

Figure 1. Lisa Mayes, *Codeswitcher* (2023), Photograph of the front entrance of the exhibition.

CodesWitcher

by

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A thesis submitted

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Faculty of Arts in the Department of Art and Design, University of Alberta amiskwacîwâskahikan or Edmonton, Alberta Treaty 6 Territory

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(Living) Land Acknowledgement

The development of *CodesWitcher* recognizes The First Peoples on all the lands my ancestors settled on, those who live with us now, and the seven generations to come. Openhearted, I turned towards the archives created in the colonial and post-colonial eras, with a lens created from the spirit of truth and reconciliation. In doing so, I put into action an ongoing commitment to articulate truth, justice, memory, reparation, and recognition within my interactions with all First Peoples' land. This resulted in crafting and rendering all objects and materials presented in this exhibition with their rightful names and the extended time to shift my gaze as knowing whose land I was on.

The content for *CodesWitcher* was created on and involved four territories across Turtle Island, Canada. The creation and display occurred on Treaty 6 territory, the traditional lands of First Nations and Métis people. My familial archives were retrieved from the Ktaqmkuk (Newfoundland) island, the unceded, traditional territory and ancestral homeland of the Beothuk and the Mi'kmaq. Epekwitk (Prince Edward Island) is the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People and finally, "Kisiskatchewanisipi" (Saskatchewan), Thunderchild First Nation, Treaty 6 Territory.

Through the ongoing care of reconnecting to my Muscogee Creek Heritage intersecting with African American and Scottish familial cords, I engaged with learning about ways of speaking, hearing, and knowing by retrieving my ancestors' mother tongues.

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From the onset of this project, I was still determining the paths and connections ahead of me. The only certainty was knowing I would only have accomplished this thesis with many individuals' care, compassion, and assistance.

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I dedicate this work to my parents, maternal and paternal grandmothers Lillian Mayes (nee Layfayette), Margaret Bagogle (nee MacDonald), and cousin Jack Wilson (nee Martineau). Thank you for believing in me.

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Introduction — An Artist Statement

CodesWitcher speaks about the experience of being a descendant of mixed heritage who lives in Canada. With an autoethnographic research-creation lens, I use the languages of painting, virtual reality and sculptural installation to explore my identity within a black body embodied at the intersectionality of Acadian, African American, Muscogee Creek, Irish and Scottish heritage. Set as an act of reclamation, I form a conceptual construction of my identity through interrogating colonial and postcolonial diasporic personal archives. These archives center around narratives of forced migration and displacement from Africa and Europe to North America and include ancestors enslaved in transatlantic slavery, indentured and displaced through Highland Clearances, as well as a few who chose their migrations.

The foundational work of *CodesWitcher* comprised site-specific research, theoretical research, artist residencies, and intense language lessons across Canada, Ireland, France, Scotland and the United States. Each of these engagements allowed for the plot of conceptual maps that guided me toward retrieving archival footage and documentation, confirming my ancestral lineages. Stuart Hall's (1932-2014) essay, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* and sociologist W.E.B Du Bois's term "double consciousness" from *The Souls of Black Folk* provided a theoretical structure. The combination of the research and literature allowed me as a cultural worker to present artwork encoded with cultural signifiers and modes of "code-switching." These modalities of visual and written languages generated different entryways to decode intersectional culture.

Emerging from this foundational work is the intentionality of *CodesWitcher*, an exhibition of a moving/still/audio representation of the past and present encoded with different conceptual maps of culture to allow participants to encounter representation intersectionality within a third space. In *CodesWitcher*, the viewer's body is transported into the virtual space of my motherland(s). At the same time, mother and daughter portraits speak of the inheritance of hybrid consciousnesses arriving from the near past. Anchoring the space are folkloric sculptures harkening to Irish and African-American myths. Simultaneously, the landscapes of my homelands offer an imagined ancestor's perspective.

