

Things That Make You Go Hmmm: Unmaking of the Racialized Self in a Graduate School Classroom

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Abstract

Using critical race theory's notion of counter storytelling I use three situations within my life as a racialized woman in the academy to exemplify the practices and symptoms of institutionalized intersectionality. Using my stories and the many useful critiques of intersectionality, I discuss how institutionalized intersectionality is failing marginalized women because institutions are co-opting "outsider" language and imposing it on bodies of their choosing.

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Résumé

À l'aide de la notion des contre-récits de la théorie critique de la race, j'utilise trois situations au sein de ma vie en tant que femme racialisée dans le monde universitaire pour illustrer les pratiques et les symptômes de l'intersectionnalité institutionnalisée. À l'aide de mes expériences et des nombreuses critiques utiles de l'intersectionnalité, je discute de la façon dont l'intersectionnalité institutionnalisée trahit les femmes marginalisées parce que les institutions cooptent le langage « marginal » et l'imposent aux organes de leur choix.

Factory (1991)—was my first exposure to antiracist theory, counter storytelling, and political action.

In a recent opinion piece for the Washington Post entitled “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait,” Crenshaw (2015) noted discrepancies between the modern-day version of intersectionality and her intention when she coined the term:

Intersectionality was a lived reality before it became a term. Today, nearly three decades after I first put a name to the concept, the term seems to be everywhere. But if women and girls of color continue to be left in the shadows, something vital to the understanding of intersectionality has been lost. (1–2)

Using my stories and some of the many useful critiques of intersectionality (Brown 1997; Nash 2008; Puar 2007), in this article I discuss how institutionalized intersectionality is failing women of colour, Indigenous women, and other multiply marginalized women because institutions are co-opting “outsider” language and imposing it on bodies of their choosing. This in turn appropriates the knowledge of racialized women, yet leaves them in the margins of academic spaces, all while maintaining institutionalized whiteness. Contrary to Crenshaw’s original intent to make visible the intersecting systems of oppression within the lives of Black women, intersectionality is now used as a method of identity politics where we all become part of the traffic in Crenshaw’s (1989) intersection metaphor, with little understanding of how these systems impact certain, namely marginalized, bodies. Despite Crenshaw’s intentions, institutionalized intersectionality most negatively affects racialized bodies.

Telling Stories

In sharing my stories here, I am using the principles of critical race theory’s counter storytelling (Delgado 2000) and Sherene Razack’s (1999) notion of storytelling for social change to highlight the limitations of intersectionality. These stories, as well as the countless other stories of racialized women, remind us that intersectionality was inspired by and continues to be a lived experience. It is important to theorize racism and marginalization, but when we illustrate them through our lived realities, we can begin to understand how they have real effects on the lives of women of colour. Razack

reminds us that stories can hold a tremendous potential for change, but in order to achieve that change, we must first think critically about which stories we tell, and why. The stories I share in this article are not told only for the sake of telling stories; they are a way to showcase alternatives to the mainstream understanding of marginalized bodies, to shift our attention in a manner focused on meaningful change.

I share these stories with a serious commitment to ending what Eve Tuck (2009) calls damage-centred research. In her open letter to communities, Tuck urges researchers to stop sharing stories of damaged racialized peoples, stories that promise social change but which only serve and support the mainstream. She encourages us to complexify damage-centered research through desire. The stories I tell in this article should not be understood as exemplars of women of colour struggling in classrooms with their peers. These stories illustrate my desire to be a complete person in the classroom, one who is not exposed to systemic racism and violence in the name of institutional innocence. I will not be your woman-of-colour diversity badge. I am not asking for equality—a broken equality—with my peers, but for an understanding that if you want diversity in the classroom, you will be expected to change the structure of the classroom to accommodate it.

These stories are challenging, partly because they highlight prickly situations, but mostly because they showcase the inherent structural racism that racialized peoples encounter within systems every day. The focus on systems is intentional because it reminds us that these structures are responsible for the injustices they perpetuate: They are developed to support certain bodies and not others. The systems and their history in racist ideologies, not individual people of colour, must be held accountable for perpetuating uneven access to the academy and other institutions of power. There is a reason why certain bodies are able to effortlessly navigate systems: The systems were made for them to navigate, are geared for the ways in which they think. This is not a coincidence.

