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Research, travel and creativity

Abstract
This paper argues that travel should be taken seriously as a research tool for creative writers. The work of sociologist Fiewel Kupferberg and cognitive psychologist Angela Leung supports the notion that exposure to new environments and cultures stimulates creativity in both scientists and creative artists. For maximum benefit the travel should be undertaken with a particular purpose, working from knowledge already gained. Travel under those conditions provides the opportunity to interact with people who may not be directly concerned with the project or study, but who stimulate the imagination and perceptions of the researcher. The positive effect of research/travel can be seen in the work of established writers, and postgraduate students who are completing doctorates in creative writing.

The notion that travel can stimulate creativity in scientists is supported in the work of a number of sociologists. In this paper I wish to explore the idea that the conclusions they reach can also be applied to writers. Studies show that travel as a means to research can enhance creativity, in particular when such travel is embarked upon under specific conditions. Benefits in creativity gained through travel/research can be shown not only in the work of scientists but also through the experiences of postgraduate creative writers who have drawn on what they have learned through travel when writing both the exegesis and creative components of their theses, as well as in the work of established writers.

Research is defined in the Macquarie dictionary as 'a diligent and systematic enquiry or investigation into a subject'. The word 'systematic' has connotations of an orderly and linear process. Such a process does not give a complete view of all research. Some research involves moving from one question to another in a pattern akin to a spiral staircase, which takes us towards our goal via a circular path and not always one forward step at a time.

Looking more deeply into the nature of research, the UNESCO website offers another definition which is pertinent to this paper. 'Research may be defined as independent intellectual enquiry into diverse disciplines and areas, often complex in character, leading to the creation of new and significant knowledge' (UNESCO 2008). This would indicate that universities, as places that extend the boundaries of knowledge, should provide research training across the range of university qualifications and a wide spectrum of disciplines. Research is not confined to the sciences or to the harvesting of empirical data. The purpose of research is, indeed, to gather new information or data, but also to use that information to produce something previously unknown or unrecognised; something which adds significantly to the work in progress. Research can be complex and far reaching. Research methods, in line with these criteria, may also be diverse and complex, not limited to a specific approach.

Turning specifically to research for writers, this may involve an extensive investigation into a particular subject area. It may also involve a diverse and complex exploration, for example of an historical period, a psychological theory, a medical condition or pivotal moment in history. The research process may include reviewing literature, and the study of primary and secondary sources, so that reading plays an important role in the process. However there are other ways to research, as Penny Hanley discovered:

> one can do much research from books but I was discovering that research is more than digging in libraries for answers to reference questions; it is more than note-taking. It is a lengthy process, a unique journey where it is necessary to be open to the unexpected, open to something wild. (Hanley 2007)

Hanley's journey need not be limited to a physical journey, but in this paper I wish to focus on travelling to new environments and situations, and on the idea that such travel can stimulate creativity. The word creativity can be difficult to define satisfactorily and may have shades of meaning. It is useful to examine how the word is used in everyday language, as a way, then, to understand it in a particular context. Creativity can mean making something out of nothing, such as 'God created the world', or making something new out of old material. There are times when we say 'I created a rod for my own back'. A fashion designer creates a 'new look'. We refer to scientists discovering a theory to explain particular phenomena, although we may regard the process of reaching that discovery as creative thinking. These different ways of using 'creativity' have certain elements in common. An end product is produced which is more than the sum of its parts. The process may involve the use of physical matter, but imagination, inspiration and inventiveness are essential. The final product may, or may not be, beneficial, but it will be something new or novel.

Arthur Koestler, in examining the act of creation, states:

> Concerning the psychology of the creative act itself, I mentioned the following interrelated aspects of it: the displacement of attention to something not previously noted, which was irrelevant in the old and is relevant in the new context; the discovery of hidden analogies as a result of the former; the bringing into consciousness of tacit axioms and habits of thought which were implied on the code and taken for granted; the un-covering of what has always been there. (Koestler 1964: 119-20)

Angela Leung et al, in their study of the effect of multicultural experience on creativity have offered another definition:

> Creativity is typically defined as the process of bringing into being something that is both novel and useful. The creative process is often a mysterious phenomenon, with sudden insights seeming to work at an unconscious level. The magical "aha" moment of discovery makes creativity seem sudden, without logic and elusive. (Leung et al 2008: 174)

The word 'useful' need not be limited to technical, scientific or medical fields. Leung et al refer to creativity as springing forth 'in places far removed from the domain for which the idea is appropriate' (2008: 6). In support of this they refer to philosophers who came to their best ideas while walking in the country, physicists who developed their theories while climbing mountains, and musicians who were inspired by being in love. Writers, during the creative

process, also draw inspiration from diverse sources. They describe a myriad of experiences, emotions, and characters. Readers can be entertained and stimulated to further reflection about themselves, the world and its people. This is arguably both novel and useful.

