CHAPTER 8

There May Have Been Other Stuff Going On: Affective Labor and the Writing Center as a Safe House

Ken Nielsen

Introduction

"She was nervous about starting to write." "He said he was a little taken aback by this prompt and scared about the writing process because it was so much less directive than he was used to." "[the student] seemed very anxious when he came in, and explained that he feels out of practice with writing and is very nervous about performing well in his classes." "She was pretty shot down in general. I think she was anxious about the deadline, but there may have been other stuff going on."

The quotes above are all taken from client reports written by consultants in the New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) Writing Center, where we hold upward of 600 45-minute one-on-one consultations each

Most of the information in this article pertaining to the mission of the NYUAD Writing Center and its policies was initially written in collaboration with Dr. Marion Wrenn, director of the NYU Abu Dhabi Writing Program, and Luise Beaumont, writing center manager at NYU Abu Dhabi. None of this could have been written without them. I am grateful to be their colleague.

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semester.[1] According to data from the NYUAD Admissions Office (available on the NYUAD website), NYUAD currently has students with approximately 110 nationalities (including dual nationalities) with the two main nationalities represented being the United States and the United Arab Emirates. Among them, students speak more than 116 different languages and approximately 92% speak at least two languages or more and 42% speaking at least three languages or more. While these numbers must be read with some caution, it is clear that NYUAD is a linguistically and culturally rich community. Indeed, this cultural and linguistic diversity is a defining feature of the liberal arts education offered at NYUAD. Such richness, however, also presents the writing center with particular challenges in serving our students' needs in terms of helping them write in strong academic English and master or navigate the particular—and for many students alien—codes of academia.

The few quotes above indicate the extent to which writing center consultants—as we call the writing instructors staffing the NYUAD Writing Center—do far more than coach students in the formal elements of academic writing and the mechanics of sentence level production: they work closely with the students as people, as young writers often struggling with the workload and with the academic demands of entering an elite university with complicated and foreign codes of behavior; in other words, "the other stuff" beyond the writing of an individual paper. This short chapter seeks to think about this "other stuff," suggesting that, in fact, it is just as much in the "other stuff" involved in participating in the university as a writer that the writing center, in particular in an international setting, can function as a "safe house" for students to try and fail and try again. It suggests that it is through the "affective labor"—a complicated term in writing center work—performed by the writing center consultants that the writing center can serve as a space for translation and growth for the multilingual, multicultural student unfamiliar, perhaps, with the conventions of North American academia. Arguably, it is through this affective labor that consultants help produce not only better writers, as Stephen M. North (1984) famously named the writing center's mission to be in his 1984 polemic "The Idea of a Writing Center," but also simply better and more confident writing one paper at a time.

Before delving into some specific case studies, a few words on the NYUAD Writing Center, the data analyzed in this chapter, and the theoretical conversation underpinning its ideas and suggestions will be presented.

The NYUAD Writing Center

The NYUAD Writing Center supports students at any stage in the writing, articulation, and expression of ideas. The writing center consultants are experienced readers and writers who work with students in one-on-one writing consultations, helping to develop strategies for revision of assignments or papers, teaching specific writing skills, and facilitating a deeper understanding of the student's own writing process. The NYUAD Writing Center is open to students from any field or discipline, and consultants work with all types of writing assignments, papers, and projects. In addition to writing consultations, the NYUAD Writing Center also offers specific consultations for oral expression and public presentations, capstone projects (the culminating project for all NYUAD students), and support for students with English language needs.

It is a fundamental belief of the NYUAD Writing Center (and the writing program for which it is a cocurricular space) that written and oral expression foster critical thinking, and, as such, writing consultations are at the heart of the writing center. Through our consultations, students are encouraged to find their voice and expand their critical thinking skills through the recursive process of writing.

As the above description makes clear, the NYUAD Writing Center is firmly rooted in a North American culture for Writing Centers and Writing Center work; however, we also firmly believe that our student population necessitates a constant evaluation of the kind of work we do, or, maybe more pointedly, the ways in which the NYUAD Writing Center needs to be more than an imagined North American space on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi. It needs to be a place where an articulation of the struggle to understand new codes and ways of knowing is possible rather than a place of erasure of difference and streamlining of student work, rhetorical registers, and ways of knowing.

