

# Recounting coup as the recirculation of Indigenous vitality: A narrative alternative to historical trauma

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## Abstract

Contemporary American Indians suffer from disproportionately high degrees of psychiatric distress. Mental health researchers and professionals, as well as American Indian community members, have consistently associated these disproportionate rates of distress with Indigenous historical experiences of European and Euro-American colonization. This emphasis on the impact of colonization and associated historical consciousness within tribal communities has occasioned increasingly widespread professional consideration of *historical trauma* among Indigenous peoples. In contrast to personal experiences of a traumatic nature, the discourse of Indigenous historical trauma (IHT) wedes the concepts of “historical oppression” and “psychological trauma” to explain community-wide risk for adverse mental health outcomes originating from the depredations of past colonial subjugation through intergenerational transmission of vulnerability and risk. Long before the emergence of accounts of IHT, however, many American Indian communities prized a markedly different form of narrative: the coup tale. By way of illustration, I explore various historical functions of this speech genre by focusing on *Aaniiih*-Gros Ventre war narratives, including their role in conveying vitality or life. By virtue of their recognition and celebration of agency, mastery, and vitality, *Aaniiih* war stories functioned as the discursive antithesis of IHT. Through comparative consideration of the coup tale and the trauma narrative, I propose an alternative framework for cultivating Indigenous community “survivance” rather than vulnerability based on these divergent discursive practices.

## Keywords

Coup tales, historical trauma, Indigenous mental health, self-narratives, speech genres, resilient vitality

In his most widely cited, first-authored scientific article, developmental psychologist Michael Chandler (along with co-investigator Chris Lalonde) explored linkages between adolescent identity, cultural continuity, and recorded suicides for 29 First Nations communities in British Columbia (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). They discovered that over half of the First Nations polities in their study exhibited no adolescent suicides within a 5-year timeframe, while other bands recorded suicides at hundreds of times the prevalence rate for Canada in general. Thus, prevalence rates for suicide among Indigenous adolescents were shown to conceal terrific variation. Beyond this, however, Chandler and Lalonde identified six First Nations community characteristics that were inversely associated with adolescent suicide: prosecution of land claims, exercise of self-government, control of education, co-ordination of police and fire services, administration of health services, and operation of cultural facilities. Specifically, the greater the number of these characteristics that were true for a given community, the lower the prevalence rate was for adolescent suicide.

Chandler and Lalonde (1998) interpreted these six community characteristics as indicators of First Nations cultural continuity, linked this construct to the development of personal continuity among First Nations adolescents, and concluded that “a better understanding of the problem of suicide in First Nations communities can only be had by focusing attention on the interface between personal and cultural change” (p. 216). They underscored the need in future research “to search out recurrent stories drawn from within the oral tradition of the First Nations to replace the Eurocentric narratives

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currently in use” (p. 216). In this article, I endeavor to advance this agenda through explication of the functions of one genre of “stories drawn from within the oral tradition”—namely, American Indian “coup tales”—for purposes of overcoming the limitations of the trauma narrative as the ascendant conceptual template for explaining American Indian health inequities (such as adolescent suicide). Specifically, in contrast to the widespread discourse of Indigenous historical trauma (IHT), a modernized form of the coup tale promises to center Indigenous resilience and vitality at the interface of personal and cultural change for American Indian communities.

## Opening

In an autobiographical work, the progressive Lakota writer and activist Luther Standing Bear (1868–1939) recounted a memorable experience from when he was “about nine years of age” (Standing Bear, 2006, p. 77). Some Lakota men who were then gathered at Spotted Tail Agency in what is now South Dakota decided to set out on a war expedition against the Poncas. Standing Bear’s father brought him along, and prior to the planned engagement shared his expectations for his son’s involvement in the coming conflict:

Son, I wanted you to come with me, because I wanted you to do something of great bravery or get killed on the battlefield. I have made my war-bonnet to fit over your head. I will like to see you wear this, and ride your race horse into the enemy’s camp. You will not carry anything but a long stick in your hand.... Early in the morning someone will come out of the lodge. Then I will let you go after that person. Touch this man with your stick, then ride through the camp as fast as your horse can run. I will be behind you, and, if you pass through without any harm, you will be the youngest man that has ever done such a thing, and I will be proud of you. But if the enemy is ready to shoot you (as they nearly always are) and you fall in their midst, keep your courage. That is the way I want you to die. (Standing Bear, 2006, pp. 76–77)

This exhortation was understandably alarming to young Standing Bear (2006): “This made my heart beat so loud I could hear it, and the tears came into my eyes; but I was willing to do my father’s bidding, as I wanted so much to please him” (p. 76). Standing Bear—whose Lakota name was *Ota Kte*, meaning Plenty Kill—never got the chance to “count coup” (i.e., strike, wound, or kill an enemy at close proximity during battle) against the Poncas, as the war party was unexpectedly summoned home. But the disappointment and shame with which he reacted to this turn of events indicates the great significance of counting coup for Lakotas prior to their confinement to reservations in the late 19th century.

The coercive shift to reservation life was not easy for the Lakotas or other American Indian peoples. In fact, many of these settings are beset even today by formidable health inequities, including disparities in conditions of special interest to the mental health professions such as addiction, trauma, and suicide (Gone & Trimble, 2012). Cultural psychiatry augments this interest with expansive consideration of the foundations, frames, contexts, and constituents of mind and mentality that give rise to disordered experience in terms that Chandler and Lalonde (1998) identified, including identity, culture, resilience, and well-being. For Indigenous communities, such consideration requires engagement with the shared underpinnings of mind and mentality from both traditional and modern modes of Indigenous life. For example, it is now commonplace both in the health sciences and in Indigenous communities to formulate the disproportionately high rates of mental health problems as contemporary expressions of *historical trauma*. The modern origins of this construct stem from the formal adoption of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) by psychiatry in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). This institutional ratification of the construct of psychological trauma soon escaped its narrow, technical usage in clinical settings, however. As Fassin and Rechtman (2009) observed, trauma emerged from psychiatry to become a moral category that has since circulated globally. This category legitimates the suffering of victims for purposes that lie well beyond professional caregiving, such as adjudicating reparations, bearing witness to testimonies, or evaluating applications for international asylum. Historical trauma is one instantiation of this “empire of trauma” that, for Indigenous communities, bridges ancestral suffering and current mental health inequities by designating European colonization as the origin of contemporary disparities. This synthesis of past and present harnesses the moral power of the trauma category by valorizing the suffering of individuals, collectivizing community-wide impacts, and buttressing group claims for repair (Gone, 2014; Gone & Kirmayer, 2020).