Richard Florida (2005) has made an analysis of creativity across a wide range of occupations. He devised a table that measures the global creative class, based on Florida's three Ts theory of economic growth (Talent, Technology and Tolerance). In preparing this table Florida and Tingalis have listed creative occupations. Based on International Labour Organization statistics, the work force is broken down into job categories, such as scientists and engineers, artists, musicians, writers, architects and managers. Florida's overall analysis emphasises that creativity may range over a variety of occupations, and that creativity is to be highly valued. He asserts that measures that encourage creativity in any field are beneficial to society.

Is it valid to equate creativity across all disciplines? Is the creativity of scientists akin to that of artists? An answer to that question might be that there is an element of creativity in both the work of scientists and artists in all fields. Koestler tells us that: 'the act of creation itself … is based on essentially the same underlying pattern in all ranges of the continuous rainbow spectrum' (1964: 330). Along this spectrum the final results of the creation can spring from a spark of intuition or inspiration, and this spark is fanned into a flame by further investigation, contemplation and reflection. Creativity lies in the intuitive or imaginative leap across boundaries or conventions. It is asking the question 'what if' and then searching outside the accepted parameters for the answer. The search to answer 'what if' is not exclusive to any discipline, but that search is very difficult to evaluate. In addressing this difficulty, Leung et al write that:

> Because of its apparent unpredictability and fickleness, creativity may seem difficult to study scientifically and systematically. However, the psychological literature now boasts a wealth of evidence delineating the psychological factors that facilitate creativity: elements of personality, affect, cognition, and motivation can either facilitate or impair creativity. (2008: 6)

It would seem quite reasonable to apply this psychological literature to creativity in the arts. A further approach, and one which I will follow here, is to examine sociological studies that, while evaluating travel as a research tool, also assess how it stimulates creative thinking.

In 1978 Martin Rudwick prepared a paper (later published without revision in 1996) concerning the value of travel for geologists. He conjectures that bringing knowledge of the familiar to the observation of the radically unfamiliar allows for an expansion of ideas:

> Without experience of the unfamiliar, a geologist is unlikely to do more than elaborate the conceptual views of his teachers and colleagues. Without the experience of the familiar - that is to say, without the initial training in interpretation - the observer of the unfamiliar will experience only bewilderment; he will not gain new conceptual insights that will stand up successfully to later testing. (Rudwick 1996: 147)

Rudwick's focus is on creativity and innovative thinking. I believe that it is appropriate to apply his theories to a wider field as he has done, comparing

innovative travel by geologists to Arnold van Gennep's classic analysis of rites de passage in primitive societies:

> Van Gennep uses the term limen or threshold to describe the special characteristics of an initiation rite, where the initiate is spatially and experientially separated from his everyday community. In this "liminal" environment the initiate is temporarily detached from the familiar features and taken-for-granted assumptions of his everyday life. He is exposed to unfamiliar experiences which give access to a new and deeper understanding of the familiar world to which he later returns. (Rudwick 1996: 149)

In the same way Rudwick claims that a religious pilgrimage may be seen as a quest towards renewal:

> The classic literature of scientific travel, like the literature of pilgrimage, characteristically expresses the individual's long personal quest to find a deeper understanding of reality, deeper than can be found by remaining within the "structure" of everyday experience. The pilgrim's travel towards his goals is a route of ever more sacred character: his sense of expectation and hence his receptivity to new understanding is progressively heightened. (1996: 151)

This claim differentiates travel simply to reach a destination from travel that is undertaken with a quest in mind, and from which there is some anticipated result. Rudwick concedes that the value of travel on research must be viewed as more than the impact of the unfamiliar. It is his claim that 'we must study that impact in conjunction with the very specific social and psychological features of the process of travelling itself' (1996: 151).

