowing the risk of speaking out on these issues and further alienating those who make decisions over our access to our livelihoods. We speak because without untying our tongues we are only contributors to a system that harms too many.

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