

Queer Lives Still on the Boundary

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This year, 2019, marks the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*. In addition to being a nationally bestselling book, one of the few in our field, it was also the recipient of the NCTE David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. Following in the footsteps of researchers such as Mina Shaughnessy and Janet Emig, Rose turned crucial and critical attention to the lives of the working class as they pursued various forms of literacy education. In this remarkable book, Rose argued that, for public higher education to work, we as literacy educators need

a pedagogy that encourages us to step back and consider the threat of the standard classroom and that shows us, having stepped back, how to step forward to invite a student across the boundaries of that powerful room. [We will also] need a revised store of images of educational excellence, ones closer to egalitarian ideals—ones that embody the reward and turmoil of education in a democracy, that celebrate the plural, messy human reality of it. At heart, we'll need a guiding set of principles that do not encourage us to retreat from, but move us closer to, an understanding of the rich mix of speech and ritual and story that is America. (238)

Given this call from thirty years ago, as well as the many contemporary challenges facing American education, we need to ask how far we have come in grappling with the “messiness” of literacy education in pluralistic democracy. More bluntly, does Rose's call to examine the lives on the boundary still offer a powerful and appropriate articulation of what is needed from present-day rhetorical, compositional, pedagogical, and literacy work? How are Rose's insights and interventions still relevant? How might we extend them to take stock of contemporary economic and literacy practices?

We cannot fully address all the complexities of such questions in one essay, even as we invite our colleagues and Rose's readers to attend to them. We can, however, in these pages, flesh out some of our own personal responses to *Lives on the Boundary*—responses which, as two queer men, we realized have dogged our reading of this book for at least two decades. In the following narratives, we want—respectfully—to put some pressure on Rose's work, complementing his stories in *Lives*

on the *Boundary* with our own *queer* approach to literacy, education, and being a professional in the field of composition studies.

David Wallace

Last fall I stole a couple of days away from my administrative duties as a dean and reread *Lives on the Boundary* and was struck afresh at how Rose used narrative as a method—both stories of students whom he worked with and interviewed and his own story—what we would now call autoethnography. Indeed, the main message that I see in *Lives on the Boundary* thirty years later is that literacy is always lived, and the stories of those who come to primary, secondary, and higher education with literacy skills and life experiences that differ from the usual expectations are crucial for developing truly inclusive approaches to the teaching and learning of writing. And thirty years later we are still struggling to learn this lesson on our campuses and even in our writing classrooms. However, in these pages I want to follow Rose's lead and use two stories to try and make two points.

In the first story I sit in a faux Adirondack chair in the courtyard of the Bloc, a downtown Los Angeles shopping plaza that quite literally deconstructed itself to create this open air courtyard that invites the residents and workers of downtown LA, or DTLA as we call it, to come in from the busy streets and relax, stroll into one of the stores or, as I am, sit with a book in relative peace while surrounded by the bustle of DTLA. I walked four-and-a-half blocks to get here from the converted loft space I bought nearly two years ago now—that space just three blocks from the sprawling LA Convention Center, the Grammy Museum, and the Staples Center, which periodically floods my neighborhood with Lakers, Clippers, and Kings fans. But my sleek loft is also just six blocks from the heart of Skid Row which, despite of or because of DTLA's resurgence and gentrification, has a growing population that lives and sleeps on the streets near me—a population in which the mentally ill and African Americans are clearly overrepresented in comparison with their percentages in the general population of Los Angeles.

I share these details of place because it gives a sense of my Los Angeles and my place in it that is strikingly different from the Los Angeles of Mike Rose's youth even though the places he describes are physically close. In fact, as I sit in my faux Adirondack chair, the map function on my iPhone tells me that the Bloc is 7.4 miles from 9116 South Vermont Avenue, the place where Rose grew up, and I realize that I have never been to Mike Rose's old neighborhood even though I have driven within seven blocks of it hundreds of times in my commute to my job as a dean at Cal State Long Beach.

I resolve to visit the address of his childhood home as an homage of sorts but also to better understand what lies between Mike Rose of the '50s and '60s and Jonathan Alexander of 2018.