It is important to discuss my process in collecting these stories. My memories, in some cases years after the events occurred, are limited to what and how I remember. I acknowledge that all stories can and do have multiple and sometimes conflicting truths. Memory adds another layer. In “The Ambivalent Practices

of Reflexivity,” Bronwyn Davies and her colleagues (2004) explain that what and how we remember are interesting aspects of qualitative inquiry that can lead to rich information in addition to the memory itself. Memories are complicated and should not be assumed to be neutral, thus the processes of memory recall can tell us a lot about the people and situations involved. These stories are the way I remember them at the time of writing. In no way is my version of the story expected to be the truth for everyone involved. I am well aware of the limitations of stories, and again, my aim is not to tell the perfect story but to showcase the systems at play within these stories and, more importantly, the lived experiences of women of colour. Although my stories are unique to my experiences they shed light on institutions (and the limitations) that affect many others in similar ways.

The process of remembering what happened in a university classroom can be tumultuous. Challenging dynamics at play in classrooms lead to tense interactions. These dynamics are particularly evident in moments of disagreement. Many risks are involved for all who speak in class, but I argue that these risks are compounded for multiply marginalized bodies. Incomplete curricula and a “single story” (Adichie 2009) of people of colour force the responsibility of teaching diversity onto the folks in the classroom who experience this diversity. This becomes the more complicated iteration of the white teacher asking the racialized other to explain “the perspectives of people of colour.” Typically, in these cases it is not a flat-out question: Information is “volunteered” but also coerced because the university systems, such as admission, funding, and privilege, force a few to speak for the “others.” In my own experience, this information is on occasion accepted and on occasion rejected by my peers. I’d like to share an instance of each.

Things That Make You Go Hmmm #1

I was enrolled in a small graduate writing class predominantly focused on the power of storytelling. As a group, we looked at a variety of different authors who shared their perspectives on how to tell the “perfect” story. The class composition was much like others I have experienced. Of the 12 students, four were racialized women, one was a white man, and the remaining seven were white women. We were led by our professor, also a white woman.

On this particular day we were watching Brené Brown’s TED talk on “The Power of Vulnerability” where Brown discusses the importance of vulnerability and how this vulnerability makes you beautiful. My professor took Brown’s statements further and explained that to tell a good story one needs to share their vulnerable side. Although for the most part I agree with the notion of vulnerability expressed by my professor and Brown, I think they both oversimplify who is expected to share it. In a fit of frustrated rage I shouted, “Who is expected to be vulnerable? Vulnerability is not a neutral term imposed on everyone!” The class turned to look at me, surprised by my “overreaction.” The professor thoughtfully looked over and gave me a quiet “mm-hmm,” signalling me to go on. Trying to compose myself, I calmly explained, “There is an expectation of who is supposed to be vulnerable. People of colour are expected to share their stories of racism, their stories of systemic struggle. It’s an expectation that these folks share the violence imposed on their lives as a way for white people to watch and “understand” the other. Violence impacts white bodies, too, but they are under no expectation to share this pain. Nobody expects a white woman to share her story of rape or sexual assault. No one expects a white man to talk about his abusive parents or how this violence now impacts him as a father. This has been evidenced in this class.” The classroom fell silent. I looked over at the other women of colour in the class and their gazes uncomfortably and actively avoided mine. I could tell I had inadvertently broken our honour code and let the others in on a secret only we knew.

The stories of racialized others have been shared time and time again in the classroom, on the pages of books, and in movies, yet somehow there is still a need and desire to “eat the other,” as bell hooks (1992) would say. This voyeuristic expectation results in the consumption, commodification, and appropriation of Black and Brown bodies. Even within our class, racialized students were encouraged to share stories of challenge, such as immigration experiences to Canada, the violent imposition of anglicized names on our bodies, and racist encounters. Alternatively, our white counterparts were encouraged to share inspirational stories about the impact of a beautiful nature hike, for example, or fictional stories of fantastical monsters. I am not sure what led to this dynamic. Perhaps there was an understanding that

white students didn't have stories of challenge. Perhaps it was understood that those stories were too personal to share with the class. Not exceptional within the academy, the culture of our class imposed the burden of the teaching stories on the marginalized bodies for the consumption of the mainstream.

