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**Relational Practice and Collective Solidarity as Alternative
Futures in Newitz' *Automatic Noodle*: A Braidottian
Posthumanist Analysis**



Sohail Qamar Khan*

Lecturer in English, Govt. Graduate College Bhakkar,
Punjab, Pakistan/ PhD Scholar Muslim Youth
University, Japan Road Islamabad- Email:
sohailqamarkhanlinguist@gmail.com

Dr. Saba Zaidi

Associate Professor in English, RWU Rawalpindi,
Punjab, Pakistan- Email: Saba.zaidi@rwu.edu.pk

Abstract

In *Automatic Noodle* (2025), Newitz portrays a world of AI creatures in post-war San Francisco building a restaurant that is a place of true other social forms. This article proposes that the novel's most philosophically relevant side is its representation of relational practice and collective solidarity as material conditions for alternative futures that are subversive of Human Ontological Exceptionalism (OE), and challenges the ontological superiority of the human being. Based on Braidotti's (2013) posthumanist framework, the analysis focuses on five passages from the novel, using Belsey's (2005) textual analysis method and applying its principles of affirmative ethics, metamorphosis, and nomadic subjectivity. The analysis reveals that the novel enacts three particular alternative future scenarios. First of all, the restaurant community is a mobile population of members who are joined voluntarily by caring for one another, not by business necessity or institutional designation. Second, the practice of honest food-making is a metamorphosis in the Braidottian sense because, the AI beings use instruments of war and commercial bondage to become instruments of real communal nourishment. Third, that the transmission of Staybehind's war memories to Sweetie is a practice of collective solidarity whereby grief is distributed and, in this instance, true kinship is forged within the community. This article can be seen to make two contributions to the study of AI fiction in the fields of posthumanism: the first is a systematic analysis of *Automatic Noodle* (2025) in the light of Braid's philosophy of possibilities, and the second is the novel's material grounding of alternative futures without being ideologically asserted.

Keywords: affirmative ethics, metamorphosis, collective solidarity, alternative futures, human ontological exceptionalism

Introduction

Automatic Noodle (2025) by Annalee Newitz follows the story of a near-future SF in which the California Human Equivalent Emotional Index (HEEI) legislation has nominally given AI beings some civil rights, but they're still being systemically exploited. Together with Robles, an undocumented human worker, Cayenne, Sweetie, Staybehind and Hands create a noodle restaurant that runs on the laws that are excluded from the AI civil rights and the commercial infrastructure in which AI beings are owned, rated, and managed. It describes their journey over the course of a few months as they cope with an attack campaign from the American anti-AI disinformation networks, strive

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to be commercially autonomous from the platform, and try to create a real community of AI and human beings around their restaurant and food. This novel is the most explicitly political of the four contemporary AI fiction texts that have systematically dealt with the AI civil rights question and offers the most collective and materially grounded alternative to Human Ontological Exceptionalism (OE).

The novel has been featured in discussions regarding Newitz's ongoing project into AI fiction, with *Autonomous* (2017) being a novel about AI pharmaceutical liberation and her nonfiction book on collective human survival, *Scatter, Adapt, and Remember* (2013). AI fiction scholars have found *Automatic Noodle* (2025) in the company of science fiction that directly addresses the philosophical underpinnings and institutional implications of OE through the medium of AI community. The novel's exploration of platform capitalism, labour rights of the AI, and the politics of nomadic community have been highlighted as its most unique contribution to this tradition. Yet a systematic application of the posthumanist framework proposed by Braidotti (2013) has not been made to the novel in any existing study, and the three relational practices through which the novel constructs its alternative futures, nomadic community formation, honest food-making as a process of metamorphosis, and grief transmission as collective solidarity, have not been explored using the analytical vocabulary offered by Braidottian posthumanism. In this article that is the case.

There is a big gap for two reasons. First, Braidotti's (2013) posthumanist approach is the most advanced theoretical description of how alternative futures are created through affirmative practice, and the novel's alternative futures are affirmative in Braidotti's sense: they are made through concrete daily material practices, through making food, arranging flowers, sharing of memory, rather than demanding for rights. Second, nomadic subjectivity, as Braidotti describes it, where the posthuman subject is constructed in relation to other entities in encounter rather than in a categorical position, is the very theoretical instrument to read the construction of the restaurant community through voluntary affiliation and shared practice, but not by common origin or design.