As I sit holding *Lives on the Boundary* and enjoying the light filtering down from the hazy skies above the Bloc, I also find myself trying to title my own version of Rose's book—what would the intersection of my life and the students I've taught look like? I get the first clue when Rose is describing the ways in which his connection with one of his Catholic high school teachers lead him and some of his friends both figurative and literally out of his South Los Angeles neighborhood:

Art, Mark, and I would buy stogies and triangulate from Mac-Farland's [their high school mentor's] apartment to the Cinema, which now shows X-rated films but was then L.A.'s premiere art theater, and then to the musty Cherokee Bookstore in Hollywood to hobnob with beatnik homosexuals—smoking, drinking bourbon and coffee and trying out awkward phrases we'd gleaned from our mentor's bookshelves. (36)

Trained by queer theory, feminism, and critical race theory that has developed in the thirty years since this passage was published, I note the inclusion of homosexuals not as a part of the fabric of Rose's narrative but as exoticized others—which strikes me as likely true to his experience in the '50s and '60s,

When Jonathan and I interview Mike Rose, I share this passage with him noting that it was the only place I found homosexuals represented in the pages of *Lives*, and he seems genuinely puzzled by this observation, thinking through the various groups he describes in the book and wondering aloud who might have been gay, lesbian, or bi and not finding any specific examples. The three of us speculate about this, about the closeting of the times and the responsibility Rose felt in his next book to represent one gay man who saw his homosexuality as part of his pedagogy and another rural gay teacher who asked Rose not to share that aspect of his identity. He tells us about the two bankers boxes of notes and messages he has from people who wrote to him about the connection they felt when they read the stories in *Lives*, including gay students saying, "not that they're seeing gay characters in here—but that capturing a sense of in-betweenness and not-belonging, feeling out of place" as a means of connecting with the text.

It is a good, substantive, and generous discussion with a lovely man thinking reflectively as he sits with two gay men at his little kitchen table. Yet even as I sit with one of my heroes, I feel disappointment in this sensible answer to my question. And so the first point I want to make is that I need to imagine a different kind of metaphor for the kinds of

identity negotiation that Rose led me to consider in higher education. My story of the challenges of working class roots, less-than-ideal education in rural America, and an evangelical Christian upbringing that was at its core anti-intellectual cannot be told in the same kind of terms that Rose imagined or put substantively on the table in his version of lives on the boundary. And so despite the incredible debt I feel that I owe Rose for helping our discipline and me personally understand higher education in a transformative and more inclusive way, I can't shake my disappointment that the critical issue of identity for me appears only as something that is only visible as an oddity.

Jonathan Alexander

I first taught Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* about twenty years ago to a group of "basic writers" in an urban college. There's so much I can say about that course, the decision to read Rose's book with these students, their reactions to it, my reactions teaching it, the knowledges my students brought to Rose's poignant stories, the critical engagements my students and I had with and through this book.

Instead, I want to focus on a passage that has stuck with me for the last twenty years, one that I'd actually encountered first anthologized in a reader that I had used in comp classes even before I read the entirety of *Lives on the Boundary*. In the book, it's part of Rose's autobiographical contextualization, near the beginning, in which he's giving us a sense of his own educational background, the cultural, socioeconomic, and educational setting from which he will journey to his research professorship at UCLA. Here's the scene:

Physical education was also pretty harsh. Our teacher was a stub ex-lineman who had played old-time pro ball in the Midwest. He routinely has us grabbing our ankles to receive his stinging paddle across our butts. He did that, he said, to make men of us. "Rose," he bellowed on our first encounter; me standing geeky in line in my baggy shorts. "'Rose'? What the hell kind of name is that?"
"Italian, sir," I squeaked.
"Italian? Ho. Rose, do you know the sound a bag of shit makes when it hits the wall?"
"No, sir."
"Wop!" (25)

This scene has stayed with me, even as I had nearly forgotten much else in the book in the intervening years. I recalled this scene to Mike when David and I interviewed him, and he chuckled a bit, even as I marked it as a scene of violence, even racist violence. It's also very likely a scene of sexualized violence. We didn't comment further on this particular scene, but I pointed it out in the context of asking Mike about his inter-

est in school. Interest is too mild of a word. Mike Rose is a believer. He believes very much in the power of school—the power of school to do good. I told Mike, “You love school.” He laughed, recognition hitting him. “Yes, I do.”

