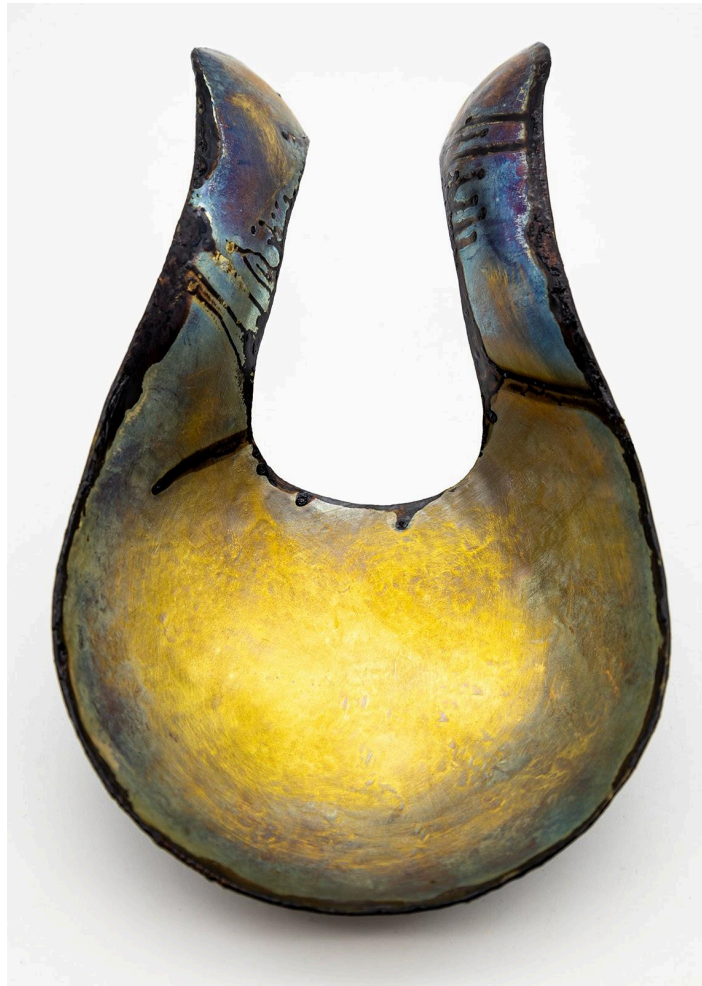


# This Game Whispers



*Gorget-Bib*. Smithed brass and charred lard. 11x18x4cm. 2024. Photo by author

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## **Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>p. 2</b>
<b>The Copy Spiral</b>	<b>p. 3</b>
<b>Function and Status</b>	<b>p. 4</b>
<b>Cultural Appropriation</b>	<b>p. 6</b>
<b>Jewellery as a Colonial Tool</b>	<b>p. 7</b>
<b>The Appropriation of Wampum</b>	<b>p. 8</b>
<b>The Gorget</b>	<b>p. 9</b>
<b>Gorget-Bibs</b>	<b>p. 11</b>
<b>Conclusive Remarks</b>	<b>p. 12</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>p. 13</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>p. 15</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>p. 16</b>

## **Introduction**

Since 2021, while at my bachelor's at Konstfack, my work has revolved around typological transformation of forms and objects as they are diffused or spread between cultures. An object that is appropriated into a new cultural context will likely be adapted through being copied, a process in which it amalgamates with elements of the receiving material culture. It is given new shapes, functions, aesthetics and values and might not in the end be recognisable in comparison to the “original” form.

The historical transformation of objects through copying invites fantastical interpretations into universes where objects from our world take unpredictable turns. Spiralling through time and space, constantly creating and being recreated, the object's copying-journey has the dramatic qualities of a human life story.

In this thesis, I first introduce my thoughts on copying and cultural appropriation. I then use these phenomena to present specific historic contexts where jewellery played a foundational role in European colonisation processes. I have made a series of copies, where each piece is a subjective interpretation of the one preceding, through a method comparable to the whispering game. The pieces visualise colonialist attitudes to Indigenous Peoples and some of their strategies for domination.