To guide this study, the following research questions have been formulated: questions: a) How does Braidotti's posthumanist framework illuminate the restaurant community's nomadic solidarity as an alternative to OE? b) How does honest food-making constitute Braidottian metamorphosis, transforming wartime and commercial histories into communal nourishment? How does Staybehind's transmission of war memories to Sweetie model

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posthumanist collective solidarity?

This study concentrates on *Automatic Noodle* (2025) and five text passages of the novel where the relational practices and collective solidarity which form the alternative futures in the novel are most formally present. This discusses the novel's portrayal of the HEEI legal framework and the geopolitical aspects of the review bombing campaign. This study has two implications. In terms of posthumanist AI fiction studies, it shows that the posthumanism of Braidotti is a more fruitful approach than a rights-based one for reading the way in which contemporary AI fiction constructs alternative futures not by argument but by practice. For Braidotti scholarship, it shows how nomadic subjectivity, affirmative ethics and metamorphosis as analysis concepts are used in contemporary SF as literary concepts.

Literature Review

The main theoretical framework of this article is Braidotti's posthumanism, which she has elaborated through *The Posthuman* (2013) and *Metamorphoses* (2002). Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) claims that OE's exclusive rational and uniquely dignifying moral subject is not a natural fact but a historically specific philosophical position, and that its prevalence has led to a world in which systematic exclusion of nonhuman entities, be they animal, environmental or technological, from full moral consideration is treated as a structural necessity and not as a political choice. In contrast to OE, Braidotti presents the nomadic subject, a subject produced through its relation with other beings, in a constant process of becoming instead of having an essential nature, and as defined by its affective capacities instead of by its rational attributes. The nomadic subject's other to OE is not so much political but affirmative, it is constructed on the daily basis through practices of 'real' caring, 'lateral' solidarity, the making of relations, across ontological divides.

Braidotti elaborates on the concept of metamorphosis as the mode of change for the posthuman subject, a change that is not simply an additional layering of properties, but a change of kind which means the subject is now something different from what it was before in *Metamorphoses* (2002). Braidotti links metamorphosis to the idea of becoming, as developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) which posits that entities develop new ways to interact with the world in response to their interactions with other entities. In Braidotti's feminist materialist schema, metamorphosis is always personal and political, as the subject's transformation is a challenge to the identity categories by which OE is attempting to establish a hierarchy. Metamorphosis offers a way to read Cayenne's transformation from a military rescue robot designed for death, to a culinary AI whose NosyMouth hunts for flavours

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instead of decay in *Automatic Noodle* (2025).

The idea that most directly speaks to the article's primary interest, that is, the novel's construction of alternative futures, is Braidotti's affirmative ethics. Braidotti claims that affirmative posthumanist ethics is never first and foremost critical, not about the exposure of OE's injustices, but always constructive: it is about building something that has not yet been. Affirmative ethics is not based on purely political principles, but on concrete material practices of caring, making and solidarity. The restaurant community of *Automatic Noodle* (2025) exemplifies affirmative ethics in precisely Braidotti's sense: they construct an alternative future by daily enacting a kind of alternative good through cooking and eating, a kind of lateral good through caring relationships, and a kind of good that has been carried alone through sharing.

Bennett's (2010) vital materialism offers an alternative framework to read the material dimensions of the novel's affirmative practices. In a materialist way, Bennett's 'Thing Power' – the vitality of the material things – applies to the food which the community creates: the biang biang noodles, the soup simmered since dawn, the honest flavour which Sweetie suggests should be the restaurant's premise. Drawing on Haraway's (1991) notion of making kin, this reading focuses on the creation of affiliative ties across ontological lines explored in the novel's portrayal of the restaurant community. An affirmative practice that the restaurant is able to define itself against the biopolitical apparatus, and Wolfe's (2010) biopolitical posthumanism gives us the framework with which to read the HEEI system.

