Higher Education for Good

Teaching and Learning Futures

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15. Vulnerability and generosity: The good future for Australian higher education

Kate Bowles

Australia is closing its borders to all non-citizens and non-residents. (Media Release, Australian Prime Minister, 19 March 2020)

This tree is only a baby at the moment, but it will grow up to 35 metres tall. It will be seen for miles because of the beautiful red flowers it will have during the summer months, Professor Davidson said. The students expressed their excitement at being back in Australia (Media Release, University of Wollongong, 10 December 2021)

It's early in the summer, and staff are standing around in the courtyard of an Australian university building. The building is very new. The senior executive, campus staff and local media are masked and careful. There is a buffet table. Summer rain is falling lightly on and off. While the hosts make small talk, the guests are running late. They're still checking out of their isolation accommodation. It's been months of committee work and delicate negotiations with Australian state and federal governments to get everyone to this point.

Out in the rain, draped with a red ribbon, is a recently planted sapling. *Brachychiton acerifolius* is a rainforest tree that lives along the east coast of Australia, named by nineteenth century botanists for its maple shaped leaves and its seed clusters that resembled a short tunic (from the Greek: *brachys* and *chiton*). This tree is also known up and down the east coast of Australia by the name that it shares with the university's own region: the Illawarra flame tree. Its distinctive red flowers are in the university's crest and brand palette, the source of the red in the corporate PowerPoint templates and Zoom backgrounds. There's even

a 1980s pub rock song that immortalises its place in Australian small-town culture (Delaney, 2015):

> the flame tree will blind the weary driver
> and there's nothing else could set fire to this town
> there's no change, there's no pace
> everything within its place

Finally, the visitors arrive. They are a very small group of international students who have returned to Australia in a government pilot program that might predict the end of pandemic border closures. They have been travelling and isolating for days and are tired and hungry. In a break in the rain, they assemble with the senior executives around the sapling that has been planted to commemorate their return, and the journalists take photographs of the scene.

This chapter reflects on the throwntogetherness (Massey, 2005) of this event in December 2021. It is a random start, an ordinary scene. Small events like these are marginal to the way we usually talk about universities, but they are core to the way a university presents itself to its local community. In this chapter, my aim is to pull apart some of the threads that are woven through this minor scene, to reflect on how Australian universities relate to the real estate they claim as their own, and to examine the enabling relations between governance, property and function that are overlooked when we focus only on what these relations have produced. These questions have come up during a period of global disruption that has left Australian universities and their staff (as with many of their colleagues across the globe) reeling from austerity, restructure, and burnout. We know (and if we did not realise this before, we have been relentlessly briefed) that the market vulnerability revealed by the pandemic did not originate with border closures. So now we have an opportunity to ask whether we really should try to return to how we did business before, or can we imagine a more courageous reform that addresses the provenance of our campuses and thinks differently about the standards by which we will measure a future that is good?

Doreen Massey's thinking about space has influenced this reflection, along with Australian Raewyn Connell's (2019) manifesto for the good university, Kathleen Fitzpatrick's (2019) call to save the (American) university through generous thinking, and ideas drawn from Arthur Frank's (2004) earlier call for the remoralisation of healthcare through

the renewal of generosity. I have found Maria Puig de La Bellacasa's (2012) reading of Donna Haraway on "thinking with care" specifically helpful. Universities are places where pragmatism and idealism run up against each other all the time. I am inclined to hope for the efficacy of small generous acts that can be undertaken while it is still difficult to imagine wholesale reform; and at the same time, I am concerned that generosity can become a ruse. Like Connell (2019), I am an advocate for the good university that has a "modest demeanour in the world" (p. 175), and this means thinking about how generosity can proceed from uncertainty and extend in tentative action.

In choosing this scene as a starting point, I am drawn to its anxious conversation with what it is compensating for. It presents as a kind of neocolonial landscape painting: a sincere attempt to manage ambivalence about international student recruitment by planting a tree on stolen Aboriginal land. Ambivalence clearly did not start with the pandemic, nor with the business model that the pandemic interrupted; in this scene there are much older problems of moral legitimacy. So, this event contains what we need to think about whether and how Australian public education can now become a form of higher education that is for good, in three senses. Firstly, can Australian universities *come good*, and recover from the crisis imposed on them by the pandemic? Secondly, can Australian universities somehow *become good*, despite the morally untenable silence in the enabling Acts that established them? And finally, can Australian universities overcome their own currently demoralising habits of operation and be *for good*, in ways that are both enduring and worth saving?