Purpose

CodesWitcher acknowledges the void of visual representation in art and art history of people who culturally exist within the intersections of diasporas. *CodesWitcher* recognizes the need to name and understand what I experienced as a child in my maternal and paternal grandparents' culturally different homes. I am conscious and motivated by other individuals born at diasporic intersections who are also grappling to form a self-actualized identity while constantly faced with normative narratives that mixed European ancestry is pure; assimilation is the gateway to acceptance. Within Canada's own census definition of a mixed union, "one spouse or partner belongs to a visible minority group and the other does not, as well as a couple in which the two spouses or partners belong to different visible minority groups."

As a child, I visited my maternal and paternal grandparents' kitchens. I tasted culturally specific food and sat in rooms that echoed with accents from southern states and eastern Canada. The objects, food and sounds around me signified a connection to my grandparents' culture and my ancestral heritage. From observing my grandparents' homes and our subsequent family discussions, I emerged to look at the abyss of narratives of forced migrations. When I started my

MFA, I committed to interrogating my ancestors' history and my children's future. Through conversations with my family, DNA analysis with Ancestry.com and family archival research, I quickly found my ancestral heritage as being linked explicitly to French Colonization in 1532, Acadians' settlement, The Plantations in Ireland (1532-1653) and the Great Famine (1830-1944), the Highland Clearances (1745-1886), the Trail of Tears (1832-1842) and the Atlantic Slave trade. No longer in an abyss, I achieved what is nearly impossible for many: the position and opportunity during my MFA studies to reconceptualize myself within my inherited history. The result of this studio-based reconceptualization is an exhibition of artworks, which includes a self-portrait of myself caught in the reflection of a Scottish archive and paintings of my 'homeland' landscapes on brown paper creased by colonial map folds. Also in the exhibition are media works such as a virtual reality experience that places the user onto a dizzying fairground carousel surrounded by 360 videos from my ancestral homelands and a video of my children masked and caught in multiple blurred layers of our shared ancestral inheritance.

A/R/Tography & Archival Research

To support the creation of visual and sound documentation for this project, I utilized the A/R/Tography (Art Research Tography) methodology. A/R/Tography is a walking, land-based method of inquiry and documentation to embody the act of reclaiming my ancestry. As part of my MFA thesis research, I initiated a vigorous walking practice of three to six hours daily to visit key locations relating to my ancestral heritage in Ireland, Scotland and France. This included visits to parishes, archives, libraries and places located through oral history and genealogical sites.

On each self-directed walk, my sensory interaction with each location in my black or mixed race presenting the body with people, I became aware of my default need to search for non-verbal responses of others to see if they were comfortable or uncomfortable with my presence. With A/R/Tography, the awareness of this feeling as it was happening allowed me to shift my engagement to a more reflexive contemplation. I listened deeply to the sounds of buildings, the land, the wind, cars, animals, accents, echoes, and things I could not see. Within the contemplative characteristic of A/R/Tography sensory interaction with land and people, I slowed down my thoughts. I physically grounded myself in the sites where my ancestors lived and was compassionate and aware of where cultural ruptures occurred before and after forced migrations.

Using A/R/Tography in my research allowed me to obtain confirmation of my heritage and make ethnographical connections that deepened my commitment to the *CodesWitcher* project. In addition to visiting multiple archives, I collected visual documentation —photographs, 360 videos, and sound recordings later used to create the artworks in *CodesWitcher*. What became apparent to me during this period of intense archival and visual research, however, was that a critical cultural component was still missing, an exclusion formed by colonialism: the languages of my ancestors.

Learning the Language of My Ancestors

In *The Irish Language and Beauty* Ted talk by Dónall Ó Héalaí, he tells an Irish mythological story of Canannáin and the Irish god of speech and language, Ogma. The story alludes to how the soul connects to land and language (Ó Héalaí 1:05). The story tells of a local tribe who must protect a treasure. They begin the journey away from their tribal lands, happy, sharing stories of songs of their ancestors. As the distance grew from their tribal lands, they slowly moved away from being happy and productive. As time passed, they fell into a trance and withdrew from their roles and responsibilities on the ship. When their elder Ogma awoke from

his trance, the elder explained to their employer that the people had moved so fast and far from their homeland that they must sit down and wait for their souls to catch up.