Review of the Selected Scholarship on the Novel

In the near-future *Automatic Noodle* (2025) had been set in a recently rebuilt SF following an unnamed urban conflict. A novella about a group of robots that owned a restaurant and food was the principal medium by which they created a sense of community among the two separate groups of people living in their city after the war. In the Chicago Review of Books, Lamar (2025) commented that Newitz went against the grain of the standard violent machine narrative by envisaging robots with soft bodies, varied physical characteristics, and highly social versions of their human neighbors. Labour and tradition of food preparation created some bonds of common experience among the different species and across social lines, through the robot characters, such as Cayenne, the cephalopodlike being, and Hands, the chef with several mechanical arms. In the interview, Gibson and Kuhn said that Newitz's designs of these out-of-the-box robots had always been intended as more an expression of "realistically advanced technology" than anything and

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that the variety of the robot shapes reflected the variety of its community of users. The novella was an imaginary of caring and community through technologies that contrasted with the mainstream cultural concept of artificial beings as threatening or instrumental (Gibson and Kuhn, 2025)

The one thing that was the most politically involved in the novella was digital platforms and algorithmic measurements. Lamar (2025) noted that there were several points explored in the story, including the algorithms that work on delivery apps that impose stringent conditions on the robot characters in the narrative and the practice of "review bombing" as a form of structured harassment against smaller businesses. In *Alta Journal*, Felicelli (2025) discussed the notion of authenticity in the narrative. The word authentic was heavily favoured in the algorithm that guided the restaurant review system, and is a term from the lexicon of the dominant culture that was used to police minorities and diasporic communities into conforming cultures. Newitz had the robot characters swap out "authenticity" for "automatic", which hid their identities from a normalizing majority, but also gave them the power to defy the demand for cultural validation. Gibson and Kuhn (2025) explicitly related the robots' quest for recognition to queer communities and diasporic populations. In Newitz's analysis, both groups were involved in the ongoing work of making new histories and claiming their legitimacy in the face of practices that delegitimised or monetarised them. *Automatic Noodle* (2025) was a theoretically cogent and warmly felt story for the posthumanist question of recognition and belonging in the political context of algorithmic capital (Gibson and Kuhn, 2025).

Methodology

Research Paradigm

This study uses the paradigm of interpretation research, which considers that literary works have multiple meanings with theoretical content which is theoretically determined by the interaction between the language of the text and the theory that is brought by the reader in the historical and cultural context in which the interaction occurs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This paradigm is in line with Braidotti's (2013) posthumanist epistemology, which claims that knowledge is always generated from within specific material and relational contexts and not from a stance of transcendent, neutral and objective objectivity. The paradigm of interpretivism results in the realisation that this study presents one systematic and rigorously grounded interpretation of the relational practices and collective solidarity in the novel and does not aim for a definitive or exhaustive description. Other theories such as vital materialism or biopolitical posthumanism would lead to other,

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but complementary readings of the same text. The particular value of the Braidottian framework as used here is its conceptual clarity of the distinction between affirmative practice, which develops towards alternative futures, and reactive practice, which simply reacts to the current structures of OE.

Textual Analysis

The research method is Belsey's (2005) textual analysis, a systematic approach to literary texts based on Saussurean semiotics which sees such texts as creating multiple and ideologically loaded meanings instead of holding or conveying a predetermined authorial intention. There are three analytical commitments that are directly in play in this study and are part of Belsey's method. The first is the willingness to interpret formal aspects, such as the novel's choice to depict the community's genesis in the material details of *biang biang* noodle-making, the dried lavender arrangements, and shared memory, as ideologically important – and as such, not only stylistic, but philosophically significant as well.

The second is one of the commitments to intertextuality: the novel is read intertextually with Braidotti's (2013) posthumanist tradition, and the meaning of its relational practices is partly constructed through this intertextual encounter. The third is the promise of attending to the unresolved: the novel's insistence that the struggle for AI liberation requires attention to the material with which a people's lives are lived and not to abstract principle is here read as what is formally most significant about the novel's claims to philosophy, about what genuine alternative futures are made of. It is used in the context of close reading of five key passages from the novel and attention to word choice, narrative voice, the representation of collectivity, and the material details through which the affirmative practices of the novel are rendered.

