Chapter 7
Winter Cities and Local Magic: Re-storying an Urban Ravine in Edmonton, Canada

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Abstract Festival experiences and environments are often marketed as magical, an appeal that marks expanding Winter Cities initiatives to rebrand forbiddingly cold climates as attractions for tourists, residents and investors. Edmonton, Canada's Flying Canoe Volant festival, named for a French-Canadian myth about a bewitched journey, offers 'magic' and 'mystery' over three February nights in a central urban ravine that attracts up to 40,000 participants each year in temperatures far below zero. A key quality of magic is transformation, and the ravine itself is part of a prior regeneration of early industrial zones that removed most traces of human habitation including by the city's minority founding groups: francophones, Metis and Indigenous Peoples. These groups, in turn, are the focus and drivers of the festival on the edge of a recently heritage-branded 'French Quarter'. This chapter considers themes of transformation in contexts of urban heritage, tourism and regeneration centred around a liminal urban space, cultural landscape or *terrain vague.* A central question is how green space as relatively undeveloped parkland cutting a deep groove through adjoining streets can contribute to goals of sustainable regeneration. As festival space, it fosters unpredictable, collaborative voices and community relations that endure beyond the event, with the important dimension of revisiting and recrafting certain entrenched historical narratives.

Keywords Urban regeneration · Winter cities · Minority groups · Festival · Terrain vague

7.1 Introduction

The Canadian city of Edmonton, Alberta, the most northerly metropolitan centre in North America, knows long, dark winters with temperatures reaching minus 30 Celsius. In 2013, the city adopted a 'Winter Cities' strategy aligned with an international movement to rebrand forbiddingly cold climates and extend the outdoor tourism and

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recreation season through design and activities such as festivals. One of seven different outdoor winter events, the 3-day Flying Canoe Volant (FCV) festival attracts up to 40,000 participants each February to a deep urban ravine. Named for a French-Canadian folktale about a bewitched midwinter journey by a group of fur traders, the event retails a magical environment, elements of solstice carnival transformation from darkness and cold to light and life. It also resonates with pragmatic economic programmes of urban regeneration and revitalization as transformative agents.

This chapter considers themes of transformation in contexts of urban heritage, tourism and regeneration as centred on a liminal urban space, cultural landscape or *terrain vague.* It does not attempt to quantify economic or policy outcomes, but examines interrelated issues in terms of the value of small community cultural phenomena that have unpredictable or inarticulate long-term impacts. A central question is how green space or relatively undeveloped parkland cutting a deep groove through adjoining streetscapes can contribute to goals of sustainable regeneration alongside or complementing new infrastructure. What relevant values and knowledges can be regenerated or emerge in or from a festival of intangible heritage? Physical, social and symbolic *terrains vague* may foster unpredictable, collaborative voices and community relations that endure beyond the event, with the important dimension of revisiting and recrafting certain entrenched historical narratives.

7.2 Culture-Led Regeneration and Historic Urban Landscapes

Although the two terms are often used interchangeably, revitalization emphasizes infrastructure whereas regeneration is more broadly about spinoffs such as jobs, investment and social or environmental improvement (Wise and Clark 2017). Even where 'creative city' driven branding incorporates heritage elements, homogenizing and generic production can sacrifice local specifics of place for mass audience spectacle, or devalue less tangible, or marginalized, aspects of local identity. The integration of local community in events and programmes is crucial to long-term sustainability and holistic regeneration of historic districts and landscapes. UNESCO (1993) has recommended citizen participation, collaboration and sectoral interdependency based in shared traditions and everyday creativity to complement instrumental strategies of urban regeneration. As local communities become leaders and drivers of projects they are themselves regenerated and strengthened on different levels (see Sepe and di Trapani 2010).

Smaller cities, in particular, need action aligned with homegrown criteria that sustain, not primarily neoliberal economic goals, but standards such as 'liveability' including access to green space and localized events such as festivals and collaborative art practices (Lewis and Donald 2010). Concepts of urban cultural landscapes, or historic urban landscapes, allow for the equal valuation of tangible and intangible elements of culture and heritage. Underused or marginal urban landscapes offer

spaces for ephemeral play and temporary activities capable of extraordinary impact with minimum permanent change and little financial investment (Buggey 1999). Intangible heritage such as festivals and events is especially significant in a city that comprises a relatively recent built environment retaining little physical evidence of its longer history, aside from the central feature of its river valley.