After an appropriate amount of silence, a classmate who had attentively listened to my concerns about vulnerability spoke. With tentative consideration she shared this platitude: It is not always risky for the underdog to take centre stage. As a matter of fact, with great risk comes great reward, and sometimes it is your only option. She went on to explain that she had seen a video on YouTube about a little dog in the Arctic that was tied up outside. It was freezing and the dog's owners were nowhere to be found. A giant hungry polar bear came up to the dog, and it looked like it was going to attack. Clearly the dog was no match for the bear. But instead of giving up, the dog decided to jump around and dance. At first the bear was confused, then it decided to join in the dance. The dog managed to engage the bear, and in that way rescued itself from death.

Perplexed about the relevance of this story to my concerns about the risks of sharing vulnerability as a racialized woman in the academy, I asked, "Are you comparing me to a dog?" My classmate replied, "Well, I didn't mean it that way, but yes, I guess."

My jaw gaped in silent amazement. My classmate's blonde hair and blue-eyed whiteness stared me in the face and pierced my stunned body. Her story reduced risk taking to a natural survival response rather than an action that requires consent among respectful peers. Her response assumed it is the sharing I fear, but in fact it is the expectation. In making this assumption, she read my vulnerability as a permanent condition of racialization rather than an expectation created by her own white privilege. Inadvertently my colleague had trivialized my experience and expression of marginalization within the academy. Furthermore, the silence of the classroom made it clear that the academic system allows and possibly even encourages the muzzling of certain bodies. Institutionalized intersectionality has forced my experiences—a Brown woman—as a commodity to share, with little understanding of how this expectation affects my body. In turn it privileges those with an understanding of the institutionalized language and equalizes our experiences as the same.

This hmmm-worthy scenario threatens to silence me within the classroom.

The First Lesson

This story is about institutions and the people within them: the institution of the academy, of the classroom, and of the people and the perspectives they contain. For many reasons, classroom dynamics work to protect the bodies and ideas of some while risking those of others. My colleague felt no threat in speaking her mind, just as no one, myself included, felt it necessary to explain how it might be inappropriate for her to compare me to a dog. I want to make it clear that my issue is not with any of the particular bodies who were in the classroom with us, but with what the classroom represents. In my department and in my field, certain bodies and ideas are prioritized over others. At its most simple, there is evidence that certain bodies do better than others in academe in terms of who gets in, who gets funding, and who gets jobs (Henry and Tator 2012; Smith 2010).

Intersectionality also seeks to legitimize the theories that help to explain marginalized identities and make visible the invisible within our lives. As intersectionality has become institutionalized, however, it aims to make a case for everyone. There is a tendency on the part of the institution to remove marginalized voices from the margins through fear that it will ghettoize them. As an application, intersectionality has been taken up as a way to understand that everyone, not only those who occupy the margins, has an intersecting identity. Although this is of course true, it fails to acknowledge the ways that systems are at play in intersectionality. As a result, everyone now feels ownership over the language of intersectionality, especially when it involves discussing the bodies in the margins. Everyone has an intersecting identity that places them in relation to others, but what this fails to acknowledge is that intersectionality is rooted in law, specifically in the case of women of colour who were unable to merge their claims of gender and race discrimination (Crenshaw 1999, 2015). Intersectionality is intended to shed light on systemic exclusion.

Within our class together it became clear that my colleague understood the language of intersectionality and multiple marginalization. Perhaps she has even been marginalized herself. I have come to real-

ize, though, that she took ownership over my language of experience. Inadvertently she told me, “You are not special. Everyone feels marginalized sometimes, and strength comes from getting over that marginalization.” She centered her experiences and equalized mine to those around her. This is the power of institutionalization, we can all take a piece of the pie. We are all the same. I have hardship, she has hardship, we all have hardship—so get over it. This is how she is able to take ownership over intersectionality, by claiming that she too has an intersecting identity. We all do. And through her benevolent whiteness, she was trying to empower me—the broken Brown girl—to save myself by exemplifying how others (whom she deemed “worse off”) were able to save themselves. It is a classic white feminist’s story of “empowerment” and of “saving” an underdog with a problem, without any understanding on the part of my colleague of how she was further marginalizing me in the classroom. This is the problem with this so called pie—she can have any piece that she wants and she gets to allocate my slice too. I have to settle for the leftovers—the broken Brown girl that needs saving pieces. Through this interaction she was telling me, “If the dog can get over it, so can you.”