Lives on the Boundary is full of school. Of the many things this book is about, it is most definitely about the power of education, the necessity of inviting folks in to school so that they can learn, develop useful skills, discover new realms of knowledge, find their way in the world. Become marketable citizens.

Rose’s attachment to schooling, and his belief in its power for good, is written all over his collection of essays, *Why School?*, in which he argues, speaking from his own powerful personal experience, that

Education gave me the competence and confidence to independently seek out information and make decisions, to advocate for myself and my parents and those I taught, to probe political issues, to resist simple answers to messy social problems, to assume that I could figure things out and act on what I learned. In a sense, this was the best training I could have gotten for vocation and citizenship. (40)

Rose details what he gained: “The study of literature broadened my knowledge of the world” (36); “The study of psychology gave me a way to understand human behavior” (37); “both the humanities and social sciences provided a set of tools to think with. Reading and writing are the megatools” (37); “Reading and writing gave me skills to create with and to act on the world” (38); and, most intriguingly to me, “Acquiring and using knowledge brings its own pleasures” (39). To be sure, Rose acknowledges that he’s “experienced classrooms as both places of flat disconnection and of growth and inspiration” (35). He can even be highly critical of educational systems, noting in *Lives on the Boundary* that American educational meritocracy is bullshit. But his heart is clearly with the former attributes of schooling, and in *Lives* he says of his students, “They had to be let into the academic club” (141). He concludes a rousing section of *Why School?* with the assertion that “Schooling . . . is a powerful thing to witness. And a powerful thing to go through. Over time, you see, you feel something; it’s the experience of democracy itself. The free play of inquiry. The affirmation of human ability” (43).

I don’t want to disagree with Rose’s enthusiasm, or with much of his vision for school. Indeed, I think Rose is offering us an aspirational, even utopian sensibility of what schooling can be. And I mean absolutely no disparagement in calling his vision utopian; I am a fan of utopian thinking and feeling, believing we could use more of it as a creative and critical force.

But, critically, I have to call Rose's vision only aspirational. For while school has done much good for me, even along the lines of broadening my sense of the world and providing me with skills, strategies, and habits of mind that have proven invaluable in many circumstances, my experience of schooling was not the "experience of democracy itself." Or, to put this another way, perhaps it was the experience of a democracy that is definitely still grappling with bigotry, with attempts to silence difference, with violent racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. I seldom experienced the free play of inquiry. I didn't often feel affirmed in my humanity. Instead, for all of the good it offered, it was also often an experience, for me and for many others, of sexualized violence.

David Wallace

Before I tell my second story, I pause to share these words from *Lives on the Boundary* that strike me as just as relevant today as they were 30 years ago.

We live, in America, with so many platitudes about motivation and self-reliance and individualism—and myths spun from them, like those of Horatio Alger—that we find it hard to accept the fact that they are serious nonsense. To live your life on the streets of South L.A.—or Homewood or Spanish Harlem or Chicago's South Side or any one of hundreds of other depressed communities—and to journey up through the top levels of the American educational system will call for support and guidance at many, many points along the way. You'll need people to guide you into conversations that seem foreign and threatening. You'll need models, lots of them, to show you how to get at what you don't know. You'll need people to help you center yourself in your own developing ideas. You'll need people to watch out for you. (47–8)

These words mean more to me when I stand in front of Mike Rose's childhood home on South Vermont Avenue, and I notice two things that seem very important. First, as Rose mentions about his return visit to his childhood haunts, I notice that there are no signs of the previous Italian American immigrants who lived in this neighborhood when Rose did; instead the signs say, "Rios Mini Market," "Tintes, Rayitos, Fades," and "Corte Para Toda La Familia." The neighborhood is definitely Latinx, probably Mexican, but I cannot read the figurative and literal signs well enough to know if it might be Salvadoran or Honduran instead. I am out of place here; my race and class privilege make me a voyeur—an outsider trying to understand the unfamiliar while acutely aware that I am an interloper whose cultural frames are not sophisticated enough to appreciate all that I am seeing.

