Research Article

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Autoethnographic Enquiry of Sexual Violence in Academia

Abstract: This article presents a reflection on the epistemological and vital implications of using autoethnographic enquiry to research sexual violence within higher education institutions and adjacent spaces. To explore the implications of using this methodology, we review the existing literature and the key discussions it raises, to which we add our own experiences writing and publishing an autoethnographic reflection on the sexual violence we suffered during research fieldwork. It begins by situating our work alongside similar ones in the context of the MeToo movement. Then, it explores five aspects of the autoethnographic enquiry that better define those reflecting on sexual violence within academia. First, it examines the capacity of this methodology to challenge current norms of knowledge production. Second, it highlights how the use of this methodology can make meaningful research contributions. Third, it reflects on the possibility of autoethnography to reclaim the silenced voices of survivors and on the multiple mechanisms of silencing victims and survivors. The fourth aspect is the power of sexual violence autoethnographies to create a reaction in the reader and society, behind which we see a collective endeavour. Finally, we reflect on the personal impact and therapeutic possibilities of this methodology.

Keywords: autoethnography, sexual violence, higher education institutions, feminism

1 Autoethnography as a Mode of Inquiry of Sexual Violence in Academia

This article presents a reflection on the use of autoethnography as a research method for the study of sexual violence in higher education institutions and adjacent spaces. This reflection is based on our experience of writing and publishing an autoethnography of sexual violence during postgraduate research fieldwork and on the analysis of similar works published before and after #MeToo. In this methodological review, we articulated our own experiences as necessary to highlight the profound implications of the method and its value. To explore the epistemological, political, and vital implications of using the autoethnographic enquiry to research sexual violence in academia, we delve into five aspects that we believe define this methodology. Before addressing these aspects, we look at the broader context in which writing about our experiences of harm became possible. This context was determined by the MeToo movement and the subsequent wave of feminism that it ignited worldwide. After this introductory section, we examine five of the many aspects of autoethnographic enquiry highlighted by Adams et al. (2016) that better describe our own and the increasing number of autoethnographic reflections on sexual violence in academia that have emerged within and after #MeToo, whether named or not as autoethnographies.

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First, we look at two related features, shared with all autoethnographies regardless of the topic: (1) the capacity of these texts to question current norms of knowledge production, still clinging to positivist, colonialist and patriarchal myths, by linking individual experiences with broader social phenomena; and (2) its consequent possibility to make meaningful research contributions, as shown among others by recent publications of sexual violence during anthropological fieldwork.

The third aspect, shared with narratives of normalised violence, silenced topics and underrepresented communities, is the capacity of autoethnographies of sexual violence in academia to reclaim the lost voices of survivors. In this section, we also reflect on the different levels and ways in which victims and survivors of sexual violence in academia are silenced by their institutions, professors, publishers, or peers. For us, publishing was a way of breaking the silence imposed on our complaints, of attesting how our university failed us when we were facing sexual violence by a senior researcher during postgraduate research fieldwork in an isolated Indigenous community.

The fourth feature is the capacity of autoethnographies of sexual violence to generate a reaction in the reader and – through those readers – potentially in society. This characteristic, shared with many other autoethnographies, is approached in the light of the MeToo and feminist movements. These movements influenced not only our decision to meet and write together but also our possibilities of getting published, as well as the reactions from readers and institutions that followed. The autoethnographies of sexual violence during fieldwork that we read created a reaction in us, encouraging us to write, and, after the publication, other researchers let us feel that our work also influenced their lives. This section highlights the significance of this sense of community in alleviating the burden of harm through shared pain. Here, we also address the relationship between autoethnographies of sexual violence against women and feminist activism.

The last aspect, shared with other autoethnographies of traumatic experiences, is that writing and publishing about a life-changing experience may help authors to navigate through their pain and to heal. Writing about our experiences of sexual violence during research fieldwork undoubtedly helped us to find a path through those experiences. Meeting each other and a broader community of young scholars and survivors of sexual violence, plus the possibility of raising our voices over the disregard with which our university silenced our complaints, allowed us to process what happened to us and to move forward. This final section reflects on the potential of this methodology to aid survivors in their healing process, while acknowledging that disclosing traumatic events may also result in more harm and re-victimisation for survivors.