Edmonton's river valley ravines to great extent embody the *terrain vague*. This notion of *terrain vague* refers to liminal, hybrid or in-between space evoking disorder, surprise and sensuality, and forgotten or superseded materialities. As it exists outside the cultural, social, and economic circuits of urban life haunts the edges of streetscapes, the *terrain vague* resonates with indeterminate, innovative temporary uses (Barron and Mariani 2014; Bower 2015). The application of the concept to the natural landscape of the ravine highlights its character as a vessel for shifting activity patterns and temporary infrastructure including homes and industry over time. Wooden trestle bridges that once carried a railroad now shape the paths of hikers and cyclists who leave the street grid on its banks and descend to pass through, typically for recreational purposes rather than practical commuting routines. Fragments of building foundations and materials occasionally surface, and an archaeological dig recently revealed a squatters' camp from the Depression era; children out of adult sight construct fragile forts and role play at frontier life. Homeless people, primarily Indigenous, erect camps on sites of their traditional homeland until once more evicted. This complex interweaving of past and present, material and imagination, a semi-wilderness within an urban frame, suggests that there are still spaces to discover complex stories of place and heritage. The ravine thus contributes deep sociocultural dimensions to historical and current practices of regeneration not only of green space but also of the built city above, including potentially expanding understandings of negatively stereotyped or typecast communities in a rediscovery of local history.

7.3 Place and Peoples

Edmonton, with its history as a peripheral resource economy launched by the fur trade in the eighteenth century and later sustained by the oil industry, has long struggled to establish a firm place identity amid intersecting histories and agenda. The core heritage narrative, evolving around selective European exploration and pioneer settlement, reflects that of mainstream Canadian history as a celebration of conquest of the land and its Indigenous inhabitants, followed by the bestowing of civilization as represented by a dominant British culture and society.

The narrative, experiential and aesthetic content of the FCV festival draws, rather, upon the minority founding group histories and cultures of francophone and Indigenous peoples including the nehiyawak (Cree) and niitsitapi (Blackfoot) who knew the North Saskatchewan River valley for thousands of years. First Nations, Métis and Inuit people (FNMI) are all recognized as Indigenous in the Canadian constitution. Beginning with late nineteenth-century settlement around the fur trade fort, the city has sprawled out in a car-centred, low-density, suburbanized mass. Although the

area's population is almost one million, its core remains experientially a small-to-mid-sized city of distinct districts. Characterized by oil economy-driven urban flux, creative destruction and successive rebranding campaigns, its central feature is the extensive river valley that bisects it from east to west with a 2-km wide, 60-m deep green space known as the largest urban park in North America. Not easily assimilated into everyday city life on its banks, the valley evolved from Indigenous hunting grounds to fur trade routes to industrial zone and dumping grounds to conserved green space in the latter twentieth century (Edmonton 1990; Bower 2015).

In its turn, the Mill Creek Ravine running approximately 10 km south from the river serves as a dividing line between the revitalized historic and commercial district of Old Strathcona and the post-war Bonnie Doon neighbourhood to the east, now undergoing infrastructure revitalization (see the sketch detailed in Fig. 7.1). As in the main valley, several stages of reinvention have transformed the space. Traces of settler habitation and industry remain though past Indigenous presence is largely intangible. Today the city hosts the country's second largest Indigenous population

Fig. 7.1 Mill Creek Ravine and Bonnie Doon (French Quarter) Edmonton

(about 83,750 people in 2016 or around 6% of total population) of which the Métis, of mixed French-Canadian and First Nations ancestry, represent just over half (Statistics Canada 2006). Following their important roles in the fur trade, they were the first permanent settlers around Fort Edmonton; Mill Creek is named for the gristmill originally operated there by Metis businessman William Bird.

By the early twentieth century, most Indigenous peoples were forced out of the central city through colonial seizures of land rights and reserves. The Metis have lived in ambiguous relationships with both White and Indigenous peoples and have reclaimed identity rights on their own terms over a long history of political activism (see Quick 2015). Canadian public discourse following the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Committee report increasingly affirms Indigenous presence and voices. Various projects support this social regeneration in terms of economic development, including tourism, as well as social identity, culture and language (Hunt 2016). The City of Edmonton has prioritized building Indigenous participation in its many progressive initiatives including arts and heritage policies that support cultural performances, spaces and events (EAC 2008, 2018b).