The specific examples in this article of consultants' affective labor with students stem from the reports consultants write following each consultation. In the Writing Center at NYUAD, writing center consultants write reports following each 45-minute consultation. In their reports, consultants are asked to reflect on the following questions (with the directions given to consultants in the *Writing Instructor Handbook*):

1. What happened?

- Here, you will briefly describe what you did in the consultation.
- Guiding questions: What did you work on (structure, thesis statement, argumentation, transitions, etc.)? What writing strategies and/or methods did you use (free-writing, clustering, reverse outlining, etc.)?

2. Students needs/progress

- Here, you will describe what areas you believe the student needs to work on and how the student is progressing. If you're seeing the student regularly, you can assess progress throughout the semester. If it's a one-off consultation, please assess the student's progress in the specific consultation.
- Guiding questions: What patterns do you see in his or her writing? What did not work at first, but later on?

3. Consultant self-evaluation

- Here, you are asked to reflect on your work as a consultant.
- Guiding questions: What went well in the consultation? What can you improve?

  Remember: These reports are not meant as evaluations of your work, but as part of a reflective practice—a crucial element of your critical pedagogical practice.

The inspiration for the findings—still in their infancy—in this article is based in a careful reading of more than 900 reports from the NYUAD Writing Center during the 2015–2016 academic year. These reports are confidential to the Writing Center—all consultants have access to them in order to be able to read up on students' needs and progress based on prior consultations; furthermore, writing center management has access to the reports for monitoring and training purposes. In other words, within the context of the NYUAD Writing Center, the reports are not anonymous, but for the purposes of this chapter all identifying information has been removed for both the consultant and the student. The six case studies offered below have been chosen because of their exemplary nature.

One could reasonably argue, of course, that choosing 6 out of more than 900 samples lends itself to cherry-picking of specific trends in the

evidence. While I make no claim to a comprehensive systematic analysis of the more than 900 reports, through a careful phenomenological reading of the material the examples below have been chosen to highlight general challenges that consultants and students face in terms of the "other stuff" or the extracurricular and affective labor that consultants perform in the writing center of a global university.

Theoretical Underpinnings

One could conceptualize the writing center as one of the many places at a university in which the university is invented for students. In his landmark 1985 essay "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae famously writes: "Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics, or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (Bartholomae, 1985, 623). That is, according to Bartholomae, students entering the university are being asked to join discourse communities that they do not yet have access to; they are being asked to essentially perform in registers they do not yet know—in and outside the disciplines—and though this, of course, must necessarily be understood as a process, students entering the university are asked to participate from their first day in class. As such, Bartholomae points out:

> The student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience, as though he were a member of the academy or an historian or an anthropologist or an economist; he has to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other hand. (Bartholomae, 1985, p.624)

I am quoting Bartholomae at length here in order to highlight the essential connection between his use of invention of the university as an act (albeit one that the student is likely unaware of), the existence of multiple discourse communities and registers that students are asked to enter

without being aware that they are in fact that—discourses and registers that can indeed be learned—and, finally, the way in which this invention happens: through assembling and mimicking.

In the process, then, of inventing the university through joining the highly specialized discourse communities of academia by "imitating" and "mimicking" codes and registers that may yet be unarticulated, the student is also inventing herself or himself—or a version of themselves. By entering new and foreign discourse communities, they are also entering into new and unknown identities, new and unknown ways of existing in the world. This process of can be—almost certainly is—anxiety producing for any student, first-year students in particular; however, the question of identity becomes heightened, I propose, at the global university. It does so because students enter into a North American liberal arts curriculum not only from a variety of linguistic backgrounds but also from a wide variety of curricular backgrounds. And this is exactly where the writing center can play a crucial role as a place of translation, challenge, and affective support. It is, in fact, where it may serve as a safe space that goes beyond the metaphor of home that has so often been used about writing centers in a North American discourse.