This methodological review provides an analysis of a significant selection of existing literature, outlining the characteristics and challenges associated with this mode of inquiry and research topic, to which we add insights from our personal experiences. With this, it aims to show the power of this methodology and its capacity not only to produce meaningful research outcomes but also to transform specific individuals and even parts of our society. This article is relevant for students and researchers interested in decolonial methodologies, feminist studies, anti-sexual violence activism, and other related topics.

2 MeToo and the Use of Autoethnography as a Mode of Inquiry Into Sexual Violence in Academia

After all, I am too a crowd.

A crowd facing you.

A crowd that is looking you in the eye tonight.

(Judith Godrèche, Cannes 2024)

While writing this paper, MeToo was experiencing a new wave in the French cinematographic industry, sparked by Judith Godrèche's presentation of *Moi aussi* at the 2024 Cannes Festival, a short film exploring her and other women's experiences of sexual violence. This new wave shows that the movement is still

pushing for changes despite an intense backlash and a persistent culture of silence and impunity, and that the MeToo movement has moved beyond social media and is expressed in many ways. In academia, as in other professional fields, a key expression of the movement moving beyond social media is the creation of numerous groups advocating for an urgent change (Clark-Parsons, 2019; Mendes et al., 2018; Trott, 2021; Vogelstein & Stone, 2021). In anthropology and other social sciences, the MeToo movement is what triggered the increasing number of researchers using their personal experiences of sexual violence within academia to generate knowledge and advocate for a necessary change.

The use of personal experiences of sexualised violence as a tool for understanding and fighting its occurrence did not begin with #MeToo but has its roots in the feminist movement, in anti-sexual violence gatherings where women talked about their experiences (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019). The hashtag that went viral online was inspired by a previous movement started by Tarana Burke in 2006. However, what #MeToo achieved, when thousands of women used it to share their experiences on social media, was to make visible how widespread sexual violence against women is in a way in which the problem became undeniable (Andersson et al., 2024). And, through this, it created the social possibility of listening to and acknowledging those silenced experiences of pain and trauma (Garrido & Zaptsi, 2021; Lamas, 2019).

For us, #MeToo and the strength of the feminist movement in Spain and Latin America greatly influenced our lives and – with it – the possibilities for us to meet, write, and publish together. We listened to the voices of other women who shared similar experiences (Berry et al., 2017; Escobar, 2018; Huang et al., 2019; Kloß, 2017). Their stories inspired and encouraged us to write about our experiences of sexual violence during fieldwork. We also discovered the voice of a woman that 20 years earlier published an article about the rape she suffered during fieldwork (Bjerén, 1995); as well as the case of the Columbia anthropology student Henrietta Schmerler, blamed by the press, her peers and University and by society for her own rape and murder in 1931, during fieldwork in an Apache community (Steffen, 2017).

The experiences of these young women researchers strongly resonated with ours, helping us understand the patterns behind what happened to us. Although we focus on sexual violence against women, gender diverse people, and people from marginalised communities face similar experiences of sexualised violence in academia.

During the writing process, we also learned about autoethnography, a method and text grounded in decolonial and feminist epistemologies due to its capacity to connect individual experiences with broader social and cultural practices. Even though there are key precedents in autoethnographic research on gender-based violence against women, including on sexual violence, what we see after #MeToo is an increasing number of works on experiences of sexual violence within higher education institutions and adjacent academic spaces (Berry et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2019; Kloß, 2017; Palladino, 2023; Thurmann, 2023). In some cases, these are specifically named and theorised as autoethnographies (Escobar, 2018; Petit-Thorne, 2023; Romero & Martínez, 2021; Viaene et al., 2023).

3 Autoethnographic Enquiry Can Question Current Norms of Knowledge Production and Make Meaningful Contributions to Research

Autoethnography emerged after the postmodernist turn, when social sciences started to question supposedly objective, value-free social research and to shift to a more significant and evocative knowledge production (Denzin, 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2016; Dubé, 2017; Ellis et al., 2015). A method of inquiry grounded in feminist thought, and made mostly by feminist scholars (Adams et al., 2016). Autoethnography allows this shift towards a more significant knowledge production by connecting the individual experience with the broader social context in which it takes place (Adams et al., 2016).

