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Becoming civic centred – A case study of the University of Greenwich’s Bathway Theatre based in Woolwich

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ABSTRACT

This paper constructs an inter-disciplinary lens to consider a University Theatre’s community engagement programme, *What About Us: Empowering Community Voices*. We argue for an ‘Open-Third Space’ as a way of decolonising the academy whilst constructing Higher Education and Community Partnerships. In doing so we re-think assumptions around privileging academic knowledge within Knowledge Exchange Frameworks (KEF). We assert the need for universities to consider knowledge exchange as a reflexive process whereby the knowledge of partners coming from non-university settings is positioned equitably with those from the academy. Moving beyond Lave and Wenger’s ‘Community of Practice’, which considers communities as homogenous groups, we take a Dreierien perspective, considering project partners as unique knowledge holders; enabling us to help frame, shape and create activity which is of interest to the multi-cultural community of Woolwich, where the Theatre sits. In doing so we are able to reflect on our shared experiences across the community engagement programme and introduce ‘Open-Third Space’ to the literature, which fuses the critical components of Ngūgī wa Thiong’o’s ‘open space’ and Oldenburg’s ‘third space,’ as a practical way of working and as a set of principles which will need further unpacking as the theatre develops its community engagement strategy.

KEYWORDS

Interdisciplinary; civic centred university; outreach; community practice; knowledge exchange framework; knowledge exchange; decolonising the academy; decolonising

Introduction

There is potential for universities to play a role in developing the artistic practice of communities from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. In this article we propose the inter-disciplinary concept of the ‘Open-Third Space’ as an option for universities to effectively co-construct knowledge. The term ‘open-third space’ bridges the authors’ multiple perspectives, rooted in post-colonial theory, specifically Ngūgī wa Thiong’o’s concept of the ‘Open Space’ in community theatre (1986), human geography studies focusing on community development (Oldenburg 1997; Soja 1996) and education, sociology and psychology theory on situated social practices (Lave and Wenger 1991; Dreier 1999 & 2008). In doing so, we create an open-third space conceptual framework for university–community partnerships, which begins to remove the binary between the university and the communities in which they sit. We consider the power,

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personal and spatial relationships of individuals working within specific contexts. This paper does not develop a new language for discussing the people involved in such partnerships as a comprehensive taxonomy is created by Facer and Enright (2016) in their cross-research council report on connected communities. Instead, through Dreier (1999), we consider the programme of activity in *What About Us* as multiple situated social practices where complex inter-personal relationships are formed between people who have different perspectives. In this coming together, new knowledge is formed. As such, we propose this open-third space framework is flexible enough to be applied within multiple and varied international contexts where a number of partners produce projects in spaces which are owned by one of the stakeholders.

This framework has arisen from the reflections of the three primary project partners following the completion of a six month programme of theatre and performance activity called *What About Us: Empowering Community Voices* which took place at the Bathway Theatre, a university owned and run theatre in Woolwich, South East London in 2019. The primary programme activity was co-constructed with personnel from the Bathway Theatre, ROMEL Foundation, and Galeforce Productions Universal Ltd. All programme activity was free of charge for participants and audience. There was also a programme of secondary activity which will be bracketed out of our analysis but is available online for transparency, as well as to indicate to the readership the substantial size of the programme, having local, national and international reach (see *What About Us: Empowering Community Voices and Open European Societies Projects* at the Bathway Theatre and University of Greenwich's Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences Research Web Pages)