Ogma's answer to how the soul and land are connected resonated with my desire to embody the languages of my ancestors before and after my travels to Ireland, Scotland and France. I committed to acquiring the Irish Gaeilge and Muscogee Creek languages throughout my MFA degree. For Gaeilge, I enrolled and completed the highest Irish-level class at the University of Alberta. Following my studies, I was awarded entrance through the University of Galway to an immersive language course in Gaelige (Ireland) in the summer of 2023 at the Gaeltacht in Connemara. To learn Muscogee Creek, in 2021, I joined the Freedmen Creek—an emancipated slave community, online to learn Muscogee Creek language lessons in Oklahoma. Irish—Gaeilge and Muscogee Creek were preempted by my acquisition of French in an immersive French language course in 2013.

Repairing connections to distant ancestors' tribal languages shows up as subtle interventions in the *CodesWitcher* exhibition. For example, a landscape painting of Old Ross, Ireland, is titled in Gaeilge language first, *Ros Mhic Thriaúi*, Éire, followed by the English title. Another example is the sound installation *Language Lessons*, which includes a compilation of recordings of myself speaking in French, Gaeilge and Muscogee Creek.

"Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practice then represents, we should think, instead of identity as 'production', which is never complete, always in the process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity,' lays claim."

STUART HALL ~ Cultural Identity and Diaspora

Aesthetics and Foundational Theory:

The aesthetic framework and foundational theory of *CodesWitcher* have been derived from a mélange of theoretical and archival research. Literature from W.E.B Du Bois's term "double consciousness" from *The Souls of Black Folk* and cultural theorist Stuart Hall's terms 'conceptual maps', 'encoding' and 'decoding' within his essay *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, provided a theoretical structure for creating a 'meaningful' discourse on representing the cultural intersections.

First, the underpinning theoretical perspective of *CodesWitcher* is Du Bois's socio-historic term "double consciousness," which situates my trepidation of presenting work that shifts towards whiteness from my defaulted classified black body. While easing the self-awareness of my positionality as the cultural maker moving through a performative "double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals." (Du Bois's, 1903)

From Stuart Hall's writings, I drew on linear connections between Hall's 'conceptual maps' and my metaphorical use of geographical maps. The 'conceptual map' is the overseer of the work, described as a shared culture-specific map of concepts that allow for meaning and making sense to be established through classifications and organizing the world (Hall, 1980). It grounds the work while opening up various modalities of painting and intermedia processes to express and present a site for 'decoding' the visual complexity of bicultural and multi-hyphenated cultural identities within their knowledge frameworks (Hall, 1980).



Figure 2. As illustrated in Stuart Hall's "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse. 1980, p. 54

Demonstrating how the conceptual map and 'encoding' are transmitted throughout the exhibition is my active intervention in reappropriating geographical maps. The use of brown parcel paper—found and rescued from various purchases replaces canvas and behaves like renditions of maps. Taking on maplike dimensions and holding maplike folds creased into paper. The specificity of maps implies authority and knowledge; maps inherit a set of hierarchical systems and beliefs.



Figure 3. Lisa Mayes, Irish Black: Installation_1 (2023), Interior of FAB Gallery.

Codes Witcher

The Exhibition

Titles of Land_ The Map Folds,

The first installation of *CodesWitcher*, *Titles of Land* _ *The Map Folds*, is a series of six ancestral landscapes painted laboriously with acrylic glazes onto brown parcel paper pressed with folds to hold the memory of colonial maps. *Titles of Land* _ *The Map Folds* returns to idyllic homelands to reclaim heritage sites of the Irish rolling hills, the Scottish highlands, plantations in Georgia, and Acadian settlements through an imagined ancestor's perspective.

The images of landscapes retrieved from the internet during the preparatory stages of research determined locations to conduct A/R/Tography fieldwork and archival research. The aesthetic of the paintings is an acquired skin-like appearance due to the glazing technique on the brown paper —gathered from Amazon and Ikea packaging during lockdown. Conceptually, the paintings allude to light brown skin; the brown paper bag test references colourism and the

European hierarchies generated from the Jim Crow era of the one-drop rule and passing white (Jordan, 2014).