Things That Make You Go Hmmm #2

Clustered in a “like-minded” group of graduate students, each of us was asked to describe the ethical implications of the work that we hope to do. One particular graduate student, a white woman of similar age and experience to me, expressed her intention to work with a marginalized community with which she does not self-identify. In a previous research project she had helped conduct, she had collected, with a larger group, a series of interviews which she felt “tell the stories” of this community. In her graduate project she wanted to expand on these stories. Irritated by the number of graduate students who assume it is their responsibility to tell the stories of other communities, I questioned her on her motives. As I posed questions aimed at prodding my colleague to self-reflect, almost instantaneously the “evil two-headed monster of guilt and shame” reared its hideous face, as it almost always does in these challenging interracial dialogues in the academy. In the presence of this monster and my perceived threat, my colleague’s body began to stiffen and she sat taller, her posture making her physically larger. She

explained that the racialized members of the original research group had left the academy to pursue other endeavours, and she felt that as one of the remaining members it was her obligation to do something with the data. I saw tears of justification and anger well up in her eyes. Upon noticing the impact of my comments on her body, my body also tensed with exhaustion at the thought of having to wipe up another white woman’s tears. As a recovering women’s studies student, wiping up white women’s guilt and shame tears became my full-time job, and I was not prepared to engage in this behaviour any longer. Our conversation went from constructive feedback on our project epistemologies to a multisyllabic academic joust to see who could stab the other first and prove their “ultimate right” in this situation.

I did not want to get into a conversation of who was racialized enough to do this work. I wanted to know if she thought it was a coincidence that her racialized colleagues had left academia. I wanted her to ask herself if her telling these stories was preventing someone else from telling them. I wanted her to question her privilege as much as she questioned the marginalization of the stories she possessed.

We both left the match hurt and angry. I later discovered that our conversation had inspired her to “change” through self-reflection. In true academic style, she wrote and published an article on how, at my unidentified expense, she had learned the error of her ways. Within this article she explained her intersections as a white woman “interested” in the challenges of marginalized communities and her desire to “help.” Taking up my ideas without crediting me, she built a case that painted her as both a marginalized white woman and a supportive, helping white saviour. There was no critical engagement with why she was interested in this project, this community, or the ethical and moral implications of her white body doing this work.

In publishing this article, she trivialized our counter stories—the ones I shared with her, the ones others have shared with her. She viewed this storytelling as something we all have access to, with little understanding of how systems take up our stories differently. When I read her story, it felt like she took the power of storytelling away from me and banished me back to the world of the broken Brown girl who struggles in school. The only problem is, I am not. My stories are involute

unravellings of systems that interpret me in particular ways—not simple “aha” moments but revelations that shake my very core. This complicated identity is what my “damaged self” can never access in the classroom in the presence of others who steal my language and strip all power from terms like intersectionality.

Again and again these challenging scenarios are used as the juicy parts or inspiring self-revelatory moments where my white colleagues are enlightened about their racism and, upon further reflection, swear they will never be racist/sexist/colonialist (insert ism here) again—of course with no serious consideration of how they profit from the same racist systems that create this marginalization. You will see them widely reflected in academic journal articles, and you may even recognize me in these publications as “a woman of colour,” “my racialized colleague,” or even “my racialized friend.” This is not an isolated incident.

In a field where publication is currency, my ideas are embraced and accepted, but without publication credit. The interlocking oppressions (Razack 1998) within the academy are what substantiate and sustain racist, classist, ableist, colonizing privilege, and by virtue of this experience make my body the racialized other in the classroom—the source, but not the articulator, of data. Again, my body, like so many others before mine, becomes the nameless, faceless, and ultimately invisible racialized body of the researched other. The power of institutionalization is that we no longer see the systems that determine and overpower our experiences. Institutionalized intersectionality has empowered everyone to tell their stories of oppression with little understanding of how they are attached to systems of power.

This hmmm-worthy moment silenced me on the pages of the journal that published my colleague’s article and on the pages of all the others that publish stories of redemptive self-discovery.