## The Copy Spiral

As I started my masters, I began to think of my process with the copy as a spiral. I imagine myself as a moving node in this spiral, with everything I encounter in my research (e.g., objects, forms, concepts, materials, techniques, theories) positioned on the opposing side of the spiral. The appropriation and copying of these entities constitute a process that transforms them, but they also transform me by giving me new knowledge and access to four new nodes of inspiration further along the spiral. Here, I am joined with all the past and present makers that led to my making. Is there ever a bottom in sight? If the very first man-made object was a recipient, it would have copied the form of a leaf or a gourd or a shell, or the cupped hand of the maker (Le Guin 1996, 150). The man-made original is a myth. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin emphasised how a work of art never truly can be perfectly copied as the impermanence of time and space unavoidably imprints on the work (Benjamin 1969, 220). The perfect copy is in this sense also a myth because it is always new. It is the ever-present enabler of the endless becoming-spiral of material culture that inescapably binds all makers into partnership.

The endeavour of reaching artistic originality often entails conjuring and assembling a multitude of subjective interpreted entities of inspiration obtained from our cultural and natural surroundings. It often seems as if the originality of a work of art depends on the number of such sources of inspiration that it contains. The repetition of these sources of inspiration, into an artwork, constitutes the act of copying. Artistic originality in a piece is thus dependent on and can be intensified by the quantity of conjured copies. There will always be inspiration to creation and the true original would have to be created by a senseless, bodiless and lonely god in a starless vacuum. Paradoxically, the endeavour for originality and separation from past artists only unavoidably sucks the maker deeper into the collective whirlpool of creation.

My imagination of the spiral is comparable to the philosophical concept of the hermeneutic spiral, in which the opposing nodes are (pre-)knowledge and interpretation (Ebdrup 2012). In a modern hermeneutic sense, to try to interpret and understand a *whole* entity (e.g., a sentence), we move along the spiral and repeatedly revisit and interpret opposing separate *parts* (e.g., words) of the whole (Motahari 2008, 106). The unavoidable subjectivity of human comprehension and science is central to the hermeneutic epistemological viewpoint (Bleicher 2017, 38). I have implemented imperfect interpretation as the main method in my copying process. It begins with identifying and interpreting a whole “original” object through its parts, or defining details. From here, I knowingly distance myself from the “original” whole, as I combine the separate parts to create the imperfectly interpreted copy. Every succeeding copy that I make emanates from the latter, exponentially differing from the “first.”

## Function and Status

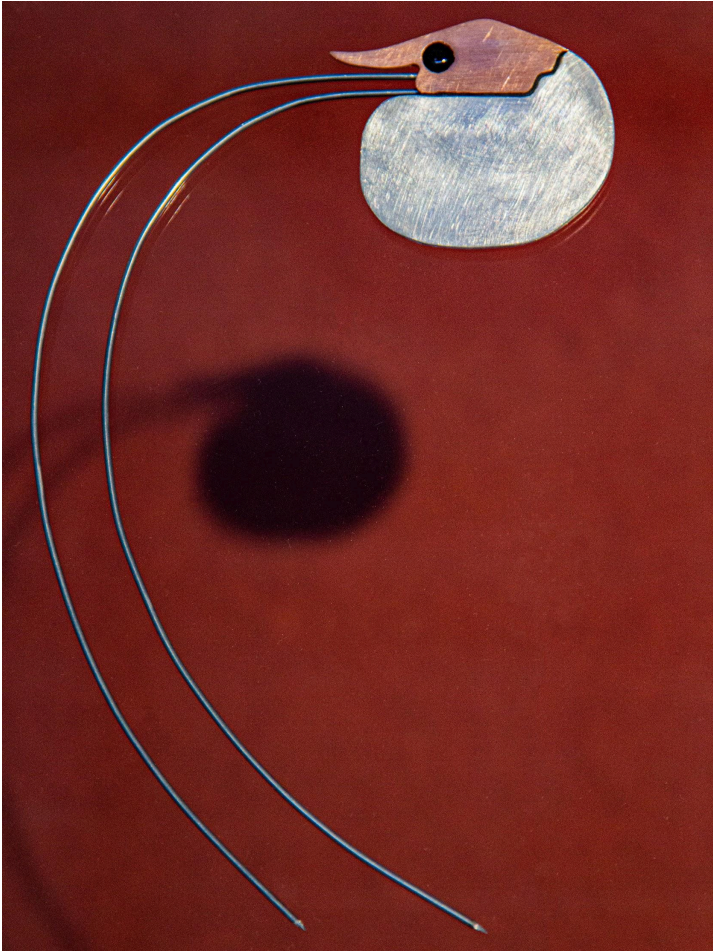
While studying archaeology at Lund University during a semester in 2018, I encountered an artefact that came to stay in my imagination for years. We were examining southern Scandinavian Late Neolithic artefacts, including a number of flint daggers and axes. By this period in the late third and early second millennium BCE, flint knapping was at its peak in terms of craftsmanship, but a new material, bronze, that in the following centuries would supersede flint as the dominant material for tools, weaponry and a range of different types of status objects, was beginning to appear through trade with central Europe. In the lecture room, we were presented with a flint dagger that stood out from the rest by being atypically broad, long and very thin. We were told that it was a copy of a central European Únětice Culture bronze dagger. The flint dagger would have been completely functionless as a weapon and would very easily have shattered due to the blade's length and thinness in combination with flint's glass-like brittleness. Archaeologists have suggested that these flint daggers plausibly would have had an "exotic" status value and were used as offerings to deities. The professor spoke of a specific flint dagger stemming from the same period, which makes matters more complex. When pouring bronze into a two-part casting mould, the liquid bronze every so often spills out between the two moulds to form a seam line. This flint dagger had an awkward, sharp line along its handle that seems to be a result of the flint knapper copying even the seam leakage. To the flintknapper, this detail may have been seen as an integrated component of the copied design, but to the bronze-crafter it was the legacy of an unfinished piece. To me, the two phenomena sparked an interest to examine the many different dimensions of copying.