The second thing I notice are the fences—most are seven feet high, solid, and in good repair. Rose’s childhood home with its unfortunate coating of peach stucco is a small enclave as are all the homes in this neighborhood—the house, front yard jammed with the paraphernalia of summer living, a wide driveway leading back to the casitas near the alley—all surrounded by sturdy fencing. I have not seen another white person since I exited the freeway.

I complete my walk around the block, through the alley behind the house, and as I return to the front of the house and snap a few more pictures from another angle, I realize there is another layer to my discomfort in this neighborhood. I am a gay man, and I don’t know what that means in this neighborhood. I worry that someone will look out from the house at me snapping pictures and wonder “what is that maricon doing taking pictures of my house?” I wonder if this worry is rooted in a form of racism that I cannot immediately identify, but I cannot linger to ponder this question. Decades of wariness of my surroundings, of wondering if I have been identified as a gay man and if such identification will make me a target drive me back to my car, and I am suddenly sure that there is a raced element to this fear—but it doesn’t matter, I have to go.

As I drive fifty-nine blocks north to pick up a few things at the Trader Joe’s nearest to my house, I continue trying to make sense of neighborhoods that are unfamiliar to me. The freeway would be faster, but I want to see the neighborhoods that I pass on my daily commute.

Thirty blocks up Hoover Avenue, I see Augustus Hawkins High School, and each of the street light poles has one of those vertical banners that usually advertise museums or shows in LA, but these have the faces and names of students who graduated the previous spring and the universities, community colleges, and trade schools they are attending. I am pleased, for a change, that I have to stop at the next three stoplights, so that I have time to read the names of these students, pleased to see so many attending Cal State LA, Cal State Dominguez Hills, and Cal State Northridge, although slightly sad that none came to my Cal State, even though these neighborhoods are not in our primary service area.

Another twenty blocks north I come to Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and the south side of the USC campus with the Coliseum stadium looming up and Exposition Park with its rose garden, and I am shocked at how clean and green everything seems in comparison to the last fifty blocks I have driven. I wonder how much of drought-stricken Southern California’s water USC uses to create this lush oasis. As I skirt the campus to get to the shopping plaza on its north side, I

am struck that there is much less fencing here, and I think that there is another kind of security operating here, a kind that does not need seven-foot fences and which will see me as normal, not a threat, as someone who belongs.

I find my way into the underground parking garage and take the elevator up to the plaza that houses a Trader Joes, a Target, numerous restaurants and coffee shops—all surrounded by large brick USC buildings with faux gothic arches. I decide to get a latte at the Starbucks across the plaza and write some notes about my visit to 9116 South Vermont Avenue.

As I walk across the courtyard, I see a diverse student body, but no one who I imagine came from any of the fifty-nine blocks I just drove through. It hits me that despite USC's proximity to Augustus Hawkins High School, none of the banners on the light poles showed a Hawkins student who would be attending USC.

At the door of the Starbucks, a handsome young man is coming out as I go in, and his eyes meet mine. We hold each other's gaze and give each other that little smile that gay men sometimes use to say without words "I see you; I know you are here."

I sip my latte and write the notes that will become some of the words on this page, and I feel conflicting emotions. First, I feel safe—I am at home in this Starbucks on this campus that drips with socioeconomic privilege in ways that I could never have imagined I would when I was growing up in the coal mining hills of Western Pennsylvania. But I am also angry at USC, disgusted by its wealth and privilege and glad to be a part of the Cal State system that serves the students in those fifty-nine blocks. The message of *Lives on the Boundary* comes home doubly hard to me: it means something different for kids from South Vermont or Augustus Hawkins High School to make it to Cal State LA than it does for the students from across the country and around the world to join the Trojan family at USC. I reflect that I could likely find boundary students at USC if I knew where to look for them, but on my campus I wouldn't have to look.

Jonathan Alexander

To say that I was bullied doesn't really capture my experience for me. I felt instead subjected to prolonged harassment, day in, day out, a steady regime of terror and torment.

What did this look like? On any given day, I was absolutely sure to be called faggot, queer, pussy, fag, fudge-packer, cocksucker. These were the taunts of choice for teen boys in the 1980s. I don't ever recall—not once—a teacher hearing such verbal abuse and calling it out,

chastising a student, marking their name-calling as wrong. Back then, it wasn't understood as abuse. It was just what boys did. In fact, I'll go so far as to say that some of those teachers, perhaps even most of them, believed that such taunting would toughen me up. I was a bit shy, even aloof, soft. Easily penetrable. I needed to be harder. Verbal assault would help, or so they thought. I would "man up." Perhaps I'd even fight back. Be a man, not a pussy.