I am conscious that in commencing with this scene, I am offering a hyperlocal response to the broadest possible questions about higher education in other places. I hope that the ideas raised here will be useful to readers in other contexts, particularly those where coloniality persists. When we generalise about higher education as a global phenomenon, whether as a set of business arrangements or a life stage, we overlook that all higher education takes place somewhere, quite literally. As universities around the world, and especially in colonised places, begin to engage with the challenge of decolonising their scholarly routines, it is timely to accept that this must also unsettle their sense of the proper in relation to land entitlement.

Universities as encounters

In thinking about universities as people meeting somewhere to do something (plant a tree, conduct research, enrol as students or work as teachers), I want to begin with Doreen Massey's (2005) well known proposition that we think about all space as relational, constituted by the stories that bring people together:

> Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far. (p. 9)

To imagine higher education as an unfinished "simultaneity of stories-so-far" invites us to wind back some of the institutional stories that appear in the event of this tree-planting. Massey speaks specifically to spaces wrenched into action by colonial relations. She reads colonialism itself as a "story about space", a legitimising narrative that attempts

> a particular form of ordering and organising space which refused (refuses) to acknowledge its multiplicities, its fractures and its dynamism. It is a stabilisation of the inherent instabilities and creativities of space; a way of coming to terms with the great 'out there'. (p. 65)

As remnant colonial infrastructure, Australian universities are narrating machines for a reason: across strategic plans, annual reports and marketing their stabilising stories discipline the unstable "out there" of students, funders, donors, governments, and publics, while refusing just as many stories of their founding purpose and legitimising themselves as the solution to the problem of the future. This storytelling is relentless and smooth, and when it comes to events and occasions, the story is placed under pressure by the multiple storylines that show up when people and institutions meet.

Like Massey, Arthur Frank reflects on encounters, in his case, in health. He has written extensively about the muddled and ambiguous communication that occurs when people who are ill meet people who work in healthcare. In a 2020 essay on his blog, he asks a question that is relevant to our tree-planting: can occasions think? He suggests that occasions are special types of these encounters, choreographing persons,

places, ideas, and things. As much as they are planned, occasions are always immediately disorganised by competing expectations and the pressure of their own temporal intensity. Multiple stories collide, always on the verge of derailment. Even when the logistics run like clockwork, the coming together of so many stories and witnesses means that the event's meaning cannot be contained. Frank notices that this draws up an obligation to recognise that coherence has its limits:

> The ethical question this raises — at least *ethical* is the best I can think to call it, although the word seems inadequate; should I just say *human*? — is whether the participants in this situation can each remain self-aware that the other participants do not share their perspective. Something beyond *empathy* (a word I seek to avoid) is involved here; it's rather an awareness of the limits of fellow-feeling, the limits of what George Herbert Mead called taking the role of the other. To return to Davis's metaphor, can we put ourselves inside a Cubist painting and live with the fracturing of the lines that, in normal perception, make the scene around us cohere?

I am using Frank's question about how we live with incoherence to look beyond the specific occasion of this tree planting ceremony and its many trajectories of feeling, one of which is my own. Past the period of emergency border closures in Australia, those of us who work in higher education are also trying to live within an incoherent scene, crisscrossed by many possible histories and futures, some of which are looking uncertain. To think about this fracturing, to ask what it is that *matters* about all this, we need to start with the recent backstories and then the further-back-stories of internationalisation in Australian higher education.

Backstories

The immediate story of this tree planting scene emerges from the way the Australian government responded to the pandemic in 2020. In March, the government abruptly closed Australian borders to non-citizens and non-residents (Hutchens, 2022; Murphy & Karp, 2020). For Australian businesses in travel, retail, hospitality and tourism, the sudden loss of foreign income resulted in widespread crisis. Australian universities were also caught out in their chronic dependency on the fees of international students coming to Australia to study. Only a month later, the prime minister announced that international students who had

been living, working, paying taxes and making an extraordinary direct and indirect contribution to the Australian economy should think about leaving (Gibson & Moran, 2020): "As much as it's lovely to have visitors to Australia in good times, at times like this, if you are a visitor in this country, it is time… to make your way home," he said.