In her provocative and insightful account of the "grand narrative" of writing centers (in this case, North American writing centers) in her book *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, Jackie Grutsch McKinney (2013) challenges some foundational myths regarding writing center work to task. Crudely summarized, the overall argument of her book is that writing center work is complex while the narrative about it is not. Clearly, this is an argument that this writer finds sympathetic. For example, Grutsch McKinney (2013) deconstructs the narrative of the writing center as a cozy home—filled with coffee pots, plants, bean bags, and posters—in which students will automatically feel safe to explore. She writes "The writing center grand narrative that writes writing centers as homes has taught us to narrow our gaze, to see particular items and to ignore others. Peripheral vision asks us to widen our view" (Grutsch McKinney, (2013)34). In other words, the focus on the writing center as a home risks limiting our understanding of the complex work happening in it while simultaneously narrowing our understanding of its role as a third space for student in the university. Though we may want to move away from a narrative of the writing center as a home, I would maintain that it needs to be what Suresh Canagarajah (2004) among others has theorized as pedagogical "safe houses."

Using the example of Tamil students being taught by missionaries in Sri Lanka in the early twentieth century, Suresh Canagarajah (2004) suggests

in "subversive identities, pedagogical safe houses, and critical learning" that these students, deemed insubordinate, were in fact trying to negotiate their own identities as simultaneously Tamil and part of the English-speaking elite. He suggests that such negotiation of identity—oftentimes a conflicted combination of loss and personal development—is ongoing and is integral to language learning. His question is how we may create a curriculum that allows for such negotiation to take place (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 117). His answer is, the "safe house," which he defines as "sites that relatively free from surveillance, especially by authority figures, perhaps because these are considered unofficial, off-task, or extra-pedagogical. Domains of time, as well as and space, may serve as safe houses in educational institutions" (121). If we think of the writing center as exactly such an "extra-pedagogical" domain, we might be able to mediate between the narrative of home and the safe house.

At NYUAD, the writing center was originally housed in the Academic Resource Center, an extracurricular place where students could seek tutoring in a variety of disciplines. The atmosphere in this place was exactly of the homey nature described by Grutsch McKinney (2013). For a variety of reasons, we decided to move the writing center into the library where it currently sits together with Research Services. Geographies matter, and moving the writing center to the library arguably highlights the centrality of writing to the academic undertaking and helps remove the remedial aura of visiting the writing center. Instead, its location in the library makes it a place of student agency and excellence. The challenge, then, I believe is to establish the writing Center as an extra-pedagogical domain that is simultaneously safe and challenging. Grutsch McKinney (2013) points out, "Writing Centers already make students uncomfortable—they make students revise, confront their shortcomings, formulate questions, engage us in their work, be active, and think" (Grutsch McKinney, 2013, p.27). While it should not be our goal to make students uncomfortable, it should be a goal to create centers that are at once safe and challenging, as safe spaces where students negotiate the invention of their university without direct consequences in relation to curricular or pedagogical powers.

As such, as the case studies below show, what we could call "affective labor" becomes central to the work of the writing center.

Case Studies

Case Study Number 1

Consultant Report on Student

What a way to end the semester! This was hard. XXXX came in 15 minutes late with a rambling 12-paper draft. There was a printing kerfuffle. Then, XXXX asked me to correct the writing. I had XXXX unpack what XXXX meant by this. XXXX wanted help with structure and source integration. It quickly became clear that XXXX had no idea how to do MLA citations or how to introduce sources. I showed XXXX a style guide online and explained a couple of things about in-text citations. It was hard to tell if XXXX was processing this in a helpful way. […] We spent a weirdly long amount of time on one sentence that made zero logical sense to me. I kept trying to have XXXX explain it and it continued to make no sense to me. We reached an impasse on this one. We also went over the conclusion. I felt it was undermining the argument XXXX had just made. This led to some tortuous reverse outlining on my part and a meta-discussion about the distinction between a filmmaker and his characters that I thought might be at the root of the confusion. Unclear if it helped or not. There were a ton of agreement and article issues we didn't address at all.