The Next Lesson

The incident I described above is a common scenario in alleged social justice spaces where people are dedicated to working in marginalized communities. In my experience, overwhelmingly the desire to help is a mask people use to hide their stuff—be it racism, privilege, guilt, etc. Through the use of this helping mask we fail to understand how systems of power intersect and how, as a result, each of us is at once privileged and op-

pressed. When we neglect to consider institutionalized intersectionality as a system, we understand these two ideas—privilege and oppression—as mutually exclusive when, like other systems, they rely on each other to function. In this scenario, my colleague went from oppressor to oppressed with a single tear and her identity shifted again to benevolent saviour with only a publication credit.

I have observed mainstream bodies use the language of intersectionality much as my “helping” colleague used it: “I am a white middle-class woman; I acknowledge this; now I can do whatever I want. I work with ‘others’ because I am able to say this to them. I am therefore absolved of my responsibility for maintaining this oppressive system.” Not only does the university allow for this appropriation of intersectionality, I would suggest that social justice programs demand it. For example, locally it is an expectation at progressive events that one will acknowledge the traditional unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples where we gather with little to no understanding of what it means to occupy stolen territory or decolonize land in meaningful ways, as per Tuck & Yang’s (2012) important article. The acknowledgement absolves responsibility and frees one to follow up with anything. The acknowledgement and subsequent inaction are the power of institutionalized intersectionality. This works in similar ways to the white woman who self identifies her social location. The resulting positionality allows and even encourages white women to centre their own experiences—again—and to sideline those who have a different reality. Let me be clear, this manoeuvre removes women of colour from the margins and somehow finds a way to equalize all experiences. White is a social construct too, I am told. Yes, of course it is, but that does not erase how white is privileged within a white settler system. This call for understanding the self in effect institutionalizes (makes official) intersectionality and, in doing so, perpetuates systemic racism. As a result, the only systemic change is the presence of bodies of colour in the classroom to witness the exclusion.

Crenshaw’s intention with a theory of intersectionality was to centre the experiences of women of colour, specifically Black women, and the ways that systems exclude them because they are both women and of colour. This scenario shows us again that the language of intersectionality and, more importantly, the rheto-

ric of responsibility/helping have been co-opted so that anyone can use them. An academic comprehension of intersectionality as a term does not mean understanding the lived experiences that give life to the term. This severing of the term from the lives is the institutionalization of intersectionality—similar to the non-doing of Sara Ahmed’s (2012) diversity work. When critical methodologies and theories become mainstreamed within systems, the knowledge is intended to be accessible to all, and in the process it loses its teeth. The knowledge lacks relevance to the people it was intended to serve, and thus it fails to be applicable.

This particular moment also highlights the fight I have had with white women who desire to equalize our experience. My colleague’s tear was her trying to show me that she was just like me: She hurts, too, and it was her responsibility to “do” something with this work. She wanted to prove to me that we are the same. What she failed to see is that although we both have intersections and stories and lived experiences that impact the work we do, systems will always play out differently when our bodies interact within them. We all—feminists, those who use intersectional theories, my colleague, myself—need to complicate our desire for this binary of we are all the same/we are all different. We are both neither the same nor different.

Things That Make You Go Hmmm #3

The third story I want to tell is a self-reflexive moment. Writing this paper and telling these stories became a nearly impossible experience for me. Over the weeks as I prepared to write and bounced ideas off others, I became greatly concerned about how to convey the systemic challenges I encounter every day. I am afraid. I have been paralyzed under the pressure of telling stories that would be understood not as isolated anomalies but as repeated incidents of structural racism. How do I tell my stories without creating a series of monolithic characters with no depth or complexity, all within a strict word limit? Furthermore, how do I do it without alienating others and leaving myself isolated as the angry woman of colour?

Feeling overwhelmed, my first instinct was to flee. I will not write this paper. I will just run away. I could really use a vacation anyways. One by one I was looking through the lexicon of horrifying “hmmm” moments that had become normalized within my life

and I became struck with an overwhelming sense of responsibility. For decades, I felt like I was going crazy. I was experiencing things it seemed like no one else experienced (at least no one talked about it) and it was not until I read Patricia Williams’s *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (1992) that I saw how “crazy” becomes imposed and institutionalized within experiences of racism. If I could prevent at least one person from feeling crazy, I had to share these institutionalized stories.