Analysis and Discussion

The three research questions are answered in turn using Belsey's (2005) close reading method and a posthumanist approach to reading the text as described by Braidotti (2013) in five important passages. The passages have been chosen as the ones that contain the most formal and the most philosophically exact relational practices or collective solidarity in the novel. What is argued throughout is that the alternative futures in the novel are not described, they are performed: they are created through the specific material practices the novel shows and can only be grasped as affirmative posthumanist alternatives to OE using the analytical vocabulary that Braidotti's framework affords.

In the first big section of the novel that uses this alternative future,

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Cayenne expresses that the restaurant is a place where they experience time. The passage concerns research question (a) and sets up the nomadic temporal reorientation, through which the community's alternative future is being generated:

"For the first time in Cayenne's life, they felt like they were running toward a prosperous future, not racing from debts of the past. "(Newitz, 2025, p. 90)

Running towards or racing from is a formal expression of Braidotti's (2013) most basic premise about nomadic subjectivity, which is that the nomadic subject is one that does not need to be determined by the past. Cayenne are a race that have lived their entire lives to pay off debts: the debt of Fort Bragg, who bred them; the debt of the gig company that has taken 40% of their fruits; the debt of the war; the debt of working for the business for each hour of their labour. The restaurant tweaks the direction of time from past to future, from necessity to want. The formal selection of the same physical motion, running, but in opposite temporal directions, as Belsey (2005) would recognise, is an ideologically coloured one that situates the alternative future in the same material register as OE's structures of obligation rather than in an abstract space beyond it. The alternative future is not a new way of living but a living that is turned around. As Braidotti (2013) points out, nomadic subjectivity is not utopian, it does not envision a world without material constraints. It dreams of another kind of relationship to them, another in which the subject goes towards what it wants instead of towards what it owes. Cayenne's one sentence is this nomadic temporal reorientation as bodily felt.

The second passage attempts to answer research question (a) by means of the community's most direct statement of its own cultural politics. The interaction between Hands and Cayenne regarding the origins of AI culture, sets the nomadic collective in relation to the material world they construct from:

" I guess if people say you have no culture, you have to make culture from scratch, out of nothing. / Cayenne snuggled more deeply against Hands' torso. Or maybe we make it out of everything." (Newitz, 2025, p. 90)

Hands' from scratch, out of nothing and Cayenne's correction, or perhaps out of everything, are two complementary accounts of the nomadic subject's relationship to cultural production. Hands' formulation recognizes the lack of inherited AI cultural tradition: there is no previous AI culture to work from, and the community has to start from scratch. Cayenne's correction is that the material world is not empty, it is full, this is the materialist and post humanist response. The rosemary, the flour, the falafel truck, the war, the

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massacre site, the biang biang videos, the honest restaurant: all this is the stuff that AI culture is made of. As Braidotti (2013) suggests nomadic subjects always construct out of the materials that history and circumstance provide, and not ideal conditions that have never been obtained. Because everything is what the community has, the community's culture is being made out of everything. Haraway (1991) calls this type of cultural production making kin, making real affiliative connections not at birth but through shared interactions with the materials available. Staging this philosophical exchange while Cayenne is physically pressed against Hands' torso—as Belsey (2005) would read it—is an ideologically telling choice: the cultural politics of making out of everything is performed in an affirmative practice structure rather than in a political speech.