Acknowledging the researcher's experiences has an enormous potential to subvert the colonial and patriarchal roots of academic knowledge production (Ellis et al., 2015; Esguerra, 2019; Metta, 2016; Ruiz,

2020). This possibility of truly disrupting a supposedly objective and value-free knowledge production, which is in fact grounded in patriarchal and colonialist notions and practices, makes autoethnography a groundbreaking and much-needed mode of inquiry.

It is necessary to continue insisting that the pursuit of objectivity in social sciences, particularly in those fields involving the ethnographic method, is an error. In our process of writing and reading other autoethnographies of sexual violence during fieldwork, we discovered that these premises of objectivity are part of a prejudicial myth of ethnographic fieldwork as a masculinised rite of passage (Berry et al., 2017). Research has shown how these myths disadvantage women or those who do not fit these masculine ideals (Berry et al., 2017; Espitia et al., 2019; Ortner, 1995).

In her 1995 article Rape in the field, Gunilla Bjerén points to this. Women in universities lived in a gender-free fiction where any mention of women's concerns would jeopardise their identities as anthropologists.

> This is, of course, because the archetypal anthropologist is a man. [...] After all, who wants to be a female anthropologist when it is possible to be a real anthropologist? As far as the danger of sexual violence is concerned, it may be part of women's daily lives, but it is not seen to be relevant to the professional part of ourselves – the 'anthropologist' part. 'Anthropologists' don't get harassed or raped. Women do. (Bjerén, 1995, p. 246)

Autoethnographic accounts of sexual violence during fieldwork have pointed out the urgent need to acknowledge its occurrence and offer young researchers better training to recognise and navigate the risks of sexual violence (Berry et al., 2017; Escobar, 2018; Huang et al., 2019; Kloß, 2017; Palladino, 2023; Romero & Martínez, 2021; Martinez et al., 2023; Thurmann, 2023). This detailed research on the kinds of situations ethnographers face when trying to establish trusted relations in the field –and how these could lead to situations of sexual harassment and abuse– provides a source of reflection for young researchers to understand the implications of the ethnographic method and fight damaging myths.

Through detailed and context-specific experiences of when and how abuse occurs, autoethnographies of sexual violence can contribute not only to breaking away from myths that prejudice women in the field, but also to pointing out institutional cultures, structures, and procedures that facilitate, ignore, and conceal sexual violence in higher education institutions. An example is the common-sense idea that within academic institutions, if a complaint process is followed, it will provide justice and safety for complainants, when the reality described by survivors is mostly of institutional abandonment, abuse, or betrayal (Ahmed, 2021; Bull, 2023; Quinlan, 2017; Romero & Martínez, 2021; Viaene et al., 2023).

It is necessary to focus on other kinds of knowledge production that come from experiences and social movements in order to build a genuinely decolonial epistemology (Garcia & Sampaio, 2023). We see in autoethnography an opportunity to subvert the epistemological grounds of current knowledge production, while also challenging the colonial and patriarchal roots of the institutional cultures and practices that prejudice women in academia.

4 Autoethnographies of Sexual Violence: Reclaiming Silenced Voices

The third feature of post-MeToo autoethnographies of sexual violence in higher education institutions, and we believe the one that best defines it, is that these texts allow survivors to reclaim their voices. Although this feature is shared by all autoethnographies, because autoethnographic enquiry also gives voice to the silence left by suppressing individual experiences in traditional research (Adams et al., 2016), this aspect is more relevant in the case of silenced topics, such as sexual violence, or in the case of the voices of members of marginalised communities.

Autoethnographies of sexual violence in higher education institutions – as texts – are in their own right a way of breaking the silence, of regaining the voices of young scholars that had been silenced by shame or fear of professional retaliations, or to safeguard the reputation or minimise the risk of liability of publishers,

universities or their "star professors" (Ahmed, 2021; Makhene, 2022; Viaene et al., 2023). The need for such accounts is undeniable, as sexual violence in higher education institutions is still minimised and silenced, and this is what helps to reproduce the conditions in which abuse can thrive (Brenner, 2013; Bull, 2023; De Araújo et al., 2024; Gryf et al., 2024).