In this article, I juxtapose both traditional and modern aspects of Indigenous mind and mentality. With respect to modern Indigenous life, I consider the rise of historical trauma, especially as this has featured in explanatory accounts of contemporary Indigenous suffering that entail “public narratives” (Mohatt et al., 2014). Certainly, various clinical approaches to the treatment of debilitating posttraumatic stress have routinely entailed the crafting of coherent trauma narratives that are theorized to reduce symptoms and improve functioning for patients. These clinical outcomes comprise an identifiable speech genre, one that generalizes in some respects to accounts of ancestral suffering that are now subsumed as instances of IHT. With respect to Indigenous traditions, I consider the Plains Indian practice of counting coup, especially as

these personal achievements ultimately featured in narrative representations as “coup tales” in pre-reservation life. Interestingly, coup tales have been recognized by literary scholars as an original form of American Indian autobiography (Brumble, 2008). As I will demonstrate with respect to historical practices surrounding the narration of war stories among my own people, the *Aaniiih*-Gros Ventres of north-central Montana, these accounts comprised a prominent and recognizable speech genre in pre-reservation times. I argue here that these two speech genres—modern historical trauma narratives and traditional coup tales—are antithetical types of self-representation insofar as the former center on human fragility, injury, and risk in the face of adversity, while the latter center on human agency, mastery, and triumph in such conditions. I conclude by asserting that a modern form of the coup tale may serve Indigenous self-determination and “survivance” (Vizenor, 1999) better than the discourse of historical trauma. In this respect, refashioning the coup tale for contemporary purposes promises to become a new exemplar in the growing literature on Indigenous resilience (Kading et al., 2015; Kirmayer et al., 2009; LaFromboise et al., 2006; Thomas et al., 2016).

### Round one: Reviewing Indigenous historical trauma

Psychological trauma as a concept and category of experience emerged in the wake of high-speed railway collisions in Great Britain during the second half of the 19th century (Young, 1995). Warfare in the 20th century provided additional contexts in which soldiers who suffered from “shell shock” and “battle fatigue” warranted clinical concern. The problems of U.S. veterans returning home from the war in Vietnam ultimately led to formal recognition of PTSD. This watershed moment institutionalized a specific form of human suffering centered on psychic injuries wrought by traumatic experiences. Psychotherapy is one longstanding means for ameliorating such suffering. Although proponents of different schools of psychotherapy theorize trauma in different ways, the idea that clinical benefit arises from elaboration or consolidation of trauma narratives by patients is widely accepted in the mental health professions. Kaminer (2006) reviewed the literature on therapeutic benefit and trauma narratives, identifying six conceptually distinct processes believed to account for recovery from post-traumatic stress: emotional catharsis, linguistic representation, habituating anxiety, empathic witnessing, explanatory meaning-making, and finding value in adversity. Although rigorous scientific investigation has not always supported the efficacy of these processes (e.g., Bedard-Gilligan et al., 2017), mental health professionals continue to practice psychotherapy that focuses on trauma narratives.

The bridge from psychological trauma and PTSD to IHT was developed by a handful of American Indian health researchers during the 1990s. Brave Heart, a Lakota social work researcher, trained clinically with psychoanalytically-oriented psychotherapists who conceived of the problems of offspring of Jewish survivors of the Shoah as historical or intergenerational trauma. Recognizing that her own people had suffered from colonization and genocide, Brave Heart imported this concept to capture the ongoing suffering of the Lakotas, who survived a massacre by the U.S. Army at Wounded Knee in 1890 (Braveheart-Jordan & DeBruyn, 1995). Concurrently, Duran and Duran (1995) developed the closely related concept of the “soul wound”—a form of intergenerational PTSD—in their widely cited book about postcolonial Indigenous psychology. Duran et al. (1998) subsequently declared these concepts to be synonymous, explaining that “historical trauma is trauma that is multigenerational and cumulative over time; it extends beyond the life span” (p. 342). Since then, Evans-Campbell (2008) and Walters et al. (2011) expanded on these ideas, adopting a public health framework that subsumes adverse historical events as social determinants of health that amplify contemporary stressors for Indigenous communities. Hartmann et al. (2019) recently summarized these theoretical developments, attributing distinct emphases by different theorists of IHT as stemming from diverse anticolonial ambitions and organizing ideas. Finally, Gone et al. (2019) reviewed 32 empirical studies that found associations between IHT and health outcomes for Indigenous peoples in the USA and Canada. From this literature IHT can be recognized as primarily a health construct promoted by Indigenous applied health researchers.

As I already noted, IHT has circulated widely throughout the global network of Indigenous communities, especially in the Western settler states of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA (the CANZUS nations). The colloquial sense in which community members adopt the term (referring broadly to post/colonial distress) can differ significantly, however, from the nuanced claims of the construct’s scholarly promoters (for examples, see Hartmann & Gone, 2014, 2016). In the academic sense, IHT is a consolidation of two familiar concepts: *historical oppression* and *psychological trauma*. Hartmann and Gone (2014) characterized the “four C’s” of IHT that distinguish it from ordinary psychological trauma, according to its proponents: IHT stems from ancestral *colonial injury* that is *collectively experienced* and *cumulatively escalating*, leading to a *cross-generationally transmitted* vulnerability to health inequities (e.g., addiction, violence, suicide) among current descendants. There are at least four valuable functions served by the construct as a health discourse. First, IHT explains the prevalence of health disparities in Indigenous communities. Second, it contextualizes these disparities within community histories of colonial

oppression. Third, it de-stigmatizes post/colonial pathologies (e.g., addiction, suicide) by reframing these away from paralyzing self-blame about one's individual deficits to shared recognition of the historical and systemic antecedents of these problems. Finally, it legitimates Indigenous therapeutic traditions (i.e., sacred and ceremonial practices) as sources of remedy and restoration that are continuous with—rather than alienated from—an Indigenous past (cf. Gone & Calf Looking, 2011, 2015).