Also characterized by resilience and activism is the francophone culture in the Canadian Province of Alberta. The French language predominated in the fur trade, becoming secondary to English in Edmonton only in the late nineteenth century. The Michif language, a combination of Cree and French spoken by most Metis, was also prominent. In 1915, when Alberta francophones represented about 6% of the population, the province declared English the only language of public school instruction, but French has survived as a living language through strong resistance to assimilation (Behiels 2005). After WWII, most of the francophone community around the fort site relocated to the south side Bonnie Doon neighbourhood. In 2016, Edmonton had one of the largest bilingual (French and English) groups among urban centres outside of Quebec in Canada. Today 16.5% of the population are native French speakers, compared to around 2% in the country as a whole; international immigration has increased and diversified this presence (Bergeron 2007). Francophones are the largest minority ethnic group in Alberta, and ten thousand live near La Cite Francophone, a cultural and business centre which, as director Daniel Cournoyer explains (personal communication 26 Aug 2019), opened in 1997 and hosts 30 organizations, a café, theatre and art gallery.

From the late 1960s to the 2000s, the neighbourhood evolved from a working-class semi-rural district to a middle-class city-centre community with a median household income of $106,251, among the highest in the country. The 2012 creation of the Business Revitalization Zone (BRZ) rebranded it as the French Quarter and has focused on improved infrastructure and special events hoping to echo the past success of its previously revitalized neighbour to the west of the ravine. Old Strathcona has endured typical problems of gentrification driving out local businesses, and some Bonnie Doon businesses have also now closed due to rent increases and Cournoyer (2019) notes that retail growth has been slow. In its programme to leverage a unique

francophone character with the brand or motto 'joie de vivre', the district has not attempted to replicate generic 'French' or Quebecois streetscapes, but emphasizes rather its Franco-Albertan presence and intangible heritage (Stolte 2012).

Part of this mission includes the use of outdoor spaces for cultural activities. La Cite's cafe has created a snow patio to 'embrace' winter and 'change the mentality' but the major outdoor space is the adjacent Mill Creek Ravine where the keystone event is the FCV (pimihâw waskwayôsis) (Ramsay 2013). It is one of two winter events that celebrate the minority founding groups of Indigenous, francophone and Metis peoples, and various overlapping identities and traditions within them. People and cultures who were expected to 'vanish' (including FCV minorities) persist not necessarily in clearly bounded groups but in hybrid and creative identity formations. For example, a First Nations or a Metis individual may be identified with the same Indigenous background, while the Metis may also be identified as a francophone by language and culture. Currently, a growing self-identification of francophones as Metis accounts for sizeable census increases. A francophone may also be identified, for instance, as a Franco-Albertan, Quebecois or an Algerian-Canadian. Multiple other associations emerge and meld.

7.4 Festivals and Storytelling

Traditionally ritualistic, recurrent events, festivals or carnivals offer collective space to affirm values and identity in direct and oblique ways, typically characterized by license and merriment, bonfires and storytelling. The midwinter or solstice festival, in particular, focuses on transformation and rites of passage from dark to light, crossing thresholds both literal and metaphorical, embodying magical conversions of things and humans. In this sense, they are liminal zones of possibility and experiment, predicated on subsequent resumption of the stable social order (see Turner 2017). Today there are at least ten winter festivals held across Canada, including Indigenous events, and many others around the world (Indigenous Tourism 2018).

In modern societies, winter festivals still mediate individual and collective transformation, through both magical experience and economic development strategies. They serve to extend the summer tourism and recreation season, part of the international Winter City movement to attract year-round investment and immigration. It is a key element of Edmonton's 2013 Winter City Strategy, which has attracted international attention by packaging winter as the keystone of the city's history and identity, 'leveraging … winter assets …' for global competitive advantage (Edmonton 2013, 2019a). Promotions focus on overcoming 'barriers of attitude and lifestyle' by venturing outdoors to celebrate and 'embrac[e]' the 'season that defines us', rediscovering 'that childlike sense of delight and playfulness …' (Edmonton 2013) in 'the magic and beauty of winter' (Explore Edmonton n.d.) seeing 'the long nights, the winds, the snows and the cold as new companions instead of old enemies' (Edmonton n.d.).