A defining aspect that occurs in all the copies that I have studied and made is a change of function. A copy of a practical object will often lose this function and instead express societal status. This specific transformation is at the centre of my investigation, as compared to a forgery, fake or knock-off, the copy that changes function more dramatically becomes an entirely new object. An object does not have to be copied to lose its practical function. It might be outcompeted in the introduction of a more technologically advanced substitute. In some cases, despite its uselessness, the object will stay in circulation as a decorative curiosity, wielding status connecting the owner to a romanticised past. This nostalgia-driven phenomenon is widespread in Scandinavia, where once-practical, mite-ridden 18th-19th century agricultural implements are sold for thousands of crowns. The often bizarrely high monetary value of these status objects can even lead to them becoming subjects of forgery.

Jewellery that is installed on a body is bound to express and intensify the wearer's cultural status, be it hierarchical, political, militaristic, economic or religious. If worn, a jewellery piece inescapably constitutes a status object, regardless of how conceptual it is. I have accepted and learned to appreciate this fact and use it as an aspect in my work with the copy. For my 2022 bachelor project (*Subject to Change*), I transformed two present-day functional tools into jewellery. Much like the whispering game I played as a child, I imagined an extended copying chain consisting of several misinterpreted copies, where elements of form were added, subtracted, perverted and the details of original intent and meaning were lost in imperfect interpretation. *Sic Le Chic* is a commercial Barbie-like choker that stemmed from a sickle. *Shrimp to Carry Close to Heart* is a post-apocalyptic religious brooch that stemmed from a pacemaker. The transformation into jewellery is a plausible future for some of our current material surroundings, after having been made obsolete through time.



*Sic Le Chi*©. Wood, aluminium and car lacquer. Sculpted, lathed and sprayed. 18x30cm. 2022. Photo by author



*Shrimp to Carry Close to Heart*. Copper, silver, steel and pitch. Soldered. 20x10cm. 2022. Photo by author

## **Cultural Appropriation**

The colonial and modern contexts that I study all entail two-way cultural exchanges, where different aspects of culture are given, appropriated, copied and amalgamated in both directions. In many cases they are characterised by dramatic ideological, material and power contrasts between two cultures. It is within these contexts of power asymmetry that appropriation can become problematic. Multispecies feminist theorist Donna Haraway reasons that White Capitalist Patriarchy is reliant on the appropriation of objectified human and non-human knowledge for the creation of western truth and power and how the appropriated elements are given no influence or agency on how they are handled (Haraway 1988, 591).