As it turned out, many international students were already caught outside Australia, due to the late summer timing of the border closure. Meanwhile others who made the brave and difficult decision to ride out the pandemic in Australia learned that as non-citizens they were excluded from all government assistance when they lost their casual jobs. Stories of international students relying on Australian university food banks were reported around the world, as the border closure stretched into a second year. Universities put in place emergency teaching measures to support international students to stay enrolled while at home, but the contraction of fee revenue converged with the controversial exclusion of universities from government support to affected businesses (Norton, 2021; Ross, 2020). By 2021, 40,000 higher education jobs were lost through a combination of early retirement incentives, restructuring of administrative teams, and slashing of casual positions (Littleton & Stanford, 2021).

After extensive sector lobbying, late in 2021 the Australian federal government allowed some state governments to trial the return of international students into quarantine from a restricted range of countries on managed flights (NSW Government, 2021). This was not a trial of public health measures so much as a test of electoral tolerance for allowing non-citizens to return when so many Australian families were still separated. Nevertheless, after the first pilot flights, change was relatively quick. By February 2022, borders opened fully, and government incentives appeared to encourage international students to return promptly (Jose, 2022; Study International, 2022). These were not trivial measures: changes to post-study visa conditions, visa fee refunds, and lifting the cap on casual work hours have all been significant policy adjustments. These efforts at incentive acknowledged that market confidence in Australia might have slipped after two years of government and universities blaming each other for international student recruitment as a business problem. Without a blush, the Prime Minister described this package as a "thank you for choosing Australia"

and added that it would be "incredibly helpful" to have international students "filling some of these critical workforce shortages, particularly those who are working and being trained in health care, aged care, those types of sectors" (ICEF Monitor, 2022).

The back and forth between universities and government during the pandemic is a chapter in a long history of lobbying and dispute over the support of Australian public higher education. This hinges on the question of mission: whether Australian universities are some form of essential national infrastructure, or export business continually at risk of market failure at home. In reality, like the Australian creative industries, they are a combination of the two. Gwilym Croucher and James Wagner's (2020) commissioned history of Australian universities takes a snapshot of the problem: "In adapting themselves to serve their communities, local and national, universities have collectively been the partners of government and have worked in the service of the nation" (p. 172). This partnership gives Australian governments leverage over what universities do and how they manage themselves, and that continual pressure on purpose means that we often find ourselves back at the question Hannah Forsyth asks in the conclusion of her study of the Australian university: *what sort of university do we want*? (Forsyth, 2014).

The answers to this question are mixed. At one level we persist with a vague claim to moral purpose dating back to Bologna, and cling to the ideal of advancing knowledge and teaching students to become educated and successful citizens. We reject retail language on principle: we don't think students should be thought of as customers just because they pay to study. Nevertheless, while governments and lobbyists haggle over the mix of disciplines, student places, and who pays, dependence on what had appeared to be a stable pipeline of fee-paying non-citizen students has increased in jumps since the 1950s. Periodically, this business vulnerability has raised alarms (Moodie, 2011). Nevertheless, as Croucher and Wagner (2020) put it, by 2017 "almost one third of Australia's higher education students came on a student visa" (p. 169). This vulnerability to the risk of a shift in demand was not unique to Australia: when international travel stopped suddenly in 2020, the global supply chain logistics of international education revealed themselves in ugly ways. As Raewyn Connell (2019) argues succinctly, the reality

of this trafficking will continue to inhibit our progress towards the good university system, "since the international market in fee-paying students sucks money out of developing countries to pay universities in richer ones" (p. 191).

This was the immediate challenge facing Australian universities as international recruitment pipelines slowly started functioning again. While trying to come good, the risk has been lapsing into the way we acted before, treating international students as revenue inputs, and Australian students in terms of their life goals and contribution to the nation's prosperity. As many observers of public higher education notice, universities draw on public funding to deliver selective private gain, even if public funding is not enough to sustain them. This problem is not resolved by cross-subsidising inadequate public funding with a partial privatisation strategy that leaves some students paying significantly more for the same experience as those they subsidise. We now have to be far more careful in the way we think, plan, and talk about why we want to invite international students back to our universities. At the very least, we need to challenge the longstanding enthusiasm for international education as Australia's extractive export winner alongside coal and iron ore (Moodie, 2011).

