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Off the side of the desk: equity work in Canadian teaching and learning centres

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ABSTRACT

Canadian higher education has been critiqued for its inequitable structures and failure to change despite claiming to be inclusive. This paper considers the experiences of 15 academic developers who engage in varied forms of institutional equity work. By focusing on how their work takes place, why they pursue equity work and their relationships with co-workers, I open a critical discussion of how prepared Canadian teaching and learning centres are to support equity work. By examining equity work and how it is supported, I intend to contribute to ongoing dialogues about the urgency of structural change in Canadian academic development workplaces.

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Equity; academic development; Canadian higher education; Whiteness

Introduction and literature

Equity, academic development, and Canadian higher education

Academic institutions in the Global North are shaped by and have their basis in empiricism and colonialism (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012), and access to higher education has been limited for marginalised groups (Connell, 2019). Scholars have documented how structural inequities such as institutional racism (Ahmed, 2012) or academic ableism (Dolmage, 2017) pervade contemporary university life. Significantly, the demands of the neoliberal academy, which values and rewards productivity and efficiency, make the struggle for social change increasingly difficult (Davies & Bansel, 2010).

In Canada specifically, scholars have documented how systemic racism and colonialism have shaped higher education and negatively impacted racialised and Indigenous academic staff (Henry et al., 2017); the pervasiveness of ableism in the academy (Dolmage, 2017); the limited access to study for poor and working-class people (Frenette, 2007); how heteronormativity impacts queer and non-binary scholars (Beagan et al., 2021); and the disproportionate work shouldered by racialised people, Indigenous people, and women to redress inequity (Dhamoon, 2020). Importantly, Canadian higher education can be considered a mass public higher education system – in 2023, there are 2.2 million students in Canadian institutions (nearly 90% of whom are at public institutions) and amongst the working age population, 57.5% of the populations

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has higher education credentials, and one third hold bachelor's degrees (Statistics Canada, 2022, 2023). Many of the calls to redress inequities in higher education – including addressing anti-Black racism, answering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's[1] (TRC's) Calls to Action, designing more accessible campuses, and creating safer spaces for queer, trans, and non-binary people – employ and call upon responsibilities that public institutions are expected to take up (e.g. following human rights legislation). Yet despite policy work to promote diversity (Tamtik & Guenter, 2020), the Canadian academy persists as a site of inequity and is organised to serve the needs of those at the centre.

In recent years, largely as part of institutional responses to demands for change (e.g. answering the TRC's Calls to Action), many Canadian teaching and learning centres (TLCs) have posted positions focused on Indigenisation, as well as other equity areas such as accessibility or anti-racist pedagogies. Research on academic developers in equity-specific positions is sparse (see Raffoul et al., 2022, on Indigenous academic development). The placement of these positions within TLCs may suggest that these units have become a place that senior administration rely on (for activities on which to report) and teachers turn to (for programming