Additionally, IHT also benefits from the same “empire of trauma” dynamics (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009) that account for the widespread circulation of trauma discourse far beyond the confines of clinical care. That is, beyond its clear functions within the health domain, IHT also operates as a moral rhetoric (Gone, 2014). Thus, invoking IHT—especially when accompanied by plaintive narratives about the devastating impact of colonial oppression on contemporary communities—seizes the moral high ground to insulate claims from skeptical interrogation or dubious critique. Moreover, as a moral rhetoric, IHT legitimates claims-making with respect to reparation and redress akin to the way a diagnosis of PTSD might bolster one's case for disability status, compensatory damages, or international asylum. Indeed, since its emergence following early British railway accidents, psychological trauma has always been associated with claims-making (Young, 1995). There is nothing wrong with making one's case for reparations, especially in the brutal context of Indigenous dispossession and impoverishment; rather, it is doing so through a discourse of psychological injury that raises concerns. In this respect, IHT stands to refashion contemporary Indigenous identity as fundamentally wounded by history and to remake Indigenous selfhood as damaged, disordered, or disabled (or, at least, vulnerable and “at risk”). On these points, I illustrate these tendencies by offering one example: an Indigenous colleague once recounted how some Indigenous students who registered for her college course in Indigenous studies about Indigenous religions complained that they could not be expected to complete their assignments because literacy and testing are “colonial” and triggered their IHT.

IHT represents a conceptual merger between historical oppression and psychological trauma. In one of my earliest scholarly investigations, I interviewed a middle-aged, monolingual English-speaking traditionalist from the Fort Belknap Indian reservation about the relationships between culture, drinking, and depression (Gone, 2007, 2008a, in press). Drawing on this interview, I explicated a prototypical discourse of distress expressed by this traditionalist that continues to resonate widely across many Indigenous communities. Specifically, in his explanatory model, Traveling-Thunder identified four historical epochs surrounding American Indian experiences of colonization, and observed that serious mental health problems such as addiction and depression are the direct result of

postcolonial anomie and disrupted ceremonial tradition. In consequence, rather than turning to “White psychiatrists” (who he characterized as attempting to “brainwash” Indigenous patients to Whiteman sensibilities), Traveling-Thunder advocated a return to sacred ritual practice that might once again recirculate life, well-being, and “good clean minds” to tribal members. Thus, what emerged from this exploration was not only an incisive critique of conventional mental health services but also a proposal for alternatives grounded in Indigenous ceremonial life. Interestingly, this discourse of distress corresponds to IHT in most respects, with a salient exception: Traveling-Thunder provided a relatively a-psychological account that never once invoked trauma. This exception, I believe, serves to illuminate other embedded commitments of IHT.

### Round two: Recovering the coup tale

Coup tales (or war narratives) were orated accounts of great deeds in battle, especially those entailing grave mortal dangers such as striking an enemy with a stick or snatching away his rifle. Coup tales were a historically prominent narrative genre in many Plains Indian communities late into the 19th century. Indeed, they persisted longest on the northern Plains where the dwindling bison herds afforded the much-celebrated equestrian lifestyle—including raiding and warfare—into the 1880s. In fact, intertribal competition for access to the remnants of the great northern bison herd fueled ongoing warfare in this region, even as the U.S. Army sought to pacify northern Plains peoples through forcible settlement on reservations. In this context, coup tales were expressive of a longstanding American Indian ethos on the northern Plains that led fathers to dream that their sons might “do something of great bravery or get killed on the battlefield” (Standing Bear, 2006, p. 76). Warfare was a pervasive reality for northern Plains Indian peoples for over a century owing to the disruptions of European incursion. This created economic incentives for access to trade with Europeans, first, in beaver pelts and, later, in bison hides. The ability for tribes to control such trade depended on power imbalances that had resulted from differential access to horses and guns. Horses were introduced by the Spanish and circulated primarily to the northern Plains from the south and west, while guns were traded by the French and English and circulated primarily to this region from the east and north (Secoy, 1992). Advantage in warfare thus depended heavily on disproportionate distributions of horses and guns. As a result, the northern Plains region was a cauldron of violence long before the arrival of U.S. military forces.

My own ancestors were especially vulnerable throughout much of this period. In her ethnohistory of the *Aaniiih*-Gros Ventres, Fowler (1987) observed that we were a less populous people caught between two larger

political and military alliances. As members of the Blackfoot confederacy until 1861, we were the easternmost group that bore the brunt of the confederacy's military encounters with the Cree-Assiniboine alliance farther to the east. The Blackfoot confederacy had better access to horses, while the Cree-Assiniboine alliance had better access to guns. This position was not sustainable for Gros Ventres, and we were pushed southward into present-day Montana by 1820. Following our subsequent rupture with the Blackfoot groups, we allied with the Crows (and later, the Assiniboines) against growing incursions from the Lakotas to the east, who sought to hunt amidst the vanishing bison herds. In sum, Gros Ventres were a beleaguered people during this era, and such pervasive existential threats allowed Fowler to document the persistence of specific and longstanding *Aaniiih* cultural ideals associated with ferocity, tenacity, and the pursuit of primacy against rival peoples. Indeed, the admiring *Aaniiih* expression "he's fierce" endured into the reservation era when widespread adoption of the English language became normative. This idiom is still captured locally today by the word *moose*, which has nothing to do with the animal but instead refers to remarkable instances of human initiative, talent, or achievement (Gone & Alcántara, 2010). Moreover, as Fowler has traced, Gros Ventre pursuit of primacy entailed adoption of a progressive adaptation strategy in reservation affairs, especially with respect to neighboring Assiniboines and intrusive Whites.

Based on anthropological inquiry conducted during the 1940s, Flannery (1953), reported that an important ambition for pre-reservation *Aaniiih* men was amassing a personal record of prominent achievements ("a career"). Gros Ventres historically recognized three means for accomplishing personal achievements: ability, prayer, and power. Everyone was expected to hone their personal abilities, and to pray fervently and regularly to the Supreme Being for prosperity and longevity. Some Gros Ventres sought sacred power from various other-than-human Patrons—including spirits or animals—through fasting and sacrifice to conduct suprahuman feats in doctoring, gambling, divination, or war. According to Flannery's interlocutors, however, pursuit of sacred power was viewed with ambivalence or even suspicion, as many believed that using such power might lead to an early death. Nevertheless, whether bolstered by ability, prayer, or power, risking one's life in raiding and war was the culmination of personal achievement for *Aaniiih* men (and, occasionally, for Gros Ventre women such as Woman Chief; see Denig, 1961). War deeds were thus routinely commemorated, including through historical *Aaniiih* naming practices. For example, my great-grandfather was named Many-Plumes (before the government boarding school renamed him as Frederick Peter Gone); he had a grandmother named Two-Strikes, a stepfather named Gone-to-War, and sisters named Meets-the-Enemy and

Taken-Prisoner. It should come as no surprise, then, that some Gros Ventre coup tales have been preserved from pre-reservation times.