Self-reflection

Yikes. There is a lot going on here. XXXX is super smart and has good ideas, but really struggles with expression and clarity. It's really hard to understand what XXXX wants and needs since XXXX is a little all over the place. […] The consultation felt very jumpy and XXXX kept directing our attention to different issues in quick succession. In retrospect, it may have been helpful to be a bit more directive and establish clear goals for the consultation.

Self-reflection on a Later Consultation with the Same Student

I think XXXX was anxious that if XXXX didn't put ideas physically together (in one sentence or in one paragraph), [the] reader wouldn't know they were related. After overcoming that anxiety, and in talking through and rewriting, XXXX's writing became much clearer.

In this case study we see a student struggling with the codes of academia, and we see the consultant struggling to balance the student's directions and needs with imposing a structure on the consultation that will ultimately

lead to a productive experience and both a more conscious writer and a clearer paper. We also notice how the student wants the paper to be "corrected" and the consultant having to unpack with the student what that means in the context of the specific paper and the policies of the NYUAD Writing Center which, decidedly, does not proofread student work for both ethical and pedagogical reasons. We also notice a desire to balance higher- and lower-order concerns, though, in this case, that seems to have been unsuccessful. This case study is also an example of how much work it takes on behalf of the consultant not to directly mirror the hurried anxiety of the student who does not yet know herself or himself what is needed.

Case Study Number 2

Student Work

XXXX wanted to outline [the] final paper which XXXX has been brainstorming for the last few days. So we mainly discussed XXXX's plan and XXXX created a brief outline. At the end XXXX also wanted to work on source integration for another paper so I explained how to cite a picture and a quote within a source. XXXX prefers to use part of the consultation as work station so I sent XXXX off to write [the] paper sitting in a corner of the writing center and check in with me later when XXXX finished typing up the first draft according to XXXX's current outline.

Self-reflection

XXXX is working really hard to improve XXXX's writing. XXXX struggles to organize XXXX's thoughts and connect everything with a thread of an argument. XXXX finds it helpful to work (write) in my presence so that XXXX can check in with me if XXXX is stuck. XXXX needs a lot of continuous support which I try to provide and hope to see some improvements.

In this case study, an easier case it seems than the previous, we see a consultant honoring the student's desire to develop critical thinking and writing skills. It is clear from this consultation that the consultant is invested in the long-term development of the student and that the student is using the writing center as a space for both writing and emotional support—in other words, the student uses the writing center not as a home, but as a complicated space in which a negotiation of the transition to the university is possible.

Case Study Number 3

Reflection on Student Work

This was one of the more challenging appointments I had all year. XXX was writing a paper about "queer Muslims" and was arguing that Islam's prohibition of homosexuality in fact creates it. I initially struggled with how to begin discussing this paper since I so heartily disagreed with the argument, but eventually I found the best way to discuss it was to focus on how XXXX crafted the argument itself. We talked about how XXXX needed to include a primary source and consider a counterargument and flesh out XXXX's own positionality a bit more. Eventually I think we got to a productive place where we focused on the linguistic aspect of the argument which I think XXXX will be able to develop in an interesting way.

Self-reflection

I was impressed with how XXXX was able to complicate the thinking over the course of our consultation. However, XXXX still needs to work on finding a more critical way of approaching arguments and texts.

This case study is representative of a number of reports in the sample—the ones in which the consultant has difficulty engaging the student for political, religious, and/or ideological reasons. This is a particularly complex situation as the consultant negotiates his or her own beliefs while respecting the student's right to believe something else—a crucial tenet of the writing center and, of course, of the discursive community of the academic. As an extracurricular space—as safe house if one will in Canagarajah's (2004) words—the writing center here serves as a place for the student to be challenged not on the belief itself, but on the ways in which said belief is being expressed. The consultant's desire to "complicate" the student's thinking could be understood as wanting to "correct" the student's thinking, but seems here to be an effort to challenge the student to consider all aspects of the argument and to move into the necessary complexity of an academic discourse community that the student is expected to participate in. I believe that this is good example of a consultation that involves significant affective labor from the consultant and—indeed—as an example of a consultation that may successfully push a student beyond his or her