My next instinct was to wordsmith the stories to make them sound better. When I took the first draft of these stories to my peers, they asked, “Manjeet, why are you letting everyone off?” I was worried that my white peers would be made uncomfortable by my stories, but instead, they called me on sugar-coating my experiences. Although my career as an activist, a feminist, and an educator has mostly been built on shaking the comfortable, it felt different disturbing the ivory tower. I wanted to stir things up, but not too much. Unlike my colleagues in the stories I shared, I did not feel free to confront the institution, because I know it will not protect my body and my ideas in the same way it protects theirs. Yet still, what is the point of telling these stories if I am not going to do it honestly and freely?

I was then left to sit with the truth of these stories. Knowing this delicate dance of colonization and marginalization, I feel both safe and unsafe in its capacity to control the institutions I access. Furthermore, I am engaging in and attempting to deconstruct an institutional pedagogy where my thoughts and experiences are welcome, but only in a certain way and at a certain time. What will happen if I disrupt this dance? This fear of change within those of us who have finally found ways to navigate impossible institutions is what maintains this system. The truth is that my stories can and will make people uncomfortable, including myself. My instincts to flee or to use a selective, euphemistic memory are in essence my unconscious desire to replicate and re-centre whiteness. This experience has become another “hmmm” moment, this time involving myself and the structural oppression I have internalized through the years.

This hmmm-worthy moment threatens to silence me every day.

The Problem with Intersectionality

As evidenced through these stories, I cannot help but agree when Nancy Hirschmann (2012) offers that “we are sometimes better at calling for intersectionality and proclaiming its importance than we are at actually doing it” (401). Several critiques of intersectionality have demonstrated its institutionalized failures. Both Wendy Brown (1997) and Jasbir Puar (2007) have explained how this theory has become a mainstay within feminist studies and, as a result, has failed to live up to its intentions. Robyn Wiegman (2012) believes that intersectionality is doomed to fail since the desire to engage intersectionality is bigger than the theory’s capacity to enact social justice. Jennifer Nash (2014) explains that the “problem of intersectionality...is that its attention to particularity never challenges the structures of domination that incessantly reduce subjects to fictive categories” (57). It has become clear that intersectionality, with its tendency to overfragment identities, has become a way to understand subject position. As a result, it fails to consider systems. We need to reconsider the roots of intersectionality within the law to grasp how we can effectively take up and decipher systems through comprehending intersectional identities, as opposed to overly fragmented individuals trying to define themselves. These hmmm-worthy moments are happening because the language of intersectionality is being stolen and the experiences of all are being forced into specific, comfortable categories. This equalization of the experiences of all without a commitment to the original intention and meaning of intersectionality fails to engage systems of power and the ways they are perpetuated.

The problem with intersectionality, then, is its institutionalization and its failure to call into action the same folks it was intended to support. Institutionalized intersectionality works systemically to injure certain bodies, and this intersectionality cannot be equalized across experiences. One system can never come ahead of the others; hierarchy counters how intersectionality works. Its sheer power is in the fact that these systems cannot be separated. Finally, institutionalized intersectionality fails to understand how privilege and oppression are always linked. In attempting to understand these stories and these systems, it is imperative to consider Mari Matsuda (1990) when she asks us to “ask the other question.” For me, the other question within

all of this is two questions: What is missing here? How am I implicated? It is always easier to point the finger in blame at another than to ask how I contribute to the problem: in this case, the institutionalization of intersectionality, the equalization of experiences, and the further pushing to the margins of the marginalized.

When stories make us go “hmmm,” we must ask what the stories are telling us. In an academy built on gaining knowledge from the “other,” it comes as no surprise that marginalized students, academics, and staff are put in a position to constantly engage in hmmm-provoking scenarios. And as long as this remains true, racialized and marginalized people who engage in this space will be expected to conserve this system.

If you see yourself reflected in these stories, there is a reason. If you do not, that says something, too, because we are all implicated in this system and its maintenance. So perhaps as a start the next time you find yourself engaged in a moment that makes you go “hmmm,” it might be interesting to ask, “Which systems am I perpetuating in this moment?”

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