In the afterword of her chapter *Rape in the field* (1995), Gunilla Bjerén wrote about why she published under the pseudonym Eva Moreno: "My use of a pseudonym is not to protect my own identity but, rather (and I hope that the weighty irony here is not lost on anybody), to protect the identity of the rapist" (1995, p. 248). In a later comment on *Rape in the field* (1995), Bjerén addressed this issue, and here she accepts that, although she was pressured to publish under a pseudonym, she also did not want to be framed as a rape victim (2017). Bjerén's mixed feelings exemplify very well the relevance of the social stigma of sexual violence and the fear of professional repercussions. This is the first form of silence: the victim's silence for fear of personal or professional repercussions.

Bjerén's authorship of a truly impactful article was silenced not for the sake of the perpetrator but ultimately for the sake of the publisher in its effort to avoid liability (1995, p. 248). Almost 30 years later, in 2024, this very same publisher, using very similar arguments, withdrew the publication of an edited book entitled *Sexual misconduct in academia: informing an ethics of care in the university* (2023). Although not officially published and with the rights reverted to the authors, the book circulates widely online. It contains a dozen articles, all using personal experience to talk about sexual violence in academia and adjacent spaces, including two using autoethnography as their methodology (Petit-Thorne, 2023; Viaene et al., 2023).

In an editorial of The Feminist Legal Studies Journal about the censorship of this edited book, Godden-Rasul and Serisier (2024) highlight how academic publishing and publishers are part of the structures and conditions that support and enable sexual violence. They use Gavey's (2005) concept of "cultural scaffolding" to describe the institutional cultures and practices that facilitate, ignore, and conceal sexual violence in higher education institutions. For them, "[t]he structures and practices around academic publishing are part of a wider system of precarious and exploitative labour relations which enable and conceal sexual violence and other forms of abuse, particularly against women, racialised and other marginalised people" (Godden-Rasul & Serisier, 2024, p. 255).

The unnamed "star professor" of one of the autoethnographies of the withdrawn edited book: *The walls spoke when no one else would. Autoethnographic notes on sexual-power gatekeeping within avant-garde academia* (Viaene et al., 2023), legally threatened the publisher and was the first to be withdrawn with no discussion with the editors (Godden-Rasul & Serisier, 2024). We must bear in mind that one of the primary reactions to the MeToo movement has been to bring defamation cases against survivors who speak out, or against media and other publishers, to silence allegations.

Although the article does not name the accused professor, it inspired other academics and activists to publicly name Boaventura de Sousa Santos from the Centre for Social Studies (CES in Portuguese) of the University of Coimbra. After this, the CES suspended Boaventura, opened an investigation that concluded that there were "patterns of conduct involving abuse of power and harassment on the part of some people who held senior positions in the CES hierarchy," and the Board and the Chair of the CES Scientific Council published a letter of apology (2024). Although the investigation recognised the facts, the article that started it all remains withdrawn.

The CES case echoes another characteristic of #MeToo: the scandals around powerful men. The academic branch of MeToo has seen numerous cases of fallen "star professors"; one of the latest cases is regarding Harvard Anthropology professors Comaroff, Bestor, and Urton. An article about these cases in the Harvard Crimson (Bikales, 2020) highlights that these professors were protected by "decades-old power structures in Harvard's Anthropology Department," structures that serve to disadvantage women and silence complaints of sexual violence.

Ahmed (2021) describes academia as a complex network of connections among institutions, administrators, and scholars. In this network, individuals gain recognition through promotions and publications, and so they become increasingly influential, creating a concentration of power among the most connected, whom Ahmed terms "important men." These figures facilitate access to resources such as funding and job opportunities, making students and early-career researchers dependent on their goodwill. The structure of academia

often shields these "important men" from accountability, leading to a culture where those who raise concerns about abuses of power are seen as disruptive. This situation leaves vulnerable members of academia, such as contingent faculty and less connected researchers, at greater risk, as their complaints may be ignored or minimised (Ahmed, 2021).

Although in our case, relations of power and dependency are created by the unique conditions of fieldwork in isolated communities, our professors and university disregarded our complaints, minimising the perpetrator's wrongdoing, blaming us, or labelling us as 'problematic' or 'crazy'. Although we had quite different experiences, in both cases we felt institutional abandonment and betrayal. Another form of silencing one of us experienced was in the form of personal threats, harassment, and intimidation in public academic scenarios such as conferences, and other professional retaliations.