And this will need to be addressed with something more than tree planting. Of course, it feels generous, creative, and hopeful to plant a tree. It engages our humility and our confidence all at once: we expect trees to outlive us, and certainly to outlast our working lives, but here we are *doing something for the planet*, instead of just digging things out of it. In Australian universities, where we lead research into climate solutions, we landscape campuses and plant native trees in environmentally conscientious ways. But this ceremonial sapling, and the ground it has been planted into, are part of a much older problem, one that we have been trying both to ignore and talk our way out of.

All-the-way-back stories

Planting a tree on a university campus is an act of humility, but it is also an exercise of power. To plant a tree carefully and with whatever intentions is to stake a claim to the ground you're planting into. This entitlement is assured in the enabling legislation that awards each

Australian university its property rights. The enabling Act of the university where this tree was planted defines the university's object as "the promotion, within the limits of the University's resources, of scholarship, research, free inquiry, the interaction of research and teaching, and academic excellence" (AustLII, n.d.). Underneath this object, its principal functions are laid out, conceived in broad terms to unite knowledge and citizenship under the shade of good governance.

> (2) The University has the following principal functions for the promotion of its object:
>   (a) the provision of facilities for education and research of university standard, having particular regard to the needs of the Illawarra region,
>   (b) the encouragement of the dissemination, advancement, development and application of knowledge informed by free inquiry,
>   (c) the provision of courses of study or instruction across a range of fields, and the carrying out of research, to meet the needs of the community,
>   (d) the participation in public discourse,
>   (e) the conferring of degrees, including those of Bachelor, Master and Doctor, and the awarding of diplomas, certificates and other awards,
>   (f) the provision of teaching and learning that engage with advanced knowledge and inquiry,
>   (g) the development of governance, procedural rules, admission policies, financial arrangements and quality assurance processes that are underpinned by the values and goals referred to in the functions set out in this subsection, and that are sufficient to ensure the integrity of the University's academic programs.

This is an uncontroversial summary of what a university is supposed to do, but from the Act the university acquires no obligations to think about where it is located. The Act presents its own *terra nullius*: it is silent on "Aboriginal", "Indigenous" and "Country". There are however 22 mentions of "land" and an entire division of the Act dealing with the question of property. The conferral of property rights enables the Australian public university to exercise itself somewhere, and on this basis to reach everywhere: "within or outside the State, including outside Australia" (AustLII, n.d.). It establishes the legal means to buy, sell, lease, and build; for Australian universities these are the underpinning rights to a portfolio of property that sustains landmark buildings, bright signage, landscaping and tree planting. Real estate assets are critical to

branding, and what Connell calls "the process of turning universities into spectacle" (Connell, 2019, p. 131).

The provenance of real estate is a moral problem for all Australian universities. It is not our land, and it did not belong to the British crown when Australia's universities were legislated. This problem cannot be symbolically managed by Acknowledging Country, a far more common university practice than tree planting. Acknowledging Country is a ritual that we share with other major Australian institutions. Across public and corporate contexts, occasions of all kinds — ceremonies, committee meetings, sporting fixtures, social events begin with an Acknowledgement of the specific Aboriginal Country where the event is taking place, and a statement of respect both to the traditional owners of that Country, and to any Aboriginal people present. Australian universities acknowledge the Country on which our campuses have been built, our governance is managed, our business divisions do business, our servers are housed, our repositories are looked after, and our research and face-to-face teaching take place. Australian university staff acknowledge Country in conferences, presentations and Zoom meetings. An Australian university will generate several Acknowledgements of Country a day, one way and another. At the very least, this should cause us to notice that the object and functions of an Australian university depend on property that was seized in violent raids whose marks of harm remain.