Elsewhere, I have analyzed the war narrative of an *Aaniiih* elder named Watches-All that was originally recorded by anthropologist Alfred Kroeber during his ethnographic work among the Gros Ventres in 1901 (Gone, 2014). Beyond the work of anthropologists, my great-grandfather, Fred P. Gone (1886–1967), was employed by the Montana Writer's Project during 1941–42 as the Gros Ventre field worker for the Fort Belknap Indian reservation. His job was to preserve *Aaniiih* "folklore" in written form toward future publication of a book about Montana's Indians. During this period, he wrote 700 pages in longhand script dedicated to Gros Ventre history and legends, respectively. His crowning achievement was *Bull-Lodge's Life*, a narrative account of our most famous 19th century medicine man that he obtained from Bull-Lodge's daughter, Snake-Woman (Gone, 2006). Not only does this life narrative feature accounts of Bull-Lodge's own war exploits, it also documents a seminal occasion when, on the night before his death, Bull-Lodge gathered his family in his lodge and told them war stories (Gone, 2011a). According to F. P. Gone's (1942) account, the longest of these involved an *Aaniiih* warrior named Bobtail-Horse, who rode to war against the Blackfeet. In the immediate aftermath of a successful raid, Bobtail-Horse returned alone to the Blackfeet camp. He was discovered, abandoned his horse, and barely escaped with his life, but not before his companions had already departed for home. And so, alone, Bobtail-Horse set forth on foot (and, after his moccasins wore out and his feet were lacerated, on hands and knees) back to the Gros Ventre camps. His successful return home took weeks. He later rode to battle against the Blackfeet on three subsequent occasions. On the fourth, he was shot and killed.

I undertook my first research project in 1994 to study Gros Ventre identity in Gros Ventre terms (Gone, 1996). During that summer, I contacted half of the elders who resided on the reservation, interviewed 13 of them, and wrote my thesis about the interviews with my grandmother, Bertha Snow (1918–2016). One component of these interviews was a direct solicitation of cultural identity narratives: "Are there any stories which best capture what it means to be Gros Ventre?" The story first nominated by my grandmother—and referenced by other elders as well—concerned the celebrated war exploits of the *Aaniiih* warrior, Red-Whip. Red-Whip was renowned in the community for his valor and loyalty during a battle with Crow allies against a large force of Sioux enemies (F. P. Gone, 1941). Their war party was set upon in the Little Rocky Mountains of present-day Montana, where Red-Whip rallied his Crow companions to battle. Red-Whip's "inseparable friend" Good-Strike was

wounded early in the melee. Red-Whip positioned his friend behind rough ground for cover, then charged out to meet the Sioux, killing one before returning to his friend's side. Hearing the enemy approaching their position, Red-Whip rushed out again, killing another Sioux. On his return, Good-Strike revealed the seriousness of his wounds, kissed Red-Whip farewell, and released him from further obligation to protect him. Red-Whip charged once more, shooting at the enemy on his way to escape. On hearing Good-Strike's wails, however, Red-Whip returned to scold his friend for crying, but Good-Strike explained that he was sobbing for his mother, who would be poor without him. He entrusted some final words and personal items to Red-Whip to give to his mother. Red-Whip began to sing, urged his friend to join in, kissed him goodbye, and ran out again for his escape.

Red-Whip's battle exploits against the Sioux have been commemorated at Fort Belknap ever since. In 1909, a "Last Great Indian Council" was convened in the Little Bighorn valley in southeastern Montana during which "chiefs" from many reservations gathered to recount their pre-reservation experiences in "solemn farewell" (Dixon, 1914). Red-Whip, then 55 years of age, recounted this war experience for the council record. Over three decades later, F. P. Gone (1941), during his employment with the Montana Writer's Project, wrote his account of this battle. In 1982, the Fort Belknap Education Department informally published many of F. P. Gone's writings to introduce *Aaniiih* culture and history into the curriculum of the local schools. Interestingly, even though most of these stories were not coup tales, this collection was titled *War Stories of the White Clay People*, and opened with three war narratives, including Red-Whip's famous battle. Thus, it is not surprising that the elders I interviewed in 1994 were familiar with Red-Whip's exploits. Indeed, the new recreation complex that opened at Fort Belknap Agency just a few years earlier was designated the Red-Whip community center. As a prominent Gros Ventre leader, Red-Whip exemplified a successful pre-reservation career in which *Aaniiih* men pursued community recognition through war honors. Prowess in raiding and warfare not only demonstrated ferocity, tenacity, and primacy in the face of one's enemies, but also yielded valuable property—especially horses—for lending or redistributing to less ambitious, less talented, or less fortunate others. Gros Ventre leadership, then, depended on ambitious achievement, audacious courage, and profligate generosity, by which individuals could generate a following within the community.

Coup tales are not just recorded accounts of "narrative events" that were preserved through literacy, but rather orated accounts expressed through "events of narration" that were recognizable as a speech genre in pre-reservation social life (for the distinction between narrative events and events of narration, see Bauman, 1986). As one form of

historical *Aaniiih* oral tradition, war stories were narrated on routine public occasions. Indeed, a prominent man was one with so many war honors that his "wrist would be made slim from being pulled up to recite them" (Flannery, 1953, p. 101), a practice that also reflects an *Aaniiih* proscription against self-promotion. The social occasions that required public oration of coup tales were manifold. Some were associated with war itself, such as the return of a successful raiding party or the appearance of scouts with news of the enemy. Other occasions pertained to ritual life, such as the felling of the tree for the center pole of the Sacrifice Lodge or when a guest violated the taboo of departing a Pipe Keeper's lodge with leftover food (which could bring about supernatural harm). Still others were associated with beginnings or renewals, such as naming a child, piercing a child's ears, or even setting up a new lodge. The oration of war stories also featured in the public competitions for status between rival men's moieties. Clearly, as a speech genre, the war narrative routinely underscored the persistence of Gros Ventre values identified by Fowler (1987) as ferocity, tenacity, and pursuit of primacy within the broader historical context of *Aaniiih* precarity and survival. Simultaneously, of course, these events of narration advanced the status and careers of the men (and sometimes women) who exemplified and reinforced these values (Flannery, 1953).