Case Study Number 4

Student Need

This consultation was a check-in on the student's progress. I had read [the] paper over the weekend and was troubled by how much of the professor's hand was in the paper. It was obvious to me that XXXX edited [the] paper heavily. I asked the student about the process of writing and revising the essay. XXXX mentioned that sometimes XXXX revised a document four to five times. We talked about what was helpful and not helpful about getting feedback from the professor, [another Writing Center consultant], and me. XXXX talked about feeling stifled in some cases and feeling like the writing improved in others. The paper itself was clearly organized and well written. I'm just not sure I like the process it took to get to this point. […] I think the professor has edited so much that I barely recognize [the student's] writing.

Consultant Self-reflection

I felt a little sad during this consultation. However, things turned around when the student hugged me at the end and thanked me for having this conversation.

initial thinking in a way that capitalizes on the extracurricular nature of the writing center.

This case study highlights the way in which consultants oftentimes work as translators between students (in particular multilingual/multicultural students) and professors. In this case, the consultant is faced with explaining the diversity of writing processes to the student and what getting feedback means within the setting of a North American university—here, the consultant has ethical issues with the paper as the consultant is unsure of who owns the paper anymore. What is illustrated here, then, is a conflict between the writing center's creed that we value the student's voice and a professor's demand for a paper that seems beyond the grasp of the student at this level. It is also, I believe, a struggle between the consultant's desire to maintain a space for the student within the curriculum and expectations that the student conform to codes that he or she is not yet fully aware of. It is a struggle that takes us back to the theoretical musings above. I also think the hug speaks for itself.

Case Study Number 5
Student Need

XXXX seemed pretty sleep deprived and at times incoherent as a result. XXXX also has problems narrowing things down to specifics, preferring to focus on broad topics and expanding things further when I ask XXXX to focus.

Consultation Self-reflection

I spent half the consultation wondering if I should send XXXX home to sleep.

Case Study Number 6
Student Need

Working with XXXX is always hard. XXXX has a lot of ideas and a great ability to describe things with insight and detail. However, XXXX has a hard time moving beyond description and making analytical moves. This can make XXX feel stuck and frustrated. I haven't figured out the best way to help XXXX move beyond this without explicitly telling XXX what to do. I've slipped up a few times and done this, but, even then, XXXX tends to slip back into cycles of description.

Consultant Self-reflection

I was really tired and a little irritated, which may have been coming across.

This case study highlights a trend in many reports: a general care for the student who is trying very hard to navigate the pressures of—in this case—the first year of college. Often we see this sort of report during peak times of the semester during mid-terms or finals. Here a consultant is balancing between being a life coach (go home and sleep and come back tomorrow) and trying to meet the student's expectations. One of the strategies discussed below concerns the writing center working with other offices—this is a good example of the need for this.

This case study—unlike the others—reflects the challenges of ongoing partnerships in the writing center. In this case, a consultant has seen a student repeatedly and is struggling to identify exactly what it is the student needs in order to be able to move forward with both the individual

paper (the writing itself, if we invoke North, 1984) and the overall understanding of him- or herself as a writer. The consultant displays concerns that he or she is "slipping up" and becoming too directive, though that clearly seems to be what is needed in this case and, as such, agreeing here with Clark and Healy—as discussed above—that a rethinking of the ethics of tutoring might be necessary.

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What joins these six case studies together is the way in which they highlight the beyond-the-paper work that happens in these writing center consultations. While it has become writing center orthodoxy that we work with students holistically, it is often unclear exactly what it means to produce better writers and not simply better writing. In the case studies above, I have attempted to highlight six situations that asked consultants to do more than simply work with the student's argument and/or sentence level challenges in one individual paper. I have attempted to highlight the affective nature of the work writing consultants are doing in the NYUAD Writing Center.