Fiewel Kupferberg, following Rudwick, accepts the 'need for two kinds of passages for theoretical innovation to occur, a chartered as well as an emergent one' (Kupferberg 1998: 196), but notes that there is no theoretical consensus about why travel enhances creativity. He attempts to define and evaluate the specific effect of travel and migration on creativity:

> Having been pondering this question for some years, I have come to the conclusion that creativity is a highly complex phenomenon involving different aspects which can be captured by three different "models": the "migrant model", the "stranger model" and the "traveller model". We are thus not talking only of one but of several mechanisms or forms of creativity which are enhanced by intellectual mobility between countries. (1998: 180)

While I am mainly looking at writer-researchers who are travellers, other types of moving around are recorded in the literature as having positive effects on people's thinking and their work. Kupferberg introduces his conclusions about the value of travel by first describing the experience of scientists, engineers and philosophers. Possibly his most famous example is that of the philosopher Wittgenstein:

> Wittengenstein originally came to England in order to study the latest in aeronautic engineering, as it was seen as the center of excellence in this field at that time. Through the intensive talking and reading on the topic, Wittgenstein was gradually led into unsolved mathematical problems which the more

> practically orientated engineers had little interest in pursuing. So Wittgenstein went to Cambridge in order to meet the philosopher Bertrand Russell, one of the writers of the *Principa Matematica*, the most advanced work on mathematics known at the time...Russell frequently complained about the intellectually exhausting conversations he had with this strange German. Gradually Russell realized he had met a superior mind. Having served as a mentor for the new thinker, he withdrew from academic life and began supporting himself as a popular writer. (1998: 184-85)

This example would more closely fit Kupferberg's 'migrant model' than the 'traveller model'. The point remains, however, that it was through Wittgenstein leaving his own country to work in a new environment where he was exposed to new ideas and other engineers, mathematicians and philosophers that his focus and field of study were created anew. It is hard to imagine that had Wittgenstein stayed at home, he would have followed the same path.

Kupferberg's paper is important not only in evaluating research through travel, but also in setting out those conditions that optimise this experience. In his analysis of the 'migrant' model he concludes thus: 'the process of discovery is not unidimensional. It involves several layers of attention beyond the written text' (1998: 154). Kupferberg concludes that the years between 1930 and 1960 were particularly fruitful in the world of science, in part because scientists travelled extensively and came into contact with other scientists and institutions (1998: 181).

The value of travel to allow wider contacts is supported by Paul Hoch:

> The temporary or permanent migration of scientists or technologies from one scientific institution within the same society to another, or from one society to another is an important condition for such contacts. (Hoch 1987: 209)

The 'migrant model' does highlight the effect of a new and unfamiliar environment and the possibility of personal interaction with people one would not normally meet. New ways of thinking and new insights can lead to creative solutions to problems.

The 'stranger model' differs from the migrant. In discussing this model, Kupferberg makes the following points. The stranger is in a privileged position because natives are less inhibited in giving strangers information, knowing that they are unlikely to use such information against them. This, of course, assumes that the stranger is not perceived as a threat. The stranger is in a better position to make objective observations, being detached from the culture and society, unlike the migrant, who wishes to become part of that society. Thus the stranger brings innovative thinking from the experience, and also gains new insights into his or her familiar world (1998: 189).

The stranger model best represents the benefits for a writer moving in a new environment and as an outsider. As strangers, writers are detached enough to make objective observations, and these observations will inform, develop and colour their writing. They are not constrained by trying to assimilate into the community or environment, and strangers do not stay long enough to become settlers. Those who have spent time in another country or environment as strangers may return home able to look at their familiar social environment in a fresh way.