The language here is so important, isn't it? Don't be a pussy. That is, don't be the penetrable male. Don't let us rape you. Real men stand up for themselves. They don't let themselves be penetrated, and especially not against their will.

But I didn't know how to defend myself. For I knew deep in my heart that I really was, very likely, a faggot, queer, pussy, fag, fudge-packer, cocksucker. I was being called out. I was being interpellated. Hail, faggot. Yeah, you. You're looking this way when I called so you *must* be a faggot.

A friend, importantly a straight male friend very much my age, asked me later in mid-life if it could've been that bad. After all, weren't most of us in the '80s called by such names? Even he, a straight man, was called faggot at times. You lived with it. You tossed it back.

No, it's not the same. You, my dear straight friend, my age-mate, you weren't really grappling with your sexuality in quite the same way. You didn't identify with the term "faggot" because you were likely securing for yourself already the comfortable privileges of normalcy. You knew this insult wasn't aimed at you, not really, or if it was, it was a misfire. Sure, the taunt likely straightened you out even further. It stiffened your back, squared your shoulders a bit. But that's the point; you didn't bow, bend beneath it, flinch under it.

I did.

The psychic damage of being called out—every single day, every single fucking day—by terms of not just derision but *hatred*, terms that identify the desires that you're grappling with, the very sensibilities and proclivities that interest you and, in fact, actually draw your interest to other boys—when those desires and proclivities are, on a daily basis, treated with scorn and contempt and *hatred*, then you are damaged *on a daily basis*, the damage accumulating over time, becoming self-hatred, internalized shame, interpolated rage. How could I not grow up to hate myself when I was so constantly told, so ceaselessly reminded, that I was *to be hated*. And when no adult around you is stopping it, when in fact the message is clear: you deserve this—then how could I not feel that my self-hatred was justified, when the hatred of others was confirmed by the absence of a restraining hand, a merciful reprieve?

A hole opened up in me, and these boys fucked it every day, over and over again, sometimes slowly, lingeringly, often quickly jabbing—fag, fag, fag.

Such experiences, situated in an educational context, have prompted me to ask—again and again, throughout my career—what are the material conditions under which people write, learn to write, understand what writing can do? Mike Rose wants to understand school as a transformative place in which underprivileged students can learn and develop literacy skills that they can then use to transform their lives. And while I acknowledge the kinds of skills I learned, I must also acknowledge—and draw attention to—what I learned about the power of language not only to harm but to license harm through silent consent. As a consequence of homophobic discourse surrounding me in school, from peers, through religious dogma, and condoned by the silence of faculty, I had to learn generative ways of being queer in the extra-curriculum, in socially pedagogic venues far removed from my formal schooling. I also had to learn to read against the grain, seeing, for instance, in an assigned text, Frank Herbert's *Dune*, the evil Baron Harkonnen and his interest in young men as at least a sign that others like me existed—however evil they might be. I saw the Baron less as evil and instead as powerfully pursuing his desires.

I cannot hold Mike Rose accountable for failing to address these issues. Indeed, reading Mike Rose later in life has allowed me to understand school differently—as a place of possibility, of transformation, or potential, even of hope. But my experience of school is also a part of my educational legacy, and I hold myself accountable for making sure that my story—and the stories of those like me—are heard. Such accountability now rebounds back to the field in that our discipline, as what some call a “teaching subject,” has been particularly invested in educational settings, in schooling, in the power of work inside the classroom and on campuses to transform. I like to think that our classes are more enlightened than the ones I had in high school. I generally think they are. We've done a lot of individual and collective work to welcome a diversity of students. Our conferences increasingly reflect the diversity of our profession.

But here's the catch for me. What I learned about language, discourse, and writing—both formally through the violence of homophobia and informally through self-sponsored life-saving investigation into supportive and generative queer discourse—had little immediately to do with professional vocation and citizenship. Absolutely, my development of a survivable queer life has impacted my literate participation in the profession and in civic life. But more fundamentally, those queer

discourses *sustained* my life. They saved it. They allowed me to imagine and then enact a life-world that formal, school-sanctioned homophobic violence tried to snuff out at the level of conceptual, felt, and lived existence. It did not succeed, but not for lack of trying.