Cultural appropriation and cases of white bodies wearing clothes, hairstyles or jewellery (all status attributes) of non-white origins have been popular political topics of discussion during all my adult life. They receive criticism for being uninformed, disrespectful and responsible for maintaining stereotypes of people in minority, some of whom have been discriminated against for expressing their cultural identity through the same attributes that are subjects for appropriation. To not problematically appropriate a cultural element, an individual in a position of power over their neighbour should understand their privilege, consider their intention and learn, value and respect the element's societal and cultural context.

Both the term and the idea of cultural appropriation carry distasteful connotations to me and I in addition often romanticise aspects of cultures that to me seem "pure" and original. But these ideas stand in stark contrast to what I also strongly believe; that all culture is in a state of unstoppable constant change and becoming. Through my work with the copy, I have had to reinterpret the term. Appropriation in its very basic nature constitutes the acquiring of our natural and the cultural environment, which we are dependent on for all our basic internal and external needs. Cultural appropriation is universal and constant for the diffusion of objects between cultures and while not always the case, it is often followed by further adaptation through copying.

## **Jewellery as a Colonial Tool**

The sort of copy that I focus on is often birthed from encounters between vastly different cultures, often within a colonial context. Jewellery played a foundational role in the early modern European colonisation process around the world. Gift-giving was used by colonists as a way to form alliances upon their first arrival in territories about to be conquered (Wood 1988, 166). Amongst these gifts, jewellery items often predominated. By the mid 19th century in Northern America, such items included;

*“...brass rings, brass and iron wire, beads, brass hair and brass plates, brass and silver gorgets, wampum moons, hair pipes, St Lawrence shells, spotted seashells, hawk bells, horse and sleigh bells, cock and ostrich feathers, thimbles, gold and silver lace, etc.”*  
(Wood 1988, 166).

To increase the Native American interest in trading, the selection of bartered items was expanded when Europeans began to produce copies of Indigenous jewellery items. These objects, often made from Western materials, were then sold back to Indigenous communities, in some cases replacing native materials and designs (Wood 1988, 166). Returning to the idea of appropriation, it seems hard to place this phenomenon; the copying of Native American jewellery items by Europeans might not really constitute a form of appropriation, since they were not intended to be incorporated into European culture. However, after having been sold to Indigenous communities, some of them would have been reappropriated and incorporated into the continuous copy spiral. Many of the forms, materials and techniques first introduced by Europeans are today widely in use and have become inseparable from and amalgamated with modern Native American craft. There is a redeeming justice in the cultural appropriation of the colonist's culture.

The wide range of new objects and materials introduced by Europeans were undoubtedly met with great interest and desire by Indigenous peoples around the world and could, depending on the context, be considered as cultural and material enrichment. Copies of prestigious objects that pre-trade were reserved for the elite could have led to a “democratisation” of Indigenous material cultures if they could be acquired by a wider range of people. However, these copies must also have dramatically shifted the values and statuses of the Indigenous objects that would have had different functions and had been important in upholding societal structures. In countless cases, the influx of western culture and materials led to the dwindling and replacement of elements of Indigenous material cultures.



## **The Appropriation of Wampum**

The history of wampum is perhaps the most well-known case of appropriated Native American jewellery. These purple and white beads made of quahog clam shells play significant roles for the Indigenous Peoples of north-eastern America (Insider 2021). Wampum belts are crucial to the Haudenosaunee, a confederacy of the Mohawk, Oneida, Seneca, Tuscarora, Cayuga and Onondaga nations that was founded by the prophet Peacemaker, using wampum to establish the laws of the Great Peace (Haudenosaunee Confederacy 2024). As the beads are woven into the belt, a speaker transfers the words of an agreement into the wampum, which then can work as a diplomatic or historic document (Onondaga Nation 2024) to commemorate agreements and treaties (Graeber 2022, 197). The Haudenosaunee's matrilineal societies were historically constituted by the resurrection of eternal names. The matriarch of a nation was the keeper of an archive of wampum belts representing a number of ancestral names. When a person died, they were resurrected through a ritual of "hanging the name around the neck", where the corresponding wampum belt was hung on another person who possessed qualities of the legendary name. If this person accepted the belt and did not shake it off, they became the dead person and in extension, the past ancestors that carried the name (Graeber 2001, 121).