The 'traveller model' is a group that has had less attention than either the 'migrant' or 'stranger' mode, although Kupferberg considers this an important one:

> Social theorizing on travelling is scarce and there is as yet no established corps of knowledge about what travelling means and in particular its independent effect on creativity … nevertheless, I think there is some substantial evidence that travelling has visible effects upon creativity, which are clearly different from migration and marginality. (1998: 194)

Taking travel to mean geographical mobility, Kupferberg excludes organised or routine trips, claiming that 'retaining the open-endedness of passages is a precondition for them to become innovative' (1998: 195). The value of such travel in developing creativity is that it frees the individual from the tyranny of the familiar. In the same vein Erik Leed writes of the social decontextualisation of travel:

> The fear of the way-farer, the loss of security implicit in unaccommodated travel is a gain of accessibility and sensitivity to the world … the stripping away by the frictions of passage of all that is not the essence of the passenger, the removal of defining associations, of bonds to the world of place - all effect changes in the character of the traveller that are strictly analogous to cleansing. (Leed 1991: 10)

Leed's 'cleansing' may be demonstrated in a traveller who develops a greater understanding of social diversity, geographical features and language, shedding preconceived notions and prejudices in the process.

In summary, to maximise the effect on creativity and the acquisition of new knowledge, travel needs to meet three criteria: it should be undertaken as a quest with a particular goal in mind; the mode of travel requires some adaptation from the usual way of life and thinking, and this adaptation allows the traveller to acquire new skills; and it affords fresh insights to the traveller who is perceived as an outsider. The 'set goal' need not be so specific, however, that it closes the mind of the traveller to a narrow focus, but is still defined enough to provide a purpose or field of enquiry.

I return to the question of whether these criteria are applicable to travel research undertaken by writers. If so, may writers who undertake travel for research expect outcomes that advance their work, in the same way as is experienced by scientists?

A traveller visiting an unfamiliar world, coming into a new culture, and being privy to its mores, is open to new observations and experiences. Writers absorb experiences, and then describe their impressions to readers who will, in turn respond in a vicarious and personal way. A writer, by travelling, may be inspired to create a deeper or completely fresh view of an overall theme or narrative. With this in mind it is significant that Leung et al, while examining the value of multicultural experiences on creativity, begin with a reference to writers:

> To Gertrude Stein, bicultural experiences were necessary for writers at both the artistic and practical levels: Not only do experiences in foreign countries allow writers a critical abstract and physical distance from the subjects they write about, but immersion in foreign environments also provides an important

> source of inspiration, a multicultural muse for the craft of creation. (2008: 169)

They identify five ways in which multicultural experience may stimulate creativity: people learn new ideas and concepts; multicultural living experience allows people to recognize that the same form or surface behaviour has different functions and implications; people adapt their thoughts and behaviour to a new environment; having been exposed to a different way of doing things people may be more ready to seek out ideas from diverse sources and thus become more innovative and creative; and in adapting to a very different culture, people may develop greater cognitive complexity. They conclude:

> Therefore, an individual who has been exposed to different cultures may be able to spontaneously retrieve seemingly discrepant ideas from each culture and then juxtapose and integrate these ideas in novel ways. (2008: 177)

While their studies led them to conclude that the longer people are exposed to multicultural experience the more this enhances their creativity, they also give value to short term multicultural experience:

> It is important to note that we do not mean to suggest that some shorter term multicultural experiences are without value. On the contrary, we believe that such experiences can be of great value. In fact, there are numerous examples of high profile individuals having life-changing experiences during short visits in a foreign country … What seems to be critical are (a) whether the experience allows for the juxtaposition and integration of cultural differences, (b) whether the individual is open to new ideas, and (c) whether the multicultural context encourages learning and minimizes the need for firm answers and existential anxiety. (2008: 186)

The initial exposure to a foreign environment, culture or set of ideas, having the force of freshness and novelty, may produce the stronger impact, and be of the greatest benefit to a writer. After a certain period of time what seemed strange becomes familiar and the decontextualisation to which Leed refers no longer applies.

Hanley, while undertaking research in Ireland, found the impact of an unfamiliar environment stimulated her ideas and sharpened the focus of her novel. In the paper she presented at the Australian Association of Writing Programs annual conference in 2007, she describes how her understanding of her theme and thesis, which includes a creative writing element, had benefited through travel:

> For my writing there is no substitute for going to places I am writing about, whether writing fiction or nonfiction. While I did spend some days in Dublin's National Library of Ireland taking notes from books on Irish women artists it was the non-writing experiences I had in Ireland that I felt at the time made the most significant research because of the way they fired my imagination. (Hanley 2007)