In his article "Affective Labor," Michael Hardt (1999) theorizes the development of affective labor in relation to more traditional kinds of production. Hardt suggests that in the developed world what he terms "immaterial labor" (i.e. labor that is not directly tied to the production of goods) has replaced other forms of labor (Hardt, 1999, p.90). One can argue, of course, that education has never been part of the material labor; however, writing center work has always been caught between producing something specific (better papers) and producing something less concretely material (better writers). Hardt defines affective labor as: "This labor is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community. Categories such as 'in-person' services or services of proximity are often used to identify this kind of labor, but what is essential to it, its in-person aspect, is really the creation and manipulation of affects." (Hardt, 1999, p. 96) Hardt's definition of this kind of labor is illuminating in relation to the case studies above by how it reveals the focus on the intangible. In our case studies we see students come in looking for something tangible (proofread my paper; is it good?; check it, please; my professor told me to have you check it), and it becomes part of the instructor's work to divert

that attention to something else—a focus on creating "a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community."

That said, if we are to work deliberately with affective labor as a concept in our writing center work, what are some strategies that we may employ, in particular at global universities (or universities with global student bodies) in order to establish awareness of this element of our work and make it visible to ourselves, our students, and the institution.

Strategies

Talk About It

The most obvious way of working consciously with affective labor is by talking about it. As we have seen in this chapter, at NYUAD, for example, consultants are encouraged to use their reports as a way of recognizing the ways in which their work goes beyond the paper itself. These reports, in turn, become part of an ongoing process of development of ourselves as reflective practitioners. It necessitates, though, that writing center consultants are given the tools—without become therapists—to recognize the often-invisible emotional component of their work. I would argue that doing this in a training situation in which the writing center is not identified as a home but rather as a challenging safe house allows for a recognition of the toll of the affective component of this labor without effeminizing it—a recurring challenge for writing center work.

Talk to Students About Process/Emotions

Connected to the strategy above is developing ways of talking to students about their process and their emotions. Here the extracurricular nature of the writing center as a safe house allows consultants to create space for students to talk about the relationship between identity formation, academic invention, and personal development. We have seen in the case studies that this happens automatically, but through heightening our consciousness regarding the affective component of both student and consultant work we allow for a space that demystifies the invention of the university. This, as we have seen in the case studies, happens through working on the individual paper—creating simultaneously better writers and better papers.

Partnerships

A third strategy is to establish ongoing partnerships between consultants and student writers. Establishing a Writing Partners Program in which students commit to meeting with a consultant a set amount of times during the semester allows for a relationship to develop that will strengthen the consultant's ability to help the student navigate "the other stuff" involved in entering academia without, of course, laying claims to the writing center as a space for therapy.

Connected to the strategy above is the necessity for the writing center to establish relationships with other offices and centers at the university so that consultants know when and where to refer students.

Conclusion

Keeping the invention of the university and the identity struggle of the first-year university student in mind, this chapter has suggested that the writing center is ideally suited to being a safe house, an extra-pedagogical domain in which students are simultaneously challenged and supported in their invention of the university. Through an analysis of the more than 900 client reports written during the 2015–2016 academic year, I have sought to complicate our understanding of the affective labor happening in the writing center and outlined a few strategies for understanding and undertaking the work of supporting students in their process of invention. I have suggested that it is partly, in fact, in the "other stuff going on" that we find the importance of the writing center as a third space in the Global University.

Finally, I would like to suggest that if we stop paying attention to the "other stuff"—that which is often unmeasurable in any direct way—we miss an opportunity to articulate what it is the writing center can offer which no other space on campus can. It is not that the writing center should be anybody's home and it is a misunderstanding to take "safe" to mean non-challenging. It is in students knowing that there are writing center consultants who know that the "other stuff" is what writing consists of for most of us that allows us to create a safe space from which to challenge students to grow and understand that, indeed, they have agency as they try out these confusing new codes of an academic world that they are being asked, as Bartholomae puts it, "invent." As such, the multicultural, multilingual writing center is a space of affective, safe, and challenging invention.

Notes

1. This number does not account for the full number of writing consultations performed by writing instructors at NYUAD. Writing instructors are embedded into the First-Year-Writing Seminar, where they perform mandatory tutorials with students. These large numbers of consultations are unaccounted for in the writing center statistics, though it is clear from my experience that the affective labor performed in these ongoing relationships between students and writing instructors is just as significant an element as it is in the writing center if not, in fact, greater.

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