This means that if Australia's universities are to become good, our symbolic actions need to raise our accountability to the true owners of our real estate. Of course, it is daunting for Western institutions to imagine doing this, but just as Raewyn Connell makes the bold suggestion of a Tobin tax to developing countries whose students we recruit (Connell, 2019, p. 191), we need to look closer to home, and as a first step consider how to address the back rent we owe for the land we occupy. While we imagine that extraordinary step, we do not need to sit on our hands. We can begin to align ourselves to that future possibility by asking of all our business decisions: how does this choice or this action represent our acknowledgement that we are on Country? What obligations are placed on our institutions, and how should we behave?

Thinking in the world

Here I find the work of Maria Puig de La Bellacasa (2012) on "thinking with care" very helpful. She distinguishes care from "hegemonic ethics", and secures care instead to the principle of acknowledging where you stand:

> Thinking in the world involves acknowledging our own involvements in perpetuating dominant values, rather than retreating into the secure position of an enlightened outsider who knows better. (p. 197)

The first step is here: we can acknowledge that public universities are currently designed to operate conservatively in relation to dominant values. Their mission is to keep operating. As people who work on campuses that are somewhere, we are not enlightened outsiders. We are inside the scene, holding tightly to the deeds, protecting the future of things going on as they do now. This is why it is much easier to imagine changing the form of words for an Acknowledgement of Country, to commit to supporting federal constitutional change in relation to national sovereignty and political agency, to fund cultural initiatives that will change how and what we teach and to transform ceremonial occasions to centre on Indigenous cultural practices (as this university has done). It is more difficult to develop meaningful reparations and figure out how to meet our obligations in other than symbolic ways.

Puig de La Bellacasa (2012), carefully surveying Donna Haraway's work on relational ontology, identifies two modes of operation that could help those of us who work in Australian universities, and indeed in the HE sector broadly to face these challenges. First, she addresses the practicalities of "thinking-with" that might help us to conceive of the identity of a public institution as neither fixed nor fluid but in action, "continuously in the making" (p. 199). We can be cynical about fluidity as the hallmark of privilege but thinking-with is an important step towards accepting our obligations to others (Fitzpatrick, 2019, p. 52), and admitting that our objects and functions matter because they have material impact. Of course, this is not a novel way to think, but dominant cultural habits of thinking-about have catching up to do, to acknowledge the sophistication of thinking-with, including thinking-with Country itself that pre-existed Australian public universities by tens of thousands of years (Wright et al, 2021).

Puig de La Bellacasa's second discovery within Haraway's writing is that thinking-with means dissenting-within. Dissenting-within is a stubbornness of attention to things that need fixing in small ways. It is not about big or public gestures, but about the continuous labour of scrutiny and refusal. "In sum", she writes, "thinking-with belongs to, and creates, community by inscribing thought and knowledge in worlds one cares about in order *to make a difference*—a diffraction" (pp. 204–5). This caring to make a difference, in both senses, lets us see the lines that tether the tree planting scene to its histories and that pull together its problematic effort at coherence. If we can let these entangled storylines become visible, we are taking a step to see past the staged present with its essential flaws to a future that can be imagined differently. So, this second step, beyond recognition that the dominant culture is catching up, is to invite the dominant culture to own its moral vulnerability, rather than just fixing its exposure to risk. Puig de La Bellacasa (2012) writes:

> *Dissenting-within* is openness to the effects we might produce with critiques to worlds we would rather not endorse. Caring for the effects this way can make us particularly vulnerable. Recognizing vulnerability has been reclaimed as an ethical stance; in the practice of thinking-with, it comes as a consequence of accepting one's thought as inheritor, even of the threads of thought we oppose. It might be also the inescapable price of commitment: if care is to *move* a situation, those who care will also be moved by it. (p. 206)

Again, apprehension about the dominant culture bringing moral attention back to itself is valid. Dominant cultures have a track record of flattering themselves that they have discovered humility without loosening their grip on power. But reconciliation to our shared and alarming future cannot commence without the dominant culture going through a few things. As Puig de La Bellacasa (2012) puts it, dissenting-within is to be dissented with — to have to live up to and live with the "effects of one's thinking" (p. 207) in a public way.