In the 17th century, due to their lack of money, colonists in several areas started to appropriate wampum beads as regulated currency within their own societies (Graeber 2001, 44). Before reading Graeber, my angle on the European appropriation of wampum was that I saw the phenomenon as the starting point of imposing monetary capitalism on north-eastern Indigenous Peoples. It turns out that wampum almost never was used as currency between Europeans and Indigenous Peoples, except for paying fines (Graeber 2022, 197) and to some extent in the fur trade. Graeber argues that there is no evidence of Indigenous Peoples using wampum's monetary value in their own communities (Graeber 2001, 119). The resilience of wampum against the appropriation into money could be attributed to its substantial cultural and societal significance.

## The Gorget

In the summer of 2023, I bought a pair of large, beautiful, crescent-shaped wild boar tusks that reminded me of the shape of a gorget, a piece of jewellery that I had seen on one of the soldiers at Akershus Festning. I had come across a piece of jewellery that would bridge my work with the copy and my long time interest in jewellery's role as a tool for colonial domination.



Wild boar tusk. 13x7cm. Photo by author

The gorget first began as an important part of medieval plate armour, protecting one of the most vulnerable parts of the body; the neck (gorge means neck in French). After the introduction of gunpowder during the Renaissance, which changed the way war was waged, the heavy and expensive plate armour was rendered less useful. The functionless gorget was kept as part of the uniforms of many European armies to indicate military rank and gave the wearer status connected to nobility and chivalry (Troy 1993, 2). The gorget's history poses as a great example for visualising my practical function turned status model, which has been consistently present and fundamental in all my earlier pieces during my work with the copy. After the gorget lost its function, it morphed into a crescent, shrunk and sagged down from the neck to land on the chest.

The gorget has a long and complex past in North America. In the colonial context, they were used by both the French and British armies, but were also subjects of appropriation as they were traded with, given to and looted by Native Americans. During the French and Indian War of 1754-1763, the French and British gave gorgets to Native American warriors to signify their alliance (Troy 1993, 5). Some of the American painter George Catlin's (1796-1872) portraits of Native Americans show people wearing metal gorgets, but many of them wear white circular ones (Catlin 2017). These are the separate, Indigenous "gorgets," which had been in widespread use for hundreds of years in pre-Columbian North America. The Chickasaw of Northern Mississippi and Alabama wore gorgets in different shapes and sizes, made from gourd, stone, shell and copper. Their use was not restricted to men and were often engraved with designs that could signify family relations or stories. Other engravings gave the gorget talismanic functions such as protection. They also served as status symbols and gorgets that were made from imported oceanic shells and copper are thought to be

reserved for the elite (Cole 2018). These circular gorgets were in fact among one of the types of Native American jewellery that were copied in silver by the Europeans, both in Europe and North America, with the intention of trading them with the Indigenous population (Wood 1988, 168). Adding to the complexity, as the European military gorgets were appropriated by Native Americans, they started to copy them in metals acquired by the Europeans. The Chickasaw inscribed some of them with the same motives that had been on their own “original” gorgets, amalgamating the two. These types of gorgets are still made today by Native American jewellers (Cole 2018). One of Catlin’s portraits depicts an Osage man wearing metal cuffs and a gorget, seemingly made from shell, but in the shape of the typical European gorget (Catlin 2017).

The strategy of giving gorgets to Native Americans to gain favour and alliance was copied by the British in Australia in the beginning of the 19th century (Troy 1993, 5). These gorgets, which were called King plates, brass plates or breastplates (Troy 1993, 1) were most often flat and twice as big as the military precursors. They were often engraved with the name, place and assigned rank of an Aboriginal person, as well as motifs of Aboriginal people, flora and fauna. For more than a hundred years, both the colonial administration and civilian settlers gave gorgets to Aboriginal people for a number of reasons. Aboriginal police, trackers and people who had been of great assistance to the colonists were rewarded with gorgets. Some were even used for the horribly sad purpose of designating a person as the last living member of their people. The gorgets could represent significant hierarchical status and were used in the colonist’s selection of certain Aboriginal men as kings (Troy 1993, 6). This “crowning” of a single leader contravened traditional Aboriginal societal structures, which mostly were ruled by a number of elders (Troy 1993, 14). The kings were expected to ensure the cooperation and labour of their people and aid in the localisation and expansion of settlements (Troy 1993, 6).