Connections between the painting and the specificity of geographical location are grounded by the titles written on wooden plaques beside each painting. The titles have been written on a plastic Dymo strip in both the native language and English, such as 'Epekwitk' for Tignish, Prince Edward Island and Contae Thiobraid Árann, Éire for the County of Tipperary Ireland.



Figure 4. Lisa Mayes, *Titles of Land* _ *The Map Folds* (2023): Interior of FAB Gallery, Acrylic on Paper: Various Dimensions.



Figure 5. Lisa Mayes, '*Epekwitk' Titles of Land* _ *The Map Folds* (2023), Acrylic on Paper, Wooden Plaque. Figure 6. Lisa Mayes, *Titles of Land* _ *The Map Folds* (2023) Acrylic on Paper, Various dimensions.



Figure 7. Lisa Mayes, aerial view of Près de l'eau/ By the Water Pavilion (2023), virtual reality view.

Carousel

Carousel is a virtual reality (VR) artwork divided into three 'pavilions' that users are transported to via a carousel portal. Each of the three pavilions, the *Irish Black Pavilion*, *Près de l'eau/ By the Water Pavilion, and The Highlands Pavilions*, contains cultural heritage and allows participants' bodies to experience specific geographical locations of my ancestors.

When users enter the VR artwork, they are automatically perched upon the carousel inside the 'Irish Black Pavilion.' From the carousel that spins in the virtual world, they see large screens facing the carousel with Irish traditional dance choreographed to Georgia Slave Shout Songs. Opposite to it is an African American Contemporary dance choreographed to my late father-in-law's Irish Folk music. Users can dismount from the carousel and explore the carousel's surroundings in the 'Irish Black Pavilion,' which includes globes that users can enter. Inside the globes are various video locations of Ireland. The first globe contains footage from New Ross

JFK Arboretum, the second is Slievecoiltia Commons, and the third is New Ross. These are locations connected to where my ancestors lived and battled the British during the Wexford Rebellion. Virtually adjacent to *'Irish Black Pavilion'* is *'Près de l'eau/ By the Water Pavilion,* ' a watery environment where a dock surrounds the carousel, and three screens have films of children dressed up in mummers' clothing celebrating Acadian Mid Lent. Within the 360 globes, viewers are transported into footage captured in Saint Servan, beside St.Malo in France, where the British sent Acadian ancestors during the Great Expulsion. Finally, *The Highlands Pavilion's* final entry space has hill terrain and three globes, Nairn, Borlum, and Inverness, for users to enter and be immersed in.



Figure 8. Lisa Mayes, carousel view of Irish Black Pavilion (2023), virtual reality view.



Figure 9. Lisa Mayes, carousel view of *Près de l'eau/ By the Water Pavilion* (2023), virtual reality view. Figure 10. Lisa Mayes, carousel view of *The Highlands Pavilion* (2023), virtual reality view.



The Ghanaian Boat

The Ghanaian Boat is a large-scale graphite drawing of a Ghanaian fishing boat placed on layers of beige architectural paper washed over with Prussian blue oil paint. It connects three themes of protection through "Native survivance" (Vizenor, 2009) through the representation of my DNA linkage to Ghana, the reclamation of my Irish intersectionality, and Prussian Blue's history. "Native survivance" is the use of a narrative of native presence to create "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent." (Vizenor, 2009) The presence of the Ghanaian fishing boat represents a generative continuation of the remembrance of my ancestors' middle passage of the Atlantic slave trade. At the same time, its aesthetic beauty diverts the representation of trauma and settles as a remembrance of voyage and prosperity. Hidden in its details is an Irish folkloric Brigid's Cross, named after its creator, Saint Brigid of Kildare, Ireland's patron Saint, still practiced today as a ritual of protection by placing the Brigid's crosses homes.