In modern times, there are evident limitations associated with a renewed focus on the historical recounting of Gros Ventre coup tales. The Plains Indian warrior has become a tired cliché (viz. American sports team mascots) and sweeping assertions about warlike Indigenous societies with tendencies toward pervasive violence were long promoted to justify conquest and dispossession by Europeans. Indeed, the frame of violence and warfare evokes the trope of Indigenous savagery that initially structured settler discourse about the inferiority of American Indian peoples relative to civilized Europeans (Pearce, 1988). Historical Indigenous customs surrounding warfare are as vulnerable to modern critique as any historical war practices (and many contemporary ones as well), including appropriate condemnation of the killing of noncombatants, enslavement of war captives, enlistment of child soldiers, desecration of the dead, harvesting of war trophies, and even human sacrifice (Linton, 1926). Moreover, community survival in the context of longstanding violence alters gender relations, and (despite Flannery's [1953] mention of Gros Ventre women who sometimes counted coup) the disparities in gender status that structured 19th-century *Aaniiih* life are strikingly out of step with modern sensibilities. And yet, a warrior ethos also encompasses an alternative legacy: beyond the tropes of savagery and violence lies a celebration of agency, ambition, audacity, action, energy, talent, and achievement. Where Gros Ventres have designated this constellation of attributes as "ferocity," they might also be conceived as *mastery* (a concept that in

other Algonquian traditions retains religious underpinnings; see Cooper, 1933).

In sum, warfare afforded a context for the pinnacle of expression of human mastery over mortal danger, despair, and destruction. As I will soon discuss, this quite literally entails life vanquishing death. Indeed, I have summarized this ethos as “the eruption of liveliness that prevails over frightful ordeal or bitter circumstance” (Gone, 2011a, p. 139). Importantly, there is cultural, psychological, and social benefit to preserving and promoting this emphasis on mastery—even while repudiating the associated legacy of violence—through a modern adaptation of the traditional speech genre of the coup tale. Such benefit is needed now more than ever owing to the widespread circulation throughout Indigenous communities of IHT, an elaboration of the trauma narrative that, as a speech genre, contrasts markedly with the coup tale.

### Round three: Reconsidering therapy culture

Recall that Traveling-Thunder did not invoke psychological trauma during our 1999 interview addressed to contemporary reservation addiction and depression. What lessons, then, might we draw about IHT in comparison? IHT was developed and promoted by Indigenous applied health researchers who were also trained as clinicians and interventionists. For example, Duran (2019) pioneered an utterly creative and distinctive form of “soul healing” (i.e., psychotherapy) for treating “soul wounds” (i.e., IHT) for Indigenous communities. Thus, clinical intervention is routinely recognized as one component of healing from IHT. Beyond clinical practice proper, however, I argue that the difference between Traveling-Thunder’s explanatory model and influential conceptions of IHT is the latter’s dependence on “the culture of therapy,” which Rimke and Brock (2012) defined as “the widespread acceptance of a particular psychotherapeutic ethos that shapes social practices” (p. 183). To be clear, in most analyses, therapy culture designates *not* the norms and routines associated with the professional practice of psychotherapy, but rather a subset of therapeutic orientations and assumptions that proliferate beyond the professional services sector to wider society as mediated by self-help groups, popular psychology, global media, and so forth (cf. Fassin & Rechtman’s [2009] *Empire of Trauma*). In this respect, IHT incorporates various commitments of therapy culture in ways that were foreign to Traveling-Thunder. One principal example of such commitments is a belief in psychic fragility, grounded in the assumption that Meehl (1973) characterized as the “spun-glass theory of mind” (p. 252), which posits that the slightest emotional shock might damage or destroy a person’s mental well-being. A second principal example is a belief in the “talking cure,”

grounded in the assumption that psychologically-minded, self-referential—and even confessional—verbal expression will remedy psychological problems (Kirmayer, 2007).

I have explored the pervasive presence of therapy culture in an Indigenous-administered “healing lodge” on a First Nations reserve that deliberately sought to address IHT stemming from the abusive legacy of Canada’s residential schools (Gone, 2008b, 2009, 2011b). My focus in this inquiry was on the local effort to deliberately integrate “Western” and “Aboriginal” therapeutic modalities, requiring accommodations of Aboriginal tradition that established new (and potentially controversial) therapeutic precedents. Supplemented by participant-observation, my interviews with staff and clients indicated that widely circulating approaches based on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, popular psychology, and facets of globalized therapy culture governed program activities alongside an overt local commitment to reclaiming Indigenous therapeutic practices. Importantly, staff interest in formally structured or evidence-based psychotherapies was virtually non-existent, which was not surprising given that counselors were not formally trained or credentialed as psychotherapists. Nevertheless, even with enthusiastic staff allegiance to the “talking cure,” community members seeking services from the program frequently resisted the mandate to “disclose” painful childhood experiences in an emotionally cathartic manner to non-intimates during group sessions. Instead, for these clients, enduring Indigenous communicative norms prescribing taciturnity and emotional restraint (Darnell, 1981) may well have prevented access to therapeutic benefit. This short-term ethnography revealed the proliferation of therapy culture in a seemingly remote Indigenous setting. Importantly, Indigenous counselors sought to promote these sensibilities beyond the clinic into the everyday routines of community life.