The concept of the 'civic university' has received much attention within the UK, following the final report by the University Partnerships Programme (UPP Foundation 2019). The UPP Foundation's report highlights the need for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to work in partnership with organisations based in the communities in which they are situated and with whom they exchange knowledge so that both might thrive and survive the changing political, economic and social climate. A number of useful frameworks have been presented in the literature to guide effective university-community partnerships (Cox 2000; Sargent & Walters 2004; Martin, Smith, and Phillips 2005; Buys and Bursnall 2007; Stewart and Alrutz 2012). These frameworks map out specific pathways which project partners need to follow, from initiating projects to evaluating success. Sargent & Walters (2004) called for more research in understanding effective collaboration frameworks as research has focussed on the development of skills within HEIs with minimal attention paid to understanding the experience of the community organisations. Buys and Bursnall (2007) included an arts-based partnership in their study but the focus again was on the HEI, thus the perspectives of the community partners were not explored in detail. There appears to be a gap in the literature where the co-construction of knowledge is discussed specifically from the perspective of the community organisations in these HEI-community partnerships. This asks questions of the purpose of HEI institutions in the UK, especially given a culture driven by specific Key Performance Indicators, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and more recently introduced Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), where HEIs are scored based on the quality of their research or teaching, respectively. Both of these frameworks focus on the activities of staff and students within the HEIs and thus the impetus to encourage an outward or community focus is minimised. Given the UPP report and reports by the

UK's independent Higher Education think tank, the Higher Education Policy Institute (Hewitt 2019), it is likely that a new Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) will come into force, the date of which is uncertain.

Drawing on Lefebvre (1991) we argue that those responsible for constructing spaces have the power to affect and change the work which occurs within them. In participatory development studies, Cornwall (2002) and Gaventa (2006) have posited that those responsible for creating these types of spaces, also known as 'invited spaces', provide opportunities and channels for everyone involved to contribute to decisions on policies and relationships that affect their lives and interests. Whilst the structures of such spaces are negotiated between partners, those who instigate this type of collaboration within formal spaces, such as the university and the Bathway theatre, are more likely to have power within that space. We consider these spaces as being continually renegotiated as partner relationships build, change and develop. This includes struggles for legitimacy, resistance, co-optation and transformation. In our effort to mitigate the negative impacts of these struggles we have combined the elements of the 'third space' as proposed by Oldenburg (1997) with that of the 'open space' as proposed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) proposes the return to pre-colonial community theatre spaces and practices, which he calls 'open spaces'. He derived this term from Peter Brook's concept of the Empty Space (1968). The concept of the 'open space' arose from a critique of the post-colonial approach to engaging communities using theatre in Kenyan communities, which had focussed on monologic encounters where the authorities and resource holders who had power over the communities would co-opt theatre groups to create productions that would re-inforce the messages crafted by the then nationalist government. He proposes that in the 'open space' communities can come together to create work that is relevant and engaging (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986). 'Open spaces' are transparent and all community members have direct access and can contribute their ideas and make suggestions on how a story could be told and related props could be created (Ibid). These spaces allow for continuous dialogue and interaction as everyone is respected as a holder of valuable knowledge. In the *What About Us: Empowering Community Voices* project, the Bathway Theatre invited community partners to engage within a space like this and it was a potentially difficult task, given that some community organisations can be wary of being objectified and manipulated from past projects that have removed their agency. Similar observations have been made by Ahmed et al. (2004) and Buys and Bursnall (2007).

Third Spaces' are perhaps most notably discussed in Ray Oldenburg's *The Great Good Place: cafés, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day* (1997). Oldenburg, a sociologist, first published this work in 1989, and argues that third spaces were essential for civic life. The premise being that home, or where you lived, was the first place, work the second and the third spaces areas in between, allowing communities to 'hangout,' learn relax and play together. We note that the terms 'place' and 'space' are used interchangeably in the literature. Whilst for those who work at the university, Bathway may be seen as a second space, we argue that, when co-constructing spaces with community members the formal structures of institutions dissolve into the informal learning space of community practice. Third Spaces within Higher Education is not a new concept. However, the term is often used to describe an ability for those within the university community to come together and

share knowledge, be that academics, professional service staff or students. In this paper we offer the term 'Third Space' to help describe the space created within the Bathway Theatre where community participants might meet and take part in multiple social practices. We partner the term with the work 'open,' allowing us to bring in post-colonial theory to look at breaking down boundaries between perceived academic and community spaces.

This article begins to explore knowledge exchange, incorporating the reflections of community partners, with particular focus on how such projects might create a longer legacy for those involved. Our 'Open-Third Space' model provides a potential way in which universities might consider KEF activity allowing HEIs to create ethical partnerships which are equitable and transparent. We acknowledge that this model challenges some of the prevailing mindsets within the higher education sector, which inadvertently establish a binarism or knowledge hierarchies where traditional routes of knowledge formation are esteemed above indigenous and informal routes. It is also important to note the political uncertainty at the time of writing this article in the United Kingdom, nevertheless, regardless of the policy, the open-third space framework provides future projects with a starting point for collaboration with potential partners.