Promotional exhortations to tell 'new stories about ourselves' (Edmonton 2019b) fit neatly into the myriad traditional cultures of winter as a time for storytelling, a

performance of intangible heritage passing on cultural protocols and shaping social identity. Cree writer Herman Michell recalls winter nights when.

> [s]acred and mysterious ancient voices from the land travel in whispers through air entering dreams and thoughts of storytellers…Winter is a time when certain stories are told in northern Bush Cree trapping families (Michell 2015, 171).

In living oral cultures, stories tend to remain fluid in content and performance, adapted to context and audiences and open to evolving interpretations, as opposed to stories or histories rooted in literate or print culture (Alivizatou 2011). As an evolving community experience, in certain cultures such activity involves participation by those in attendance, rather than passive audience reception. At Metis festivals and interpretive events, for instance, audiences typically contribute to stories and performance (Giroux 2016). Richardson (2006) argues that these events constitute 'third space', which Bhabha (2004) described as hybrid and transformative processes opening ethnic communities to new versions of histories, with ambiguous multiple narratives disrupting cultural binaries. In the context of touristic or festival events, third space and hybridity involve negotiated and dialogical experiences (Amoamo 2011). These may include practices akin to re-storying, a processing of individual imagination that can also have collective political implications.

In re-storying, themes and contents of past experiences or narratives are reframed or reformed, making new meaning that allows for transformative insights about origins and identities. Foote (2015) uses the metaphor of a river to illustrate the constantly changing unfolding of stories over time and retellings, with many applications including research and education. Such practices, for instance, have drawn on Indigenous oral histories of place to supplement or undermine mainstream or authoritative versions of heritage as part of decolonizing practices (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016).

A related approach is Indigenous metissage, working with multiple sources and contexts of knowledge about a place, emphasizing the post-colonial experience and identity as fluid and polysemic without rejecting any one strand. Such weaving or blending does not reduce complexity as strands remain in tension 'without the need to deny, assimilate, hybridize, or conclude' (Donald 2012, 536). From this perspective, storytelling about a city can mediate between past and present discourses of place and identity, reshaping often silenced or forgotten perspectives and experiences. Woven around the stories of founding peoples who have been largely written out of current versions of Euro-Canadian settlement history, the FCV is in effect re-storying or reweaving place, memory and identity within a season of reflection.

7.5 The Flying Canoe Volant Festival

The FCV is one of the few local festivals that directly concerns the land, the season, and its human and non-human history. Evolving from a 2009 Winter City ravine walk activity, it amalgamates local brand identifiers of 'festival city', 'river city' and 'winter city'. It is in part supported by the Edmonton Arts Council's grants programme, which in 2018 distributed $1,761,500 to 37 festivals. Almost entirely funded by the city, the agency has an annual budget of $14 million. The Edmonton Heritage Council, the Edmonton Community Foundation and volunteers also support the festival and other Cite Francophone activities (EAC 2018a, b).

Elements of 'magic' and 'mystery' infuse the ravine over three February nights. Cournoyer (2019) calls snow the 'canvas for light' as the space 'takes on a magical quality, lights dangling in the winter skies, dancers and music' during 'magical evening strolls' (Bell 2019). The 'magical evening walk' is a 2-km, illuminated trail between Mill Creek Ravine, a nearby school, and La Cité Francophone with costumed characters, bonfires and hot food stations as well as indoor events. The trail includes several Metis, First Nations and voyageur camps staging participatory dancing, storytelling, fiddling, drumming and bannock making, and a canoe race down a snow-covered hill. Woodsmoke and steam fill the crowded paths and 'public art bends and blends light, music, history, and politics with snow and trees and fire. Every now and then a few voyageurs, in pretend canoes and fake moustaches, holding tiny paddles, pass by to ask a series of absurd questions in English and French'. The festival 'at times … feels like a party … At other times it feels like an outdoor church' (Babiak 2017). A writer calls this 'very, very Edmonton' (ibid) suggesting that a spontaneous, irreverent embracing and reinterpretation of the tropes of heritage is a strong component of local identity.