But how liberating or emancipatory (or “decolonizing”) is therapy culture for contemporary Indigenous peoples? In *Modernizing the Mind*, Ward (2002) identified the role of therapy culture in the making of modern subjects:

Psychology’s subjectivization of experience creates a number of taken-for-granted truths of contemporary life. The first of these truths is the notion of the “deep down.” This is the place where pathology, or the true self, resides in wait of release through confession, therapy, cognitive recognition, “self actualization” or perhaps a “primal scream.” The language of deep interiors ... characterize[s] a true or authentic self that lies buried beneath the vicissitudes of modern life.... People are expected to probe continuously their lives for repressed memories, neuroses, unhappy childhoods or “unresolved grief,” because in these factors is said to reside both the truth about the self and the material needed for recovery and healing. (pp. 211–212)

“Subjectivization” refers to the exercise of societal power in the creation of “subjects” through normative (i.e., seemingly natural and correct) regimes of social life. According to Ward, therapy culture includes a mandate for individuals—in seeking to become virtuous, healthy, and complete human beings—to reflexively probe their interior lives toward greater awareness, insight, and effectiveness. Similar observations have been offered by other scholars of the psy-disciplines beginning in the 1960s (Cushman, 1996; Moskowitz, 2001; Polsky, 1991; Rieff, 1966; Rose, 1998). Much of this work builds on the Foucauldian legacy to uncover and assess the workings of discourse and power in everyday life (Rimke & Brock, 2012).

Furedi (2004) charted the rise of therapy culture from the vantage point of sociology. Emerging during the Enlightenment (in association with the global ascendancy of reason, science, democracy, capitalism, and urbanization), modernity eroded traditional systems of meaning-making (especially religion). One consequence was that people were no longer furnished unambiguous expectations about their purpose, role, status, or direction in life. This led to fragmentation in society, but also (crucially) in the individual, as each person becomes responsible for charting their own path and making their own meaning. This obligation for self-creation can easily become isolating, disorienting, anxiety-provoking, and burdensome. According to Furedi, throughout much of the 20th century, Americans could still find collective cause through political action, though he argued that the Reagan–Thatcher era signaled the demise of politics as a viable option. He traced a dramatic expansion of therapy culture in the 1980s as sensibilities that were formerly encapsulated within the professional sector began to widely circulate through popular psychology and the self-help movement. These sensibilities promised to fill the interior void left by the demise of politics by centering and celebrating individual self-fulfillment. In this, Furedi identified key contradictions. Whereas therapy culture promises to actualize the potential of the individuated self, instead it underscores individual vulnerability. Indeed, Furedi perceived the dominant dogma of therapy culture to be the “diminished self.” Additionally, whereas therapy culture promises to optimize individual functioning, instead it promotes dependence on professional expertise and, owing to widespread promotion of therapeutic sensibilities through public programs, an intrusion by the state.

Thus, even as therapy culture is promoted as the solution to rampant individuation and disorientation, Furedi (2004) argued that instead it exacerbates these problems. How so? Furedi claimed that therapy culture circulates new scripts for emotional vulnerability (e.g., by fixating on self-esteem or emotional abuse), and an attending preoccupation with the fragile self: “This is the age of traumas, syndromes, disorders, and addictions” (p. 111). Thus, despite

assurances that self-actualization and self-fulfillment lie just a little deeper within one’s psyche, therapy culture principally promotes a “permanent consciousness of vulnerability” (p. 21). Moreover, although it promises to combat alienation and isolation, therapy culture actively facilitates further individuation. It does so in two primary ways. First, it incorporates a “deep-seated aversion towards family and informal relations” (p. 75), evident, for example, in its stigmatization of “codependence.” Second, it prescribes reliance on professionals rather than on friends and family to whom one might otherwise turn for mutual support. Ultimately, according to Furedi, therapy culture invites a retreat to the interior realm of the private self, but in reality it opens up this private realm to professional management in ways that have increasingly become the business of government and other societal institutions. As examples, Furedi cited the uptake of the therapeutic ethos in education, unemployment, child protection, criminal justice, the civil service, and various other elements of the modern welfare state. In sum, Furedi identified therapy culture as a discourse that has colonized everyday life.

In questioning the “inward turn” mandated by therapeutic discourse, Furedi (2004) concluded:

Today’s therapeutic ethos ... is much more an instrument of survival than a means [to] enlightenment.... Individuals are not so much cured as placed in a state of recovery. They are far more likely to be instructed to acknowledge their problems than to transcend them. Therapy, like the wider culture of which it is a part, teaches people to know their place. In return it offers the dubious blessings of affirmation and recognition. (p. 204)

In assessing Furedi’s argument, one might declare his critiques as overstated, derivative, reductive, nostalgic, or blind to the societal advantages of normalizing professional help-seeking. Certainly, it is crucial to remember that his critical lens was trained not so much on credentialed professional activity (e.g., health service psychology) as on popular circulation of associated—but frequently refashioned—sensibilities (e.g., as reflected on television talk shows). But irrespective of the persuasiveness of every element of this argument, Furedi’s analysis overlaps with other investigations and critiques of therapy culture (as already cited). Returning now to Indigenous life, we might ask what it means when entire generations of Indigenous people are said to suffer from IHT and therefore to be “at risk” for mental health problems? What does it mean when Indigenous community-based “healing” projects promote these ideas among their Indigenous clients, many of whom arrive to these programs by professional or legal mandate, only to be considered successful cases if they learn to disclose their vulnerability, open up to their counselors, and inaugurate a “healing journey”?



In sum, is this what Indigenous liberation and emancipation from the legacy of colonization should look like? Whereas proponents of IHT find hope and possibility in the therapeutic ethos, I instead explore what Indigenous self-determination today might resemble if we were to celebrate *mastery* more so than fragility and to cultivate “*survivance*” rather than “*victimry*” (Vizenor, 1999). As I have already suggested, I find the coup tale to be a traditional exemplar for celebrating mastery and survivance. But coup tales were also deeply entangled with warfare, violence, and the taking of human life. Thus, to be useful today, this traditional speech genre will need to be updated to preserve mastery while repudiating violence.

### Round four: Reimagining the coup tale

Reimagining the pre-reservation coup tale in response to contemporary therapy culture requires an innovative approach that blends the traditional with the modern. To achieve this, I need to further explore how coup tales functioned for my own ancestors. As narrative accounts, *Aaniiih* coup tales commemorated fearless war deeds that in every public performance reinforced Gros Ventre values of ferocity, tenacity, and primacy, even as they certified the vaunted community status of the orators who were “pulled up” to recite them. But beyond these representational and evaluative functions (which translate well enough for modern literacy), the recounting of Gros Ventre war stories was also understood to exercise efficacy in the world. Flannery and Cooper (1946) provided an illustrative account that featured my great-great-great-grandfather Lame-Bull. It centered on a pre-reservation gambling contest involving the wheel game. In the game, two contestants would take turns rolling a small wheel or hoop across a playing court. During his turn, each would attempt to throw an arrow through the hoop, and points would be assigned based on how the hoop came to fall on the arrow. Wheel games were the pinnacle of *Aaniiih* gambling practices, and the most exciting contests involved two prominent men who were “enemy friends” or “war friends” (a cultural designation marking the utmost in rivalry). For these games, the relatives of the contestants might wager nearly all they owned on the outcome. So it was that Lame-Bull, then a young and upwardly mobile man, was challenged to a wheel game by a much older warrior, White-Owl, who jealously sought to protect his own status by vanquishing this young upstart. Against his father’s advice, Lame-Bull agreed to compete against White-Owl, even though he had never even played the wheel game.