Hanley spent time in the National Gallery of Ireland 'absorbing the rich variety of innovative art', but claims she gained more from a talk given by the art historian Fiona McLoughlin on 'The Origins of Modernism in Irish Art' than from all the notes she had taken from the books in the library. Hanley was able to see paintings and have access to books that are not available in Australia, but

she also gained from the contact with a variety of people and scenery. In particular, the Blasket Islands captured her imagination:

> The Great Blasket was called the island of poets. This had to have been the place where my character Deidre Wild spent her first twenty years. I found out more facts about the people of the Blaskets, including some intriguing events that dovetail with my idea of my first generation woman artist, such as rebellious acts of certain women against the tax collectors. (2007)

My own experience of researching by travel mirrors those of Hanley. Like her, I spent time researching in libraries, visited geographical and architectural sites and garnered impressions from the physical environment, theatrical performances and people I met. My journey was to Germany and France, and while I did spend time in the National Library in Paris, my aim in travelling to Europe went beyond formal research.

As my novel (an historical novel based on three famous medieval women) gives equal weight to three different women, I planned my time to cover all of them in roughly equal measure. I began the trip at Hildegard's Abbey in Eibingen, Germany. This abbey was founded by Hildegard and is a centre for research into her life, her work and her music. Living there, even for a short time, gave me an opportunity to experience the Benedictine way of life, albeit as a layperson rather than a postulant. In the same way, walking about the Paris of Abelard and Heloise, near Notre Dame and in the Left Bank, brought me to a new sense of their reality not gained through reading their works or reading about them. This was a *Verstehen* approach to the twelfth century, not possible without immersing myself in such locations. No other method of research would have allowed the same awareness.

I had begun both my novel and exegesis before I set out to do further research in Europe. I had read numerous books and papers on medieval history. I had attended a number of excellent conferences. All this was valuable, but none took the place of what I experienced in Germany and France. Much was gained from this travel because I had left with a certain amount of knowledge (the familiar) to go to a new landscape and environment (the unfamiliar). This corresponds to the ideas of Rudwick, cited earlier, who sees this as a requisite for gaining creativity through travel. Certainly I fitted the 'stranger' and the 'traveller' model of Kupferberg, which allowed me to experience a way of life outside my familiar one. The difference in the language and outlook I experienced led to reflection, innovation and restructuring of ideas. All three make up some part of creativity.

Robert Dessaix's book *Twilight of Love: Travels with Turgenev* is just one example of a text enriched because the author undertook research through travel. As a young man, Dessaix had lived and studied in Russia. However, he later experienced a form of writer's block whenever he tried to write about Russia. In renewing his interest in the Russian writer, Turgenev, he decided to travel to the places where Turgenev had lived and worked. This travel freed him to write, not only about Turgenev but about Russia, as he describes in The Background section of his book:

> First in Baden-Baden, later around Paris and finally in Russia, where he also spent a large slice of his life, I found that following in Turegenev's footsteps, seeking not his ghost but to understand our kinship better, made me want … at long last to write about Russia - my Russia, not a economist's or political

> scientist's. And so crabwise, as it were, while seeming to fix my sights on Turgenev, I have ended up scuttling past him, heading for the broader target. (Dessaix 2004: n.p.)

Dessaix began his journey with a purpose, but the book he eventually wrote had a greater scope than the one he originally planned. Now he could write movingly and affectionately about Russia, something that had previously eluded him:

> Back in Moscow - and perhaps because it was a Sunday afternoon - I found that my mood was beginning to change. Besides, the whole city seems to break out in a smile on a springlike Sunday afternoon. I strolled about the old city with friends, took pleasure in the handsome architecture, the garish churches, even the beautiful wrought-iron fences bordering so many gardens and parks. My mind drifted to the treasure-houses of the Pushkin Museum and the Kremlin, the feasts on offer in the concert-halls and theatres. Who was I, when it all boiled down, to sit in stony-faced judgement on a civilization as rich as this one? (2004: 263)

Here Dessaix draws on his previous knowledge of Moscow to enliven his appreciation and perceptions of a typical Moscow Sunday afternoon. Physically he is confined to the streets as he walks about, while his mind ranges over the cultural riches of the city, which he reveals to the reader. In a description of Oryol he again reflects on the changes he observes:

> At the same time something about the square was not Soviet at all. It wasn't just the roller-skaters, either, in their Adidas tops, gabbling into their mobile phones at Lenin's feet or the woman with the Marks & Spencer carrier bag, getting out of her Audi. No, it was something less obvious than these fairly superficial signs of a globalised economy. "What is it then?" Kolya was curious. "I think it's the absence of fear," I said - and then regretted it. It was true, but, putting it like that, I felt I'd struck the wrong note. What I'd meant to say was that I sensed a movement outwards on the streets of Oryol, rather than a closing-in, as I once would have felt in a town like this, an inclination to flirt with life rather than retreat from it. And that was new. (2004: 223)

Having returned to Russia after years away Dessaix is highly sensitive to the changes he now observes, as he uses both heightened language and references to everyday items to recreate the ambience. It is impossible to talk of the book that Dessaix might have written if he had not travelled to Russia to research it. But we can look at the one he did write, which includes his fresh impressions and sensations. His earlier experience of living in Russia informed his perception of the changes and his expression of the reflections and descriptions which they inspired. In this research he travelled, with a purpose and with prior knowledge and preparation. Through the experience of travelling, the resultant book gained in scope and dimension.

In a similar way I found that even though I had read much of Hildegard of Bingen's writings and made a study of the Benedictine Rule, I had a new appreciation of their way of life after staying at both the Abbey of St Hildegard at Eibingen and Fontevraud Abbey in the Loire Valley. It was my time in the garden at Fontevraud that led me to have Hildegard describe her experience of walking in the garden of the Paraclete abbey:

> When I walk in a garden I like to be alone, to study the plants and to mark those from which I could take cuttings. These were the usual kitchen and herb gardens. Monasteries need to have condiments for the kitchen close to hand but the herb garden is used to grow medicinal plants as well, to help teach young nuns and monks how to recognize them properly before going out to pick plants in the wild areas. Otherwise those who sought to heal could do great harm. Wisely they had placed two wells in the vegetable garden, so that the plants could be adequately watered. I noted that the green vegetables were grown separately from the root vegetables and the legumes; common sense and common practice. I asked the sisters who tended the garden if they ever rotated the beds. It seemed a new idea to them. (Sutherland 2008)

It was only through being there that I was able to notice the small details, such as the two wells rather than one, and the fact that some medicinal plants were grown in the herb garden for the stated purpose. This helped me to imagine life in a twelfth-century abbey more directly. I was also made particularly aware of the importance of the Daily Office in the daily lives of the nuns even when they were involved in other activities. Thus I wrote:

> There was no time to talk further then as the bell called us once more to chapel. It is a discipline to leave what is important to go to pray, but once on our knees, chanting the Office, that is what becomes really important. I always knelt opposite Elizabeth at the back of the chapel. We stood at times, knelt at others, eyes focussed on the altar. The seats in the choir stalls are built so that the old or infirm sisters can support themselves at the times they were expected to stand. Sometimes I was grateful to rest my poor knees in this way. Once our prayer was finished we walked in pairs to the altar, bowed or genuflected, then moved in silence back to our work. Could any life be more fitting, fixed as it was on the things of heaven and the needs of those on earth? (Sutherland 2008)

Scientists and cognitive psychologists accept that travel can increase and promote creativity. Kupfberg has concluded that while creativity is a highly complex phenomenon involving different aspects, travel opens the way to creative work. A migrant, a stranger or a traveller is exposed to new environments, new ideas and contact with other people in the same discipline. This contact with the unfamiliar stimulates creativity. It is important to note that not all forms of travel are of equal benefit. The traveller should be equipped with specific knowledge, setting out with a set goal while still allowing for expansion of this scope and flexibility of approach. The goal need not limit the mind of the traveller to a narrow focus, but needs to be defined enough to provide a purpose or field of enquiry.

All creative artists, including writers, may make a similar claim concerning the benefits of travel on creativity. Both disciplines are seeking knowledge. Both groups can draw on knowledge and experience gained through travel. A physicist discovers new areas within his science. A writer finds, through travel to a remote island, a new way to develop the character she is depicting in her novel. Another writer, returning to a once-familiar city, is able to depict that city with a new vision. Another, spending time in a Benedictine monastery, gains insights into the cloistered life. Travel does not take the place of more formal research but is a legitimate research tool in itself. The creative stimulus

it provides builds on what is already known and leads to the expression of new knowledge and insights.

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