Here, I quote a Russian explorer who described the situation in 1820:

*“They live in societies of 30, 40, 50 or more persons, and are ruled by their own elders. Nowadays the English Government itself selects the elders and gives them a special mark to that effect consisting of a copper plate on which their rank is indicated, and which they wear round the neck.”*

(Novosil’sky 1820, in Barratt 1981, 29 in Troy 1993, 13)

Aboriginal attitudes to the gorgets varied, some disliked and discarded or did not wear them, as some were either indifferent to or saw them as colonial tools for domination. Others wore them with pride and embraced the status that they represented (Norris 2019, 38). The gorget could also be used to the Aboriginal wearer’s advantage in contact with the colonists due to the exclusive access and benefits that it could provide (Norris 2019, 39). Today, the names and places that often decorated the Australian gorgets can serve as material links and historical records between the ancestral wearer and their descendants. (Troy 1993, 1) I have found no evidence that Aboriginal people copied the gorget, but it is feasible due to its potential high status and the more than hundred year long active practice of using gorgets in gift-giving.

## Gorget-Bibs

I have made a series of copies of European military gorgets, of varying dimensions, where each piece is a subjective interpretation of the one preceding. I decided to break the practical function turned status object phenomenon and in the “end” of the transformation reintroduce practicality in the form of the bib (device around a baby’s neck that catches dribbled food). In amalgamating with the vessel element of the bib, the convex, dome-shape of the gorget is transformed and inverted in a churning belly dance. The bib disarms, belittles and ridicules the coloniser, the victor spilling his spoils, who claims a piece of the cake and eats it too, biting off more than he can chew.

I chose to smith the gorget-bibs in brass as it has been the most prominent material in my research. I treat the front surfaces with heat and acid for a range of colours to appear. The backsides, that rested against the body of the coloniser, have been smeared with lard and charred, traces of greed and gluttony. In the process of charring, the lard flows over to the front sides of the gorget-bibs, contrasting the colours of the brass with its rich, tactile and thick brown-black surface. The patterns made by the lard balances the method of copying with a hint of originality. It is what we cannot control that is original, what has appeared in the material due to its innate material qualities.

I display the gorget-bibs on a large, wooden bow, a crescent shaped section of the fibonacci spiral. The bow represents the copy spiral and is itself a copy of my original, natural source of inspiration for the gorget, the wild boar tusk. It also makes me think of a beam in the hull of a colonial-era ship that once garried gorgets across oceans. I place the gorget-bibs on the bow in an ape to man type evolutionary order, starting with the gorget. The bow conveys the direction of this succession as it steadily grows narrower. The reverse direction, from baby to soldier, can also be interpreted.



Process photo of gorget-bibs and the bow. Brass and wood. 222x135cm. Photo by author.

## **Conclusive Remarks**

I have been interested in the different dimensions of copying since I studied Archaeology in 2018 and have focused on the theme during my time at art schools since 2021. My artistic identity is fused with the concept of the copy spiral, which will continue to guide my work. It allows me to explore the vastness of history into the future, with very few restrictions regarding material, technique, form and medium.

In this thesis, I turned my focus to a number of historic cases and phenomena that visualise the universality and constancy of the spiralling processes of appropriation and copying. After discovering the gorget, I was able to unite the concepts of appropriation and copying with my long-time interest in jewellery's colonial history and create a series of vessel-jewellery pieces that carry dramatic stories.

In concluding the thesis, I identified four main actions that repeatedly appeared throughout the text, often in the same order; gift-giving, appropriating, copying and amalgamating. Gift-giving is characteristic for the early colonial contexts that I have researched. Amalgamation is ever-present in the copy process as the "original" is blended with the copier's culture.

I would like to end with repeating some key points:

The copy spiral transforming both the maker and the copy

The binding of all makers into partnership through the copy spiral

The loss of practical function and gaining of status value as a result of copying

White Capitalist Patriarchy being reliant on appropriation for its constant growth

European colonists' copies of Indigenous material culture produced for trading with Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous appropriation and copying of materials, techniques and forms introduced by Europeans

Indigenous resistance to European appropriation

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## Appendix