Finally, Prussian blue paint signifies its relationship to predicting storms at sea with the cyanometer, a visual tool used to measure sky moisture against the entire tonal spectrum of Prussian, which was held up to the sky to predict the weather on voyages.

Figure 11. Cyanometer from the collection of the Musée d'histoire des sciences de la Ville de Genève.



Figure 12. Lisa Mayes, *The Ghanaian Boat* (2023), FAB Gallery Interior, Prussian Blue Oil Graphite on Beige Architects paper, Size 88.58 x 78.74 inches.

Top: Figure 13. Caspar David Friedrich - *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog.*

Below: Figure 14. Lisa Mayes, *An Coinín agus na léarscáileanna _The Rabbit and Maps (*2023) & *Is bratach na Breataine /*Iss brot-okh na Brat tin/(2023), Interior FAB Gallery.





An Coinín agus na léarscáileanna (The Rabbit and Maps)

The installation *An Coinín agus na léarscáileanna (The Rabbit and Maps)* is a wooden rabbit covered in soot perched upon a metal coil. The charred rabbit looks up towards four cloud paintings—another iteration of geographical maps painted on brown parcel paper.

To enhance the reading of this work, a legend is provided to the viewers to connect the name of the folds creased onto paper: 1) French Cross, 2) Z-Fold, 3) Map Fold, and 4) Miura Fold. This interaction of 'conceptual maps' was generated from the discovery of England's use of provincial and plantation maps. However, like most of the work in my thesis exhibition, it is code-switching between different cultural references.

One such reference is the harkening of German Romanticism artist Caspar David Friedrich *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, a painting made in 1818 (fig 13). The implication is that the rabbit is the wanderer under the sky; another is a self-conscious reflection of African-American Folklore, the Brer Rabbit. The Brer rabbit is a trickster figure originating in African folklore and transmitted by enslaved Africans to the New World, where it acquired attributes of similar native American tricksters.

Is bratach na Breataine /Iss brot-okh na Brat tin/

The placement of the four maps in *An Coinín agus na léarscáileanna* reveals the French Cross. Beside the *An Coinín agus na léarscáileanna* are two found British flags hanging (fig 14, right side), titled with only the Gaeilge translation, *Is bratach na Breataine* /Iss brot-okh na Brat tin/. The French Cross and *Is bratach na Breataine* are the two political actors whose actions have forged my cultural heritage.

Irish Black: Installation Includes: Father's Daughter and Mother's Daughter, Capall & Imbolc/'in the belly,'

The installation *Irish Black* is an installation of two sculptures and two paintings titled *Father's Daughter and Mother's Daughter*. These almost identical portraits of my daughter, taken on St. Patrick's Day in 2020, are painted on masonite board covered with clear gesso to allow the rich brown undertones to emulate the trueness of her skin tone. One face is pale, and the other is richer, to account for her inheritance of a future of negotiating mixed cultural heritage and dominant Irish ancestry.

Inspired by African American artist Adrian Piper's essay *Passing for White, Passing for Black,* these are contemplative portraits that address the 'one drop rule' of racialized identity. The work speaks to the alienation experienced at times from all the cultural groups one belongs to and is encoded with a direct, yet poetic invitation to read the work with undertones of whiteface or blackface. It resonates for me as a closer depiction of the superficial projections experienced by people with a mixed cultural heritage that interferes with healthy interactions conducive to well-being. Anchoring the installation is a *Capall* (horse)-fashioned after the first Lego toy but linked to Irish folklore— believed to see and cross over into a world beyond our present reality. *Capall* inserts play and ease the installation while reinforcing my daughter's maternal and paternal Irish ancestors. The final object, *Imbolc/'in the belly,'* rests inside a museum-like case with a glass carrot perched on the branches of a tree. Enshrined in the carrot is the burnt offering of my son's placenta, created as a relic on Imbolic Day.



Figure 15. Lisa Mayes, *Irish Black: Installation_2* (2023), Interior of FAB Gallery. Figure 16. Lisa Mayes, *Irish Black: Installation_3* (2023), Interior of FAB Gallery.