Future stories

In closing, I want to think about how a turn to vulnerability could change the assumptions we have held about generosity as both national benefit and community contribution, drawing on recent thinking about

generosity as a critique of the philanthropic mission. It is difficult for universities with their roots in the mud of colonial history to contribute to a good future. Intentional vulnerability is not the way Australian universities were established, and it is not the way that they have evolved. We have awarded ourselves the contract to advance the good future through our research and our education of citizens. Knowledge and innovation assure our status; we have become so used to seeking approval by being internationally well-ranked that we have lost sight of the value of local modest action. Our idea of generosity involves big gestures in our communities, while making good against the international competition.

In the US context, Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2019) proposes a sharp criticism of the philanthropic understanding of generosity in universities. She sees in the idealisation of generous sharing the risk of moral burnout, and an excuse:

> to draw boundaries around our responsibilities to the communities in which our institutions are embedded... As a result, we create specific contexts for our generous behaviour that lie outside the center of our working lives. Nothing about that center need necessarily change: we do what we do, and then we bring the good of what we do to the world. Generosity in this model slips all too easily into a missionary project, in which we provide the understanding derived from our privileged position to the less fortunate around us. And, having done so, we can consider our obligations to the world to be fulfilled. (pp. 50–51)

Instead of engaging in generous acts that risk nothing of our own, Fitzpatrick advocates for radically generous thought that critiques philanthropic action itself. Arthur Frank (2004) also points out the limits of philanthropic attention. Both see the case for a renewed understanding of generosity: not the heroics of public giving while giving nothing up, but more in the everyday and reciprocal encounters between people who can make a small difference to each other. This is the modest, local scale at which generous reform of object and function can begin. But it is not an easy cultural shift. Fitzpatrick (2019) argues that this demands rigorous commitment to obligation, and a refusal to let ourselves off the hook. This generosity is necessarily uncomfortable, and inconcludable, an open-ended and open-minded determination "of which we cannot absolve ourselves" (p. 51). It is founded in vulnerable

thinking rather than philanthropic hubris, and it pulls together thinking-with and dissenting-within. Of course, this kind of vulnerable generosity presents challenges to the business of universities, especially in the retail hothouse of international student recruitment, but it is within our reach to think intelligently about how we change the way we think and act, and to ask ourselves what this new modest demeanour means for every strategic choice.

So, do we still have time for universities to achieve change at small scale, become good at this slow pace, and having sorted out their own houses make a just contribution to a good future? Can public systems that depend on private revenue streams engage with the urgency of dissenting-within while still staying open for good outcomes? Universities don't have the privilege of downtime: all change has to happen live and incrementally, while workers depend on employment, students are enrolled and progressing through their degrees, and multinational research projects are underway. The perpetual activity of the public university means finding a way instead to think in the thick of the everyday choices, enactments, and routines that interpellate universities, their staff, and their students as themselves. It means allowing ourselves to become and remain uneasy when we know that something feels wrong, and to continue with patience to advocate for change.

In this chapter, I have been thinking about the ways in which, at any given ceremonial moment, a university can look like a scene in which "there's no change, there's no pace, everything within its place" (Delaney, 2015). To staff who are demoralised by living with misgivings about all of this, to students who facing an uncertain and expensive future, to communities who are not sure where their investment in higher education is taking them, to governments of all kinds, and above all to the true owners of the land universities are built on — to all these stakeholders, the way Australian universities have been operating, and the business risks they been taking, can make them seem out of touch with present realities and not fit for future purpose. Universities are easy to give up on. But sometimes a commitment to a good future begins with a simple refusal to give up trying.

A good future for higher education, and not just a future in which we're keeping the lights on, is a challenge that will involve new kinds

of partnerships between universities and their communities. These partnerships, especially with true owners, will involve slow progress, significant mistakes, and the need for persistent, small scale, generous acknowledgement that this is hard. Locating generosity within vulnerability, we will have to ask for public and government support for an agenda of courageous reform over the long term. This kind of change is not a quick win. The courage to confront the provenance of our real estate would place the property portfolio at risk, as it should, and land back may not happen in any of our lifetimes. This is what makes it radical and worth cherishing as a dream.

Even to imagine such a move, let alone to lobby for it, is to plant a sapling in our imagination. And now that we have thought of it, it is already growing, and might yet come to be seen for miles.

Postscript

This is an essay written from a position of ambivalence, but not from bad faith. I work in internationalisation at the university where this sapling was planted, and I was the person who suggested planting it. The suggestion was met with warmth at every turn. Change is complex.

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