A related form of silencing is due to our cultural disbelief of sexual violence victims' accounts. This implies that women researchers who have survived sexual violence are also deemed less credible, as feminist scholarship has sufficiently shown (Alcoff, 2018). Godden-Rasul and Serisier (2024) see the retraction of the book *Sexual misconduct in academia: informing an ethics of care in the university* within a broader epistemic economy that casts the knowledge of survivors, even academic survivors, as illegitimate. Academic survivors, or survivor-researchers as defined by Sweeney and Beresford (2019), suffer from bias, importantly through the anonymity of the peer review processes, and from norms surrounding who has the right to study whom.

Despite the silencing, retaliation, or legal threats that authors of autoethnographies of sexual violence in academia may face, we see the need to denounce as the first step to end situations that have been happening for too long in higher education institutions around the world. Speaking and writing about experiences of harm within academia is an inherently political endeavour. As Ahmed (2021) suggests, writing about these stories is a form of recording an alternate history of our universities. As long as we can, we will continue raising our voices loudly to talk about the endemic problem of sexual violence in academia and the urgent need for change. This is not to say that silence is an illegitimate or wrong option; survivors should be free to choose, and choosing silence can also be a liberating and feminist path to transit (Parpart & Parashar, 2019).

5 Creating Community. Creating a Reaction in the Reader and in Society

Autoethnography is a mode of inquiry that privileges engagement with others by providing insights that resonate with those who share similar experiences or inviting others to witness or act on specific struggles (Adams et al., 2016). Some autoethnographies, and among them those of sexual violence in academia, explicitly use personal narratives to advocate for a change by inspiring readers to act in their world, informed by the insights gained from the text. Another key way in which many autoethnographic reflections on sexual violence are contributing to change is by providing survivor-led and trauma-informed guidelines on how higher education institutions should approach sexual violence (Bull, 2023; Romero & Martínez, 2021; Von Meullen & Van der Waldt, 2022).

The viral sharing of personal experiences of sexual violence on social media with the hashtag #MeToo exposed sexual violence in a way that became undeniable. We believe that, just like us, many women who participated in this movement felt the power of overcoming silence in such a resounding way. As we mentioned earlier, the use of personal experiences with the specific goal of transforming reality started long before MeToo in feminist anti-sexual violence gatherings (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019). Here emerged the feminist slogan "the personal is political" because women's spaces of vulnerability show how violence and discrimination based on sexism take place. Breaking the silence on sexual violence is a political action to directly transform that reality (Cruz et al., 2015; Ellis, 2009; Metta, 2016).

Knowing each other's stories and reading about other young researchers' experiences of sexual violence during fieldwork gave us a new perspective. Knowing that there is sisterhood in this space, where our voices are heard without value judgements, invites us to embrace safety and control regarding our experiences. We find solidarity and strength in the path we have walked together (Korol, 2018).

Meeting and writing together was central because, by doing that, we broke the individualisation of our complaints, which helps to dilute the truth of a systemic problem (Patiño, 2021). As Petit-Thorne points out for the Canadian context, neoliberal discourses and risk management techniques inform institutional responses to sexual violence. Neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility for one's well-being, or lack thereof, ignores the effects of structural violence on that well-being (2023).

Institutional policies often assume that reporting incidents will happen on an individual level, focusing on a single event where one person is targeted by another within the academic community. However, reporting can also occur collectively (Ahmed, 2021) when a group of women, often coming together by chance or through networks like the 'whisper network,' unite to support one another in reporting to their institution. Other forms of direct action, including graffiti (Viaene et al., 2023), also play a role in this collective approach. This collaboration is not surprising, given that many individuals who engage in abusive behaviours often target multiple victims. Another way we can see this collective approach in denouncing is by looking at why people report; the overwhelming reason reported was to protect themselves and others (Bull, 2023).

After the publication in 2021 of an autoethnography of the sexual violence we suffered during research fieldwork, women researchers from different countries, disciplines, and institutions wrote to us to express solidarity and support. We both felt what has been called sorority and experienced what it means to find a community to share our pain. The experiences of women in academia that we read on social media under the hashtag #MeToo and the autoethnographic accounts of sexual violence in academia that we read moved and inspired us to write our own stories. We are comforted that our autoethnographic reflection has also impacted the lives of other researchers.