Participants, mainly local families, are invited to 'celebrate your inner voyageur with light, music, legends and dance' in a **'**creative and interactive cultural event designed to celebrate local history and … a long winter's night' (Centre Communautaire d'Edmonton 2018). Further, it is promoted as an inclusive, open opportunity 'to be invited into some of our smaller communities' (as well as a 'testament to how much Edmontonians are embracing winter') (Global News 2019). It transforms audiences from observers to participants 'learning a little more about each other' (Cournoyer 2019). In 2015, the public was invited to leave comments on Indigenous reconciliation on slips of paper, messages that several years later were painted on 4-m permanent canvas lanterns. The installation captures transient thoughts and emotions in an enduring yet mobile medium for return visits and contemplation, a materialization of cultural dialogue in a time of social transitions.

The festival and the cultural centre focuses on building relationships and breaking down cultural silos, rather than fostering any one ethnic group. Practices of reconciliation, in particular, open space for Indigenous people, both in forms like art displays and through autonomy and creative freedom in festival programming. Performers have exerted these rights in ways including rejecting the fire department's installation of a tin stove for a cooking demonstration in a tipi, replacing it with the

traditional fire pit. Embodying the focus on connection, participants are led in dancing with partners and sharing food across cultures rather than simply talking about abstract ideals of reconciliation. Describing these events, Cournoyer (2019) appreciates that on the basis of this approach, Cree Elder Will Campbell has dismissed concerns about cultural appropriation in the festival events and displays.

Living practices of connection include exchanges of stories that can not only retrieve past knowledges about a place but also reframe parahistoric and unsettling components of histories and power relations (Prosper 2007). The oral tradition of storytelling accommodates ongoing variations, additions and inventions (see Ong 1982). For instance, performer Roger Dallaire tells a version of the Flying Canoe story about lonely oil industry workers north of the city who make a deal with the devil to fly their pickup trucks home. It is an appropriate story for the city, with its history of transient labourers including squatters in river valley shanty towns. Fur traders from Montreal who remained on Indigenous plains wintering grounds rather than returning home after summer hunts were known as *les hivernants* (winterers) (Foster 1994). And before all these came the tipi camps and later the canvas tents were raised by nomadic peoples and settlers.

The story of the flying canoe is appropriately situated along the river and its ravines. Indigenous territories are traditionally defined by usage, paths, trails and sites perpetuated by practice and memory rather than monument, text or boundary. The festival creating temporary yet sheltering spaces in the ravine echoes these mobile cultures much as storytelling adapts to place, audience and temporal context. As a cultural landscape, the ravine is an archive of the interaction of physical environment with human thought and activity, intangible and overlooked phenomena, particularly relevant to cultures with a minimal or absent material imprint on the land (Jones 2003).

7.6 Winter Cities and Everyday Transformation

The Winter Cities initiative represents the recognition of the season as a key part of that landscape and a generator of local cultural heritage. From its start, the city of Edmonton has marketed itself and the region as a winter destination; carnivals were held here and around the province through the Depression and WWII to boost morale and spending. A 1937 event offered ‘fun for all, and buying opportunities galore’ (Walker 2013). Ominously, though, while winter tourism and branding strategies commonly advise ‘embracing’ the season as medium of magical experience, traditional winter stories around the world often involve monsters and witches such as the Snow Queen whose cold embrace can transform or consume humans. Herva (2014) notes that these ideas, while to some extent based in colonial ‘othering’, also suggest the haunting of the present by relegated possibilities to rethink or broaden perspectives on these relationships. Cree and Anishinaabe winter stories featured the Wetigo or Wendigo, a cannibal giant of ice, a figure of psychosis that evolved in the colonial era to stand for the newcomers’ greed and cruelty (Brightman 1988). In

turn, non-Indigenous participants in a present-day storytelling event will encounter new interpretations of their own memories and knowledges.