Man is the only picture-making animal in the world. He alone of all the inhabitants of the earth has the capacity and passion for pictures . . . Poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture-makers, and this ability is the secret of their power and achievements: they see what ought to be by the reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction.

-Frederick Douglass



Figure 17. Lisa Mayes, Self Portrait in Scottish Archives (2023), FAB Gallery Interior, Oil on Canvas, 74 x 80.

Self Portrait in Scottish Archives

Self Portrait in Scottish Archives is a shadowy self-portrait based on a photograph I took of myself in the National Archives, Edinburgh after discovering that my paternal lineage linked me to a Scottish Creek enslaver. I am self-reflected before John Siezer's *'The Prospect of ye Town of Glasgow from ye North East.'*¹

A diversity of layers of meaning is embedded in this work, alluding to the intricate material and historical connections. This includes the central focus of the painting extruded from careful care of bringing out the brown-skin tone to annotate the painting, defying who is Scottish. Another is the painterly mimicry of the deterioration of a daguerreotype, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's invention in 1839. The daguerreotype as a medium shifted the paradigm of the truthful depiction of the enslaved and freed blacks and offered freedom from the ideological and material consequences of the dehumanizing" depictions that came before photography, which aided in the emancipation of my family who was enslaved (Raiford, 2011).

¹ Image Glasgow - 'The Prospect of ye Town of Glasgow from ye North East'from *Theatrum Scotiae* by John Slezer, 1693. John Slezer, Chief Engineer for Scotalnd and 'Surveyor of his Majesties Stores and Magazines' under James II, who led the Royal African Company to trade in slaves and African Goods. Slezer first visited Scotland in 1669 and then in 1671 moved to Scotland, with secured military posts.



Figure 18. Lisa Mayes, Mi'Carême (2023) Installation (film, sculpture, painting), Interior of FAB Gallery.

Mi'Carême

Mi'Carême is the exhibition's final work and combines video projection, sculpture, painting and sound installation. They were inspired by the apparition-like photograph found of children celebrating an Acadian tradition of Mi'Carême (Mid-Lent) blended with the Irish tradition of Mummers in Tignish, Prince Edward Island. The film projected onto the back wall has two children dressed in the same clothing as the children in the painting on the side wall. The children roam around as the motifs of horses and rabbits move across the picture plane. On the opposite wall are the two masks worn by the children in the video resting on wooden blocks.

Language Lessons

Harkening back to Hall's description of "identity as 'production,' which is never complete, always in the process," the exhibition's final piece is *Language Lessons* (Hall, 2012). *Language Lessons* rests conceptually as the linguistic definition of code-switching–when a speaker alternates between two or more languages while definitively marking a mid-process of production of a culture in action.

Four minutes and a half in duration, the sound installation works in dialogue with the *Mi'Carême* installation. It is played by speakers placed in front of the installation, behind the seating for the viewer. The recording begins with reading a great-grandfather's testimony from the historical Dawes Roll, 1898-1914 document— a list of individuals accepted as eligible for tribal membership in the "Five Civilized Tribes": Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles. I then read an account of lineage from my ancestor, John. G. McIntosh was sworn into the Choctaw Tribe and challenged about the nation he belonged to. I break free from the script and continue weaving in short recordings of my beginner's conversational lessons in Mvskoke Creek, French and Gaeilge.

Reflection,

"Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects."

– Kimberlé Crenshaw

With *CodesWitcher*, my purpose as an artist and MFA student at the University of Alberta in Edmonton is to offer the Canadian art archives another entry into cultural intersectionality and narratives of belonging. I have aimed to access the complicated dynamics of relationships between the social construct of race, tease out the nuances in culture and reclaim a lost cultural linkage to ancestral heritage.

Through the generous modalities of research, literature, and visual and written languages combined, *CodesWitcher*, I hope, permits the viewer to decode objects with collective meaning and interpret them with culturally responsive sensitivity to understand the complexity of "code-switching" meaning-making that, in turn, facilitate a better understanding of the intersectional cultural and conceptual maps that enfold me and others living within black or intersectional cultural bodies.

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