6 On Writing an Autoethnography of Sexual Violence

When we decided to write about our experience of sexual violence, we thought so much about how to do it because of the implications for us and others, the fear of jeopardising our careers, the stigma, the victim-blaming, and the emotional labour that it requires. To speak out and to write down our personal embodied experience for the first time was terrifying. We had to remember the violence, the shame, the doubts, the confusion, the invisibility, the silencing of our complaints, and the re-victimisation, which requires an enormous emotional effort.

We revealed the facts from 10 years back, with positive and negative memories. We engaged in a dialogue: with our memories, with each other, with other similar works on sexual violence during fieldwork, as well as with our then-present selves, by acknowledging the paths we followed after complaining. Here, we are looking back on the process of writing and publishing together to reflect on the impact of these very acts on our lives. The path we embarked on, of reflecting autoethnographically on experiences of sexual violence, allowed us to feel part of a community and to fight the silencing of our voices. Despite the cost and emotional effort, writing about these traumatic experiences and articulating them with feminist activism helped us to process the events and to heal.

Writing an autoethnography of sexual violence during fieldwork allowed us to share our stories with each other, with some close friends and, after publication, with a broader audience. Among this last group, some women reached out to us because the texts resonated with them. We received emails of support and were invited to academic spaces to talk about our work. Finding each other and then a community of support, of researchers with similar experiences, but also of a broader community that, in the frame of the MeToo, shared their experiences of sexual violence in academia on social media, blogs, or research articles, allowed us to build a sense of community.

As we lived in different countries, we decided to share our stories in the form of a freestyle text. This exercise of sharing helped us understand our experiences from another perspective and highlight commonalities in our stories. While reading other young researchers, we realised that there are patterns in our experiences. This allowed us to break through the self-censorship we had felt years ago because of the reactions and violence we had received after complaining.

Autoethnography of sexual violence in academia is an inherently feminist method (Petit-Thorne, 2023; Romero, 2024), as it is in itself a political act to break the silence imposed on our stories, a silence that is paramount in the structures that allow and perpetuate sexual violence (Poó, 2009). Writing an autoethnography of sexual violence was hard but also liberating. It helped us close cycles and break the silence of our voices by sharing our experiences of harm. It certainly has impacted our professional paths and our future as academics. The possibility of telling our silenced story and finding a community empowered us and helped us heal. For us, it was crucial to be able to share our stories and foster a sense of sisterhood and healing.

This is our experience, but it does not negate the possibility of other methods of addressing patriarchal violence. Silence is also a valid adaptive response to violence, and those who choose it can still be feminists who challenge the colonial and patriarchal roots of academia and pursue liberation in their work (Boesten & Henry, 2018).

7 Conclusions

After #MeToo, the use of autoethnography as a methodology for researching sexual violence in academia has increased, challenging the patriarchal and colonial foundations of knowledge production –of the knowledge itself and of the conditions of knowledge production within higher education institutions. By linking personal experiences to the systemic issue of sexual violence, it offers a detailed and context-specific analysis that helps us to debunk myths that prejudice women – while also contributing to a much-needed change by offering survivor-led and trauma-informed guidelines for addressing sexual violence in higher education institutions.

Writing an autoethnography of experiences of sexual violence was for us a way to reclaim our silenced voices. And through them, we hope to fight silence, the cornerstone of how academic cultures allow sexual violence to thrive. Despite multiple ways of silencing survivors, and the professional and mental cost of labelling oneself as a survivor and as a researcher, we believe it is worth pushing for a much-needed change in the way in which knowledge is produced that disadvantages women. This articulation with the MeToo movement and with feminist activism was central to us and other authors of autoethnographies of sexual violence within academia.

The path we embarked on, of reflecting autoethnographically on our experiences of sexual violence, allowed us to navigate through our pain together, inspired and empowered by other women who, just like us, were shaken by the force of the MeToo movement and also used their personal experiences to reflect on a systemic issue that massively affects young women, as well as racialised, gender diverse and other marginalised people, who are usually precariously employed.

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