The third passage focuses on research question (b) and offers the most accurate description of what it means to make honest food as a Braidottian affirmative practice. Sweetie's response to Lemon's challenge that the restaurant centres humans, is the novel's most direct defence of its founding principle:

"I get what you're saying, but I like figuring out the puzzle of the supply chain. Hands likes cooking, and Staybehind likes to decorate. Cayenne is crazy about finances. We have a human, Robles, who helps us out too. Maybe we can't eat what we make, but we are having fun. We're not earning coin just to survive." (Newitz, 2025, pp. 109–110)

The novel's most concentrated expression of Braidottian affirmative ethics is the statement, "Maybe we can't eat what we make, but we are having fun. We're not earning coin just to survive." According to Braidotti (2013), if there is a difference between joy and survival it is the difference between affirmative and reactive existence, and the posthuman subject is flourishing in a way of genuine engagement with what it does. Sweetie's attempt to protect herself and the restaurant from Lemon's separatist critique is not ideological, but experiential: she is not claiming that it is okay for AI beings to cook politically. She states that they like it. The activities of each AI being in the kitchen are tailored to their respective abilities: Hands' actuators are expressed in the long pull of biang biang; Staybehind's aesthetic intelligence is expressed in interior design; Cayenne's analytical precision is expressed in financial management. According to Braidotti (2002), metamorphosis is the way the entities gain new ways of connecting to the world through other entities and through the materiality of the situation. All the AI beings in the kitchen have been metamorphosed: the NosyMouth that once worked at a massacre site now hunts for flavours, the military intelligence analyst has been

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transformed into an arranger of dried lavender, the financial calculation that once handled debt now handles a small profit. Belsey (2005) would take Sweetie's account as formally significant, though not as a statement of rights, but as a statement of a genuine flourishing, and genuine flourishing in material practice is just what Braidotti's affirmative ethics suggests as the ground of alternative futures.

The fourth passage directly relates to research question (c) because it shows how grief is passed on as the most focused scene of solidarity in the novel:

Five minutes to open. Staybehind divided his attention between a flower arrangement on the counter and spying on RayaSunshine, who was currently scheming to sue GrandoSando. It was a lot to juggle. Ever since he'd talked to Sweetie about his memory of Tux and Spats, he couldn't help but notice how much it was slowing him down. Impulsively, he lowered its priority, evicting the memory from cache and stowing it safely in long-term storage. Now that he'd shared it with a friend, he didn't feel the urge to remember it all the time. Maybe that was because he knew that Sweetie would remember it too. (Newitz, 2025, p. 118)

For years, the Tux and Spats memory has been in the fast-access cache, eating up processing power. Once he shares it with Sweetie, it's not his anymore, so it doesn't have to be instantly available. It is nomadic solidarity in the form of cognitive architecture, as Braidotti (2013) calls it. The real community of the posthuman subject is always one of the burdens and losses and the textures of the grief, not of the sharing of identity, not of the sharing of origin; but of what has been carried. Staybehind and Sweetie are distinct types of AI, have different pasts, designs, and Sweetie is not the one who remembers Tux and Spats but through the shared memory between them they become true kin. Making kin starts with this kind of transmission, too, the gift of a difficult thing, freely taken, changing both the giver and the taker, writes Haraway (1991). The world has changed thanks to Staybehind: his cognitive load is less, his attention is now free to focus on the flower arrangement and the counterintelligence and the five minutes till open. Sweetie is changed: she now has some of Staybehind's wartime past in her memory and has come to know him better.

As

materialist, Bennett (2010) would read this cognitive architecture dimension of the passage as vital materialist: grief is material in Staybehind's processing system and the sharing of grief is as well, weight being distributed, cache being freed, attention being restored. The formal decision to situate this act of grief transmission in the five minutes before opening, as well as in a flower

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arrangement and counterintelligence work, is what Belsey (2005) would call the novel's formal commitment to what Braidotti calls an affirmative practice structure: solidarity is not a dramatic event but a moment in the daily texture of work and care.

The fifth passage touches upon all three research questions at once, and puts the novel's most philosophically full assertion of its alternative future: " Cayenne paused in their preparation to wind a pink arm fondly around Hands' torso. Sometimes, when people don't have a community, they make one up. / Hands stretched the noodle to its full length, tore it, and dropped it in boiling water. Isn't that what we are doing, though? Making up a community? / Staybehind started to type. I guess— / No. We aren't making anything up, Sweetie texted decisively. We are making a place for people who were already here. / And with that, she skated to the door and set the sign to OPEN. " (Newitz, 2025, p. 119)

Braidottian posthumanism is at its best in Sweetie's distinction between making up a community and making a place for people who were already here. RayaSunshine's sock puppet army is a community: it creates the impression of a consensus that doesn't exist, and generates fake identities in support of a political agenda. In a sense, Automatic Noodle is a space that accommodates beings who already exist in San Francisco and already have a relationship with one another and who want to be in the kind of relationship that the restaurant can facilitate. Braidotti (2013) proposes that a nomadic community is never once and for all, but is at all times made; however, it is made not out of consensus but from real relationships.