Background

The primary programme

The aims of the *What About Us: Empowering Community Voices* programme were to create safe spaces where theatre and performance-based workshops might help to tackle areas of social need caused by social inequality and cultural issues; to listen and build knowledge of local concerns, identify how the building and its activity can support the local community and reach out to those who might most benefit; to share knowledge gained from local, national and international networks, workshop practices and interdisciplinary research in order to help identify and promote local sustainable solutions; and to use the activity as a pilot, to create a model for how the university theatre might engage with the community and support further activities beyond the end of the project.

The primary programme raised over £30,000 from both internal and external funders including Arts Council England and Royal Borough of Greenwich and engaged with over 430 people, 250 through the workshops and 180 as audience members. Specific data on socio-economic backgrounds of participants was not collected but data around ethnicity was captured by workshop leaders. Out of the 250 participants, 50% of workshop participants were from the African community, 24% from the Caribbean Community, 21% were white British and 5% Other. The statistics represent the diverse mix of Black and minority ethnic communities engaged in the programme. This is not directly representative of the community based on demographic data within the 2011 census (Royal Borough of Greenwich, 2011) where 52.3% identify as white British within the Borough of Greenwich. This is perhaps unsurprising, given Galeforce Productions Universal CIC's strong links within the African and Caribbean community within Woolwich, and who drove recruitment onto the project.

When participant demographic data is cross referenced with a report commissioned by the Runnymede Trust examining race equality in the borough of Greenwich

(Mompelat 2019), we are able to draw out likely social inequalities faced by participants in the project. The report presents data which demonstrates that social inequalities exist in areas of criminal justice, employment, housing, health and financial support for the third sector. As an example, on employment, the report highlights that between 2016 and 2018, not only were the highest proportion of Job Seekers Allowance Claims (JSA) from Black Caribbean, Other Black, Mixed White and Black Caribbean and Black African but that Black African and Black Caribbean's saw this disproportionately increase when compared to other groups (23). In 2018, Black Caribbean groups were 2.7 times more likely to be JSA claimants than White British groups (Ibid). Whilst the report notes that this disparity could be caused by 'a lack of job competencies' they assert that 'racial discrimination in the labour market' is likely (ibid). This is supported by the data that Black African children have a higher educational attainment at Key Stage 4 when compared to other ethnic groups, including White British, and where educational attainment appears to have no 'clear and predictable effect on success in the labour market (23). This level of structural and social inequality resonates with the Global #BlackLivesMatters movement prominent at the time of writing (2020). Based on this data, and the stories shared anecdotally throughout the project, it is likely that a significant proportion of our participants came from low-income households. It is important however to point out that this was not the case for all participants and that any generalisation made here is to demonstrate the levels of social inequality encountered daily by participants' lived experience. Rather than perpetuating a victim narrative, participants and partners were active agents in the co-construction of the programme, able to support each other despite the structural inequalities they encountered.

Primary programme partners

Galeforce Productions Universal CIC was established in 2010, the organisation is led by Erica Rolle. The organisation supports two priority constituencies; the first is women, men and same sex couples affected by homelessness, domestic abuse and disability and the second is vulnerable people who do not have recourse to public funding because of their immigration status. In this project, Galeforce Productions delivered 8 weeks of weekend workshops using music and song with young mothers, of which 50% had experienced domestic abuse and other social barriers (data on their socio-economic background was not collected).

The R.O.M.E.L Foundation (Realising Our Meaning Emancipates Life) was founded in 2005 by Tatiana Ellis. The organisation delivers fusion arts workshops aimed at improving health and wellbeing of low-income families in the Royal Borough of Greenwich. The R.O.M.E.L Foundation takes a partnership approach to delivering its projects and works with a number of community organisations to offer creative workshops. In this project, the R.O.M.E.L Foundation delivered 8 weeks of weekend workshops with young people aged 12–17, using spoken word and poetry to enable them to express themselves in a safe space.