Lame-Bull was not only defeated but publicly disgraced in this contest, though he later recovered to become a leader and Pipe Keeper in his own right. Of interest here is one facet of successful competition in the wheel game, namely the thoughtful concentration by *Aaniiih* contestants

on prior war deeds. According to Lame-Bull’s son, who discussed this practice with anthropologist John Cooper:

He would use [such thinking] as a sort of prayer for better luck in the game and would then win.... He here used the supernatural. He used words in his mind. He did not talk out loud.... He was sort of taking an oath indirectly. In an indirect way he would think: “I am not telling a lie [about this war deed]. The powers know that I am not telling a lie.” He actually did the deed, otherwise he could not hope to have better luck in the game. (Cooper, 1957, p. 369)

In other words, contestants might pause briefly during the wheel game to carefully concentrate on a notable war deed. In doing so, they were “not exactly praying;” rather, they were “appealing against fate. They were wishing for good fortune and good luck in the game” (p. 369). This act was understood to actively harness luck or fortune, thereby improving the odds that the competitor would win the contest. The audience understood what was happening during these silent pauses, speculating as to which war deed a competitor was using to “hit his opponent” (p. 369). Upon winning, the contestant would then recount the coup tale that had enabled him to vanquish his rival to the assembly of onlookers. But how could intense mental concentration on a war deed by a contestant “appeal against fate” and harness luck to alter the outcome of the wheel game?

The key to answering this question depends on understanding three intersecting concepts in traditional Gros Ventre cosmology: life, wish, and power. My great-great-grandfather, The-Boy, and other men of his generation explained these concepts to Cooper beginning in the late 1930s (Cooper, 1957). Note, however, that some aspects of this synthesis reflect my own (somewhat speculative) efforts to produce an integrative account (see also Gone, 2019). *Life* was traditionally understood as the gift of the Supreme Being (the “One Above”) to terrestrial beings, including humans. It is therefore exogenous to humans, who live only as long as the One Above wishes. On this account, the duration of an individual’s life might be extended through prayer (by incurring favor with the One Above) or shortened through immoral actions (by alienating the One Above). Life encapsulates all blessings, prosperity, and goodness; it is incompatible with (and in opposition to) misfortune, sickness, poverty, or untimely death. *Wish* was traditionally understood as the expression of personal desire through intense concentration. Wishing possessed the following properties (Gone, 2019). Wish was first and foremost exercised by the One Above in controlling the cosmos. Wishing was also an attribute of all persons (whether human or other-than-human). Human wishing was an ability that could be cultivated toward greater potency. Humans could engage in conflict with

each other through contrary wishing. But human wishes could also resonate with and “call for” action by other-than-humans. Moreover, wishing could be combined across persons—human and other-than-human—for greater efficacy. Wishes could be expressed verbally through utterances of blessing and cursing. Finally, wishing was a social phenomenon, grounded in interpersonal relationships and interactions.

*Power* was traditionally understood as the ability to bring the world into alignment with one’s wishes. It was exercised through the efficacious concentration of thought that could generate reality. As the Supreme Being, the One Above was the Prime Thinker and source of efficacious thought. Indeed, *Aaniiih* names for the Supreme Being reflected the associations between life, wish, and power, for the One Above was also known as the Owner of Life, He Who Controls Everything By Thought, and the Master of All (Cooper, 1957). Beyond the Supreme Being, Gros Ventres also recognized a pantheon of other Beings who were ranked by power (e.g., the Four Holy Old Men, the Sun, the Moon, the Thunder Being, the Last Child). Humans, too, were ranked by power, with older people possessing greater facility with its exercise than younger people due to greater access to sacred knowledge over time and more experience with pursuing one’s wishes. In fact, Gros Ventres were one of just five American Indian peoples to structure the life course of men through age-grades (Whyte, 1944). These were cohorts of age mates who successively progressed through a sequence of ritual lodges over their lifespan, with greater knowledge and authority attending the oldest age cohorts. This likely designated a ranking by power among humans that is continuous with the ranking by power of non-human Beings. Thus, life—in all its fullness—was of utmost importance to Gros Ventres, who sought more of it by wishing for their own desired outcomes. But humans were low in the hierarchy of power, so they depended heavily on prayer and ceremony to enlist more potent other-than-humans to wish on their behalf (i.e., exercise power) toward the desired shaping of an unfolding reality and the rejuvenating circulation of life.

The final conceptual link between these *Aaniiih* traditional concepts—life, wish, and power—and Gros Ventre coup tales concerns the role of speech. Speech is the vocable utterance of thought. It conveys a person’s thought into the world. It is connected to life insofar as breathing and breath are markers of vitality. Speech is thought plus breath (mediated by language, another attribute of persons), and singing may be the most elevated form of speech. In fact, the first mythic utterance occurred during the making of land following a great flood, in which Earthmaker sang the land into existence: “Up to the moment of the singing of this first song, he had been mute, silent; he had only thought, this was the first utterance” (Cooper, 1957, p. 79). All *Aaniiih* ceremonies

involved singing, as well as smudging (i.e., the burning of incense), smoking (i.e., inhalation of a burning tobacco mixture), and prayer. Smudging and smoking transform plant materials into smoke (which renders unseen movement as visible), just as singing and prayer transform thought into sound (which requires the usually invisible movement of breath). In *Aaniiih* tradition, owing to its origins in thought, speech had the potential to channel wish, shape reality, and circulate life. This was evident in cursing, in which one might say to an adversary, “you are not going to live long” (p. 366). Such would agitate any reasonable person, and again reveals the traditional associations between life, wish, and power, as conveyed through speech. Cursing was considered deeply immoral; as forms of generative intervention in the world, both speech and thought were subsumed within the moral domain. In sum, Gros Ventres recognized various powerful speech genres: song, prayer, ritual narratives, and, I argue, coup tales.