Appadurai (2003) reminds us that the production of locality always involves colonization through seizure from prior inhabitants in events later routinized and legitimated, one strand of which is the historical complex of the European fur trade celebrated in the FCV. In terms of relationality, we know that the ravine is year-round home to both human and non-human animals. Although pre-contact, fur trade and industrial habitats and economic systems have been superseded and replaced by heritage versions, residual spaces such as the ravine still host complex human networks including transient homeless people, mostly Indigenous (Rossi and Vanolo 2013; Sorensen 2010). The tent structures that house FCV activities, reflecting and embodying these dynamics, occupy a destination that incorporates both actual and imaginary or mythical phenomena transformed from the everyday through narrative and magical effects. Of course, heritage tourism today is typically imbricated in material and economic transformation of urban space. In Edmonton, while some evidence shows increased participation in winter city festivals, in general, instrumental benefits of such events are often exaggerated and under-researched, as are impacts such as social cohesion and sense of place (del Barrio et al. 2012; Edmonton 2019; Mair and Whitford 2013; Quinn 2005). Visitors to the FCV number in the tens of thousands, but it is unknown whether those people experience a new sense of identification with city or community, or otherwise feel their everyday lives transformed through neighbourhood regeneration programmes.

Nevertheless, while urban transformation through property and land interventions often result in problems such as inequitable gentrification, the festival at the least opens space for participation and cultural citizenship and education, suggesting incremental transformation through redefining or relabeling place and histories over time. Diverse practices and imaginings in a mobile fragment of space and time can juxtapose celebrations of heritage with present-day consequences of those histories in terms of resilience and reconciliation. Daniel Cournoyer notes that La Cite and agencies such as Native Social Services and Metis cultural groups are rooted in ongoing infrastructure and communities beyond the immediate BRZ or 3-day festival. As creative cultural programming potentially rearticulates forms of identity and relationships, the group itself must control imagery and performance. Broad coalitions of interest are effective in the shift away from tangible to intangible competitive advantage, with relational forms of tourism based on creativity and embedded knowledge. A shared long-term vision in a community can help mitigate displacement and identify evolving needs and opportunities (McLean 2014; Wise 2017).

7.7 Conclusion

In Edmonton's river valley, decades of regeneration following industrial decline as well as adjacent neighbourhood renewal programmes have involved the partial restoration of pre-colonial cultural landscapes including natural areas. Within urban

cultural landscapes, underused or marginal spaces permit ephemeral activity less restricted than routines amid quotidian streetscapes. As *terrain vague*, we can see the ravine and festival within shifting networks of meanings and uses: 'absence marks the presence of complex relations, contiguous, accumulating, radiating outwards, endless, and compositive' (Stewart 2015). Green space as relatively undeveloped parkland or *terrain vague* offers few visible traces of local cultures or histories but carries rich veins of stories that intersect along regional waterways that can contribute to sustainable and broad concepts of regeneration in adjoining urban space.

This discussion has focused primarily on the context and discourses about the Flying Canoe Volant festival and its communities, and further accounts of the content of intangible heritage traditions, stories and memory must come from minority founding group members who produce them. As a settler scholar, I base this necessarily incomplete account not on immediate claims to related cultural knowledge or viewpoints but on public discourses and records of encounters and histories. Although festival stories and events reflect the past of the cultural landscape, they are not necessarily specific history teachings but dramatic and often theatrical interpretations of human experience and value systems or cultures. The image of a flying canoe driven by a team of paddlers also points to the importance of diverse long-term community involvement in sustainable shared and re-woven knowledges. Creative industries and creative city strategies originating externally result mainly in serial reproduction, whereas we need to look to local creativity in tourism and culture-led regeneration. An understanding of cultural heritage as part of political, cultural and social production in post-colonial contexts importantly includes performative, intangible and affective expressions of evolving identity (Ashley and Terry 2018; Winter 2013).

As an element of a complex urban cultural landscape, the Flying Canoe Volant festival brings together layers of tourism, cultural and natural (as well as tangible and intangible) heritage, urban regeneration and placemaking. Themes of magic and transformation, as much as the content of heritage practices and stories, reflect the history of the ravine as a long process of reinvention, from Indigenous hunting and habitation grounds to settler industrial zone, regenerated as recreational parkland and currently part of a Business Revitalization Zone. This is less the 'magic bullet' of creative city economic development rhetoric and more the sense of magic as an ephemeral, multivocal assemblage of imaginative power, depths of traditional knowledge about place and the power of ideas to animate or regenerate the stories we tell about ourselves.

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