The Bathway Theatre sits in Woolwich's old historic quarter as part of Greenwich Boroughs Woolwich Common Ward. From 2011 Census data, only 56.5% of people living in Woolwich Common were born in England. 12.4% of those in this area are born in the African countries of Nigeria, Somalia and Ghana (8.7, 2.3, and 1.4%, respectively

[ONS, 2011]) which is significant given the aforementioned data from the Runnymede report around social inequality (Mompelat: 2019). In 1983, after closing as a swimming pool, the Bathway Building in Woolwich was converted to a community centre before being taken over by the university in the 1990s. It became first a Student Union, then staff offices, and now repurposed as drama and theatre facilities for the University of Greenwich's undergraduate and post graduate drama. The Bathway Theatre has a long history of working with artists and members of the local community through capacity development projects and performance work (Lilley and Derbyshire 2013).

Findings

Co-constructing knowledge

This paper posits that knowledge is co-constructed in situated social practices and we assert that the *What About Us* programme activity constitutes a specific social practice. Across the programme, different project partners would have had different social interactions within the open-third space of the Bathway Theatre. Our use of the term social practice moves beyond that suggested by Lave and Wenger (1991) 'community of practice' which considers groups of people as homogenous. Instead, we consider partners and participants as individuals, favouring psychologist Ole Dreier's writing on 'personal trajectory' and 'nexus.' Dreier (1999) proposes that social practice is translocal. Here, translocal means: to occupy multiple social contexts and concrete places. Social contexts, Dreier goes on to say, are places 'in which persons, activities and objects are linked with other such places in a structure of social practice' (Dreier 2008, 23). This approach considers how a person's perspective is formed out of, not just their experience on this programme of activity, but rather out of a series of life experiences formed from a nexus of their social practices. Thus, to consider situated social practice we must consider the interrelatedness of a partner's multiple situated perspectives. As such we consider partners as holding unique knowledge, born out of their individual personal trajectories.

Within this nexus, there is the possibility for multiple constellations of participants or partners working together, within each specific social context, to undertake different tasks and actions. Through these actions, the social context is both re-produced and changed. We cannot therefore consider these groups as a singular, homogeneous, community of practice, but as a nexus of individuals who form social connections within specific social contexts in a structure of social practice. This creates numerous layered and complex relationships between those involved where knowledge is co-constructed. However, whilst Dreier's work allows us to consider the relationship between participants and practice within spaces or situated contexts, it does not allow us to understand how those spaces are constructed and occupied. For this, we will turn to the notion of what we call 'open-third spaces'. By taking a Dreierien approach to analyse the interviews of the three project partners, their reflections offer a unique insight into university–community partnerships through recognising the different skills and knowledge of each participant, rather than considering the team as a homogeneous group with a singular cultural perspective. A number of themes which were simplified to relationships, results and resources arose from analysing the reflections of the three primary project partners. *Relationships* emerged as shorthand to describe the complex relationships occurring across multiple social practices. *Resources* as a way of considering

space, time and personnel as being finite or bound within projects, emerging from our discussions on HEI-Community partnership projects. *Results* as way of describing Key Performance Indicators and social activity. Representatives of the three organisations were interviewed on how the project went, what they learnt and the essential elements universities would need to consider and plan for when creating open-third spaces for university-community partnerships that facilitate the career development of arts professionals outside the academy. The key developmental points are highlighted below.

Relationships

In reflecting on the building of strong relationships, project partners noted the importance of challenging the default institutional mindsets and preconceptions around the creation and legitimisation of knowledge in order to decolonise the academy. Here we use the term decolonise, not to describe post-colonial revision of curricula, but rather, to legitimise the knowledge in the local community and foreground it as having equitable value against traditional, colonial, academic knowledge systems. Davies et al. (2016) noted that in write-ups of UK university-community partnership projects, there is still a focus on the university as the holder of legitimate knowledge and this partner in the relationship is expected to bestow their knowledge and expertise to build the capacity of project partners. All 3 project partners raised issues around perceptions of expertise and knowledge creation in their evaluation of the project. The university was able to develop more effective relationships by valuing local knowledge and expertise. Similarly, Mulvihill et al. (2011) noted that in instances where a community of practice approach is the starting point, it is easier to set up partnerships with the community as co-researchers facilitating stronger relationships and reducing binaries of subject and researcher. In our Dreierien approach, we consider partners as colleagues and acknowledge partners' differing expertise equitably, where our multiple perspectives allow, for both, a reflexive knowledge exchange, learning from each other and creating new knowledge together, either through ways of working or indeed, ideas within this article.