Thus, an important traditional function of *Aaniiih* war stories may now (finally) be discernable. Gros Ventre coup tales were narratives of agentic triumph in which personal *wish* for the fullest measure of *life* had become *potently* manifest in instrumental human action under circumstances harboring the greatest likelihood of death and destruction in pre-reservation times. As representations of these events, such narratives were indeed commemorative, but the conditions of oration for coup tales (already reviewed) reveal functions beyond representation proper, namely the *dispensation of potentially generative power* (as in naming or ear piercing) and the *neutralization of potentially destructive power* (as in vanquishing enemies in war or nullifying the “hard luck” that otherwise results from violations of ritual taboos). Specifically, for pre-reservation Gros Ventres, recounting coup tales functioned beyond acts of narrative representation (i.e., providing an account of this or that series of happenings) to acts of narrative efficacy in the world (i.e., intervening in unfolding reality so that it takes shape in some desired way). But why might this recounting of coup tales exercise potency for shaping the world? I propose that the telling of *Aaniiih* war narratives captured the very culmination of life that was requisite for vanquishing mortal danger in combat, and in fact rechanneled this vitality—the source of all goodness, prosperity, and blessing, and the very antithesis of misfortune, sickness, and early demise—for the benefit of an audience. That is, recounting coup made possible the *narrative recirculation of life* through a transfer of residual vitality from the oration of past actions to present lives. In sum, the telling of Gros Ventre coup tales, not just figuratively, metaphorically, or symbolically, but literally conveyed or communicated life. This explains why, in his farewell deathbed orations with his assembled relatives, Bull-Lodge told coup tales.

In the end, to conceive of the traditional *Aaniiih* speech genre of the coup tale as fundamentally concerned with

violence and killing is to misunderstand its foundational functions. Instead, this speech genre was primarily fixated on *eruptions of liveliness*:

As commemorations of triumphant agency in which mortal danger had been neutralized by overwhelming vitality, such narrative events retained some capacity to circulate and redistribute to the assembled audience at least some measure of that same vitality—the generative manifestation of thought or wish—that had made possible the very actions portrayed in the narrated events themselves. So it was that among the Gros Ventre, certain kinds of narratives—and the efficacious power of thought these tellings simultaneously commemorate and express—literally imparted life. (Gone, 2011a, p. 144)

In its essence, the war story would seem to remain a potent cultural—and perhaps even a sacred—resource for celebrating actions of mastery, agency, and vitality. As with most things “traditional,” however, the coup tale would benefit from a modern update. Such innovation will blend the traditional with the modern, first by abandoning the primary association with violence, and second by preserving an obsessive preoccupation with ambition, achievement, energy, mastery, and talent (i.e., that which is “moose” in Gros Ventre slang; see Gone & Alcántara, 2010). Such preoccupation need no longer skew in traditionally gendered ways. Rather, this innovation will seek to identify a wide range of contemporary circumstances in which to witness eruptions of liveliness. It will afford new opportunities to “recount coup” after overcoming long odds.

Examples of public recognition for distinctive achievement are plentiful in American Indian communities. Prominent community leaders who secure access or protection with respect to tribal resources might be honored with the presentation of a war bonnet. High school sports teams that win championship games in statewide tournaments are similarly honored with war bonnets or eagle feathers. Graduation ceremonies are ubiquitous, whether from tribal colleges and universities, from tribally administered Head Start programs, or from residential substance abuse treatment. On the powwow circuit, skilled dancers compete for prizes, and community members are called forward by families and organizing committees to receive honor and validation for a variety of contributions. Expert crafts and agricultural produce are recognized at area fairs. In short, many contemporary domains of local activity are associated with public occasions that mark personal achievement and community contribution, whether in tribal leadership, team sports, subsistence hunting, college graduation, legal battles, or business successes. What is less common is a conventional narrative recounting of these achievements, but perhaps the time has come for a signature innovation in this respect. Interestingly, in recent years, I attended a funeral back home in which a

Gulf War military veteran was invited as part of the proceedings to publicly orate his personal account of braving significant war dangers and surviving to return to the reservation. His deed had nothing to do with the deceased, nor was he even related to the grieving family; rather, his narration was a modern effort to revive a traditional speech genre for the benefit of the community. In sum, as “renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry,” modern coup tales are genuine narratives of “Native survivance” (Vizenor, 1999, p. vii).

## Closing

Through comparative consideration of narrative possibilities, I have proposed an alternative framework for cultivating Indigenous mastery rather than vulnerability through a selective and creative process of contemporary culture-making. In this manner, Indigenous self-determination might be recast from past traditions to modern practices in support of future Indigenous vitality. This kind of creative exercise must surely be what Michael Chandler had in mind when positing that cultural continuity could protect Indigenous youth from suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998) and, by extension, from many other undesirable developmental outcomes. Such cultural continuity undoubtedly affords a distinctively Indigenous approach to resilience. As a concluding example, I note that during my 1994 interviews with Gros Ventre elders about *Aaniiih* cultural identity, I inquired about Gros Ventre role models. At that time, the most nominated individual was a living elder named John Capture. Capture was admired by his peers as a “self-made” man, a reservation rancher who served the Gros Ventre people in many capacities for decades of his life, whether elected to the Gros Ventre Treaty Committee or the Fort Belknap Community Council, or in championing Gros Ventre land claims against the federal government. Although the community center at Fort Belknap Agency was named for Red-Whip, the community center in the Gros Ventre district of Hays was named for Capture. Singled out for this recognition even while he was still living, Capture was a modern-day Red-Whip, whose many coups included forcing the U.S. government to compensate our people millions of dollars for the historical plunder of our lands. During my interviews with his peers, these elders knew and shared stories concerning Capture’s modern-day coups. In this article, I have juxtaposed two speech genres practiced in American Indian communities, the traditional coup tale and the modern historical trauma narrative. By way of illustration, I focused on historical *Aaniiih* war narratives, including their role in conveying vitality or *life*. By virtue of their recognition and celebration of agency, mastery, and survivance, Gros Ventre war stories functioned as the discursive antithesis of IHT.

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