It did not succeed because I found ways of conceptualizing language, discourse, reading, and writing as fundamentally not just about job prep or becoming an engaged citizen. Queer discourse is fundamentally about desire. Eileen Myles puts it this way:

I think writing
is desire
not a form
of it. It's feeling
into space,
tucked into
language
slipped
into time,
opened,
felt. All this
as a matter

of course
of course

yet being
here somehow,
open (15)

This kind of language, thinking, *writing* saved my life. I wonder if it might help save others' lives too? I wonder who else might need to know that literacy is more than job prep. It is *desire*—and often and importantly a *desire for things to be different*.

So, to the field, to those dedicated to the teaching of writing, I say: if we are only about vocation and citizenship, we are likely missing the point. No, we are likely failing our students. No, we *are* failing our students. If this is just about skills transfer, we are failing our students. If this is about bolstering disciplinary knowledge, we are failing our students. If this is about nothing less than helping them understand the power of discourse to re-imagine our dying world, we are failing our students. Bluntly: to the extent that composition studies fails to interrogate the political implications and ramifications of its theories and practices, then it becomes complicit in the very structures of oppression that, in its most fantastical and utopian ideas of itself, it seeks to undo.

Coda

We offer these stories as a continuation of the work that *Lives on the Boundaries* asked us to do, and conclude by making two points. First, the problematic effects of the kinds of intersections of class, gender, and race marginalization that Mike Rose brought to our attention thirty years ago are still *very* much with us—they are still important markers of the boundary negotiations that millions of college students face each year. Put too simply, our approach to addressing these issues in the last thirty years has been to focus on a more inclusive approach to language. We have usefully extended Mina Shaughnessy's (and others') revolutionary insight that "remedial" students are skilled users of language, of dialectics and discourse practices other than those typically valued in the prestige dialects of the academy and professional practice. We have sought the answer to the boundary problems that Rose and others helped us to see in more inclusive and pluralistic approaches to language—for example "World Englishes" that seek to create a more inclusive and inviting metaphor for what literacy in higher education means and how it is taught. But, in doing so, we have too often settled for a model which requires the border crossers—those already marginalized—to add what we value to their linguistic tool kits with all the attendant identity negotiations involved rather than seeing them and their linguistic expertise as transformational for us and our curriculum with all the attendant identity negotiations that would entail for us. We have not taken seriously enough the lingering legacies of racism, sexism, class marginalization, ableism, religious intolerance, homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity and a host of other evils that infuse the discourse practices we value and teach. We have, mostly, embraced marginalized students as worthy of learning the discourses we prize but have not embraced them as agents of change to those discourse practices and to our pedagogies.

As a field, we have been slow to embrace the notion that not only do the student border crossers' identities matter, but so do ours—we resist the obvious implication that identity matters in rhetoric and composition, seeking to avoid the necessity of negotiating identity in our rhetorical practice and pedagogy by framing the underlying problem as how we can help border crossing first-year composition students to actively manage a variety of discourses. If we do not seriously address our own complicity in the maintenance of the discourses of power and particularly the value that we derive personally from participating in the privilege of some discourse conventions over others, then we will never fulfill the promise of the Wyoming Resolution to give our students the right to their own languages and discourses.

As a gesture toward the kind of further work we need, as queers we declare ourselves here, and we will no longer participate in disciplinary practices and perspectives that closet us by considering “diversity” to be only or primarily gender, race, and class. We demand that our field understand closeting as a different kind of marginalization—that coming out is a process not a single event, that closeting is not just an issue for lesbians, gay men, bisexual people, transgender and transsexual people, intersexual and other queer people; closeting affects veterans, people who are physically and mentally abled in other than expected and not immediate visible ways, and often for religious minorities. Finally, it is not enough to account for only the ways in which one has been marginalized along one axis of identity; we must all account for our relative marginalization and privilege along multiple and often intersecting aspects of identity if we are to truly understand how literacies are lived and to meet the challenges that *Lives on the Boundary* laid out for us 30 years ago.



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