Resources

There was consensus among all the partners that the perception of projects like this in universities must change, adequate resources would need to be committed by university partners in order to set up sufficient administrative structures and develop appropriate strategies and insight into co-constructing effective partnerships that would embrace the necessary approaches required in an authentic 'open-third space'. Davies et al. (2016) noted the importance of seeking commitment to projects like this from all levels of management in HEI's, right from the pro vice-chancellor to dean and head of department level so as to ensure that the appropriate resources are available.

Time as a project resource was another key consideration. Project parameters such as duration of arts programmes and length of weekly activities were a key reflection point for all project partners. Both community partners considered whether the timings they initially set for the workshops were suitable, as a more permanent and ongoing programme of activities would have been useful, especially with a focus and expectation from the outset for all participants so that they could have the space to first build up collectives

and then with strong relational foundations and a common purpose they could work on developing one or a series of larger performances.

An appreciation of the engagement with physical spaces in this project was also a key reflection point. The community organisations were flexible and adaptable but also keen for a level of structure, especially in areas of allocation of the physical spaces – so that there was a set space for each group without overlaps where facilitators and arts teams could come in and prepare or brief each other prior to the start times. This desire for structure and appreciation of the institutional frameworks was also in the paperwork to register participants and allow for a selection process so safeguarding procedures could be embraced.

Partners also reflected on the differences between the institutional processes and contexts in university–community partnerships. Where smaller community arts organisations can be more flexible and adaptable to change quickly, they do not have the resources or space to generate enough research and development time at the initial phase of the project to allow for the careful development of a value adding creative project. This is where the university is at an advantage as the economies of scale and measured progression of the project through the right departments provide spaces for reflexive practice to revisit the project activities and expected outcomes while the necessary sign-off is being negotiated and funding resources are mobilised. Community arts organisations do not have this safety net, all the project partners could see this and appreciate the challenging parameters their counterparts were working in.

There was also consideration of the physical layout of the space where the rather imposing doors of Bathway Theatre that face the street can only be opened either with a university pass or by security from the inside after ringing the bell for access. Community partners noted that the messages portrayed by the physical space are crucial especially when reaching out to community groups that have never engaged with the space before and thus it was important to consider the appearance of the space from their eyes and what was being portrayed. A less institutionally structured space would have given more of a community feel. Project partners reflected that other social facilities like Wi-Fi and even a coffee shop could help to make the space more welcoming and accessible in future for members of the community to feel comfortable and want to engage with the space. A useful strategy recommended by partners was to hold open days prior to the project finalisation so that people from the communities could come in and get comfortable with the space and discuss what they would want from the project.

The definition of a community space and activities from a traditional HEI perspective does not necessarily acknowledge the socialisation aspect related to community. The workshops and lunch aspect of this project was beneficial and a huge success but the socialisation process of such activities was underestimated. Thus, setting tight 2 h allocations for spaces and activities did not translate to community time and often participants would want a similar amount of time for socialising post workshop. Partners observed that the women in the workshops came with their children and thus the age groups were mixed, this therefore had an impact on compliance with safeguarding and the use of that space. It was therefore important to consider how to maintain a focus on achieving both the artistic and social objectives without drifting into merely becoming a babysitting option for the mothers with young children.

Underpinning the focus on resources was the awareness of the need for project partners to exercise a degree of flexibility in their planning from week to week. Community partners

reflected on how it would have been useful to be able to quickly access more physical spaces within the theatre, especially break-out spaces as some revised tasks needed 1-2-1 time with facilitators, where the numbers grew significantly this was not possible.