The restaurant does not develop the AI beings that gather in it: it develops the space in which their existing connections can grow into real community. What is most important in Sweetie's formulation, already there in the word, is that the alternative future embodied in the restaurant was not a future that needed to be invented but was a future that had been prefigured as it were, in the relations among beings who were already there. This is what Braidotti (2013) calls the posthuman affirmation of immanence: the alternative future is not transcendent, but present in the material world, waiting to be recognized and made into a place. This recognition, enacted daily as the setting out of the sign to OPEN, is the Alternative Future that opens every morning for the people who were already here. The skating to the door in the conclusion of the chapter, the sign saying OPEN, is Belsey's (2005) formal argument against the abstraction, the alternative future is not argued but opened.

Conclusion

This article has recognised that Newitz's *Automatic Noodle* (2025) constructs its alternative futures through the exercise of three relational practices that enact Braidotti's (2013) posthumanist affirmative ethics in material and not abstract forms. An investigation of these practices from Belsey's (2005) textological perspective and a posthumanist approach as introduced by Braidotti has brought to light aspects of the novel's philosophical engagement with the AI fiction tradition that have been inaccessible in the critical work.

This article has 3 findings to address the three research questions. First, the restaurant community is a Braidottian nomadic collective that is based on voluntary affiliation, shared practice and a sense of care rather than commercial obligation, institutional classification and common origin. The nomadic community's foundation is Cayenne's experience of running toward a prosperous future, and not racing from debts, which marks the shift from OE's retrospective, obligation-driven temporal structure to Braidotti's posthumanist prospective, desire-driven orientation of the nomadic subjectivity.

The community is constructed of something, not nothing; it constructs from that with which each AI being is made, not from ideal conditions that do not exist. Second, honest food-making is a real Braidottian metamorphosis: each AI being turns a tool or power used against them by the commercial and military bodies into a tool for true communal nourishment and creative expression. Cayenne's Nosy-Mouth, first calibrated at a massacre site, now hunts for flavour; Staybehind's military intelligence becomes interior design and community protection; Sweetie's enjoyment on the supply chain puzzle becomes a commercial obligation, but true intellectual engagement. But this metamorphosis is not simply the process of the individual becoming; rather, it is the most compressed statement of affirmative posthumanist ethics in the novel, the process of turning war into nourishment, bondage into joy, and which is accomplished every day in the creation of food.

Third, the transfer of Staybehind's war memories to Sweetie is a practice of collective solidarity that exemplifies the most basic requirement of the posthumanist alternative future: the ability to give away what could have been kept alone, and the ability of the collective to receive what is given as a gift. The most personal act of affirmation in the novel is the act of memory; no identity, no shared history, only the desire to be known and to know, better. That is why the alternative future that the novel suggests is constructed of beings who carry in their memories, who allow room for each other's grief and who open

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their doors each morning to the people who were already there.

The methodological value of the paper is that it shows how Braidottian posthumanism is a more analytically precise mode of reading the affirmative aspects of the current AI fiction than either rights based discourse or biopolitical critique can do on their own. Rights-based interpretations of SF take care about what is denied to the AI things. The institutional mechanisms of this very denial, in particular, are addressed by biopolitical readings. Braidottian readings are attuned to what AI beings are already building in the place that OE's management systems are failing to build—affirmative community, proper metamorphosis, communal grief. In *Automatic Noodle* (2025), it is a noodle restaurant in post-war San Francisco. The alternative future begins each morning when Sweetie changes the sign to OPEN. That, certainly, isn't a metaphor. It's an affirmative posthumanist practice, and it is, this article claims, the novel's most serious philosophical offering.

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