Space and workshop facilitation plans would need to be adjusted very quickly – you would expect 15 and then 45 would turn up at time so there was a need to be more flexible, it's a community arts project, you cannot turn people away. (Erica Rolle)

Flexibility and adaptability can be easier for community organisations that operate within flatter hierarchies but this can be a challenge for universities that must still operate within their wider institutional policies and operating infrastructure. Room booking systems, building maintenance activities and safeguarding policies were crucial aspects to be considered and thus restricted flexible and quick responses to the iterative and organic nature of the project development from week to week. For example, the plan for delivery of the spoken word workshops which were originally intended to be for the 14–17-year-old age group had to be revised as this age group had exams and were busy at the time of the workshops and thus focus shifted to 8–15-year olds with a majority female attendance. The participants also wanted to focus on creative projects that would help them express themselves in a therapeutic and cathartic manner and thus the concept of 'Spill the Tea' was developed from the group. Spill the Tea was a spoken word performance piece where the idea of 'tea' played on the urban slang for 'Truth' and the way in which ideas were shared between workshops, over a cup of tea.

Results

Project partners reflected on the influence of other stakeholders that participate in university-community collaborations. There sometimes can be a mismatch in objective and goals set: for example, funders and local council can hold a certain degree of power over project activities. This can make an artistic programme with social objectives quite political, and skills in strategic diplomacy and careful negotiation are a priority in delivering community projects where partners must ensure they are not alienating themselves from potential or future funding partners, or encroaching on the existing work of other projects in the area.

All project partners also noted the importance of not focusing on quantitative outputs and numerical targets related to attendee numbers but on making a notable and sustainable difference that supported the local community. It would not be good enough to just have the theatre filled with people for an 8 week project each semester or once a year but to ensure the space was welcoming and accessible to the local community so that rather than always wait to be invited into the space, they could see it as an open space which they could access with their ideas based on the priorities they identified and use the space in the best way most relevant to them.

The community arts organisations also identified a wider range of skills they would have wanted to be included as Key Performance Indicators at the beginning of the project from their perspective. Partners reflected on how universities could offer more support in developing technical skills around performance space etiquette and stage management and lighting and sound. Administrative skills related to fundraising and negotiating with project partners were shared by partners but a stronger focus in building knowledge in these areas in future projects felt useful and necessary.

Conclusion

Through the work, at the Bathway Theatre, we have learnt that there is a level of complexity in navigating the fields of power that exist between cultural organisations, practitioners, funders, community gatekeepers and local councils. As such the theatre must carefully consider how it can enhance its connections with local groups and leaders, build relationships and negotiate what engagement and community participation means in form and function whilst considering that each stakeholder is not necessarily representative of the wider community. Another important finding is that whilst projects of this nature are essential for the sustainable development of cultural spaces, they require adequate resourcing. The project team will use the learning from this pilot to develop a strategy for how the theatre can continue to become more civic centred over the next 5–7 years, with the hope to also impact wider structure and policy around arts and event practice within the University of Greenwich as a whole.

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Disclosure statement

This research is sponsored by multiple organisations, including those from the council, arts council and multiple universities. It may be used as evidence to support a community outreach plan for the University of Greenwich as well as to generate additional work by project partners.

We have disclosed those interests fully to Taylor & Francis, and have in place an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from this arrangement.

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Notes on contributors

Tatiana Ellis: 90's rap star, Q-tee and author of 'Melodies of A Ghetto Princess'. Tatiana formed The ROMEL foundation in memory of her son Romel, who passed away from a heart condition in 2005. To keep his memory alive, Tatiana has concentrated on making community links to create change through art.

David Hockham is the Theatre Manager of the University of Greenwich's Bathway Theatre. Having taught technical theatre practice for over 10 years, David is a PhD candidate at the IOE looking at vocational practice as socially situated. Alongside this he works as both producer and Production Manager for Dead Rabbits theatre Company

Erica Rolle: Chief Executive of Galeforce Productions Universal CIC, over 27 years expertise in the field of housing, employment law, policy and strategy for domestic violence and abuse. Erica delivers high profile conferences, workshops and training to combat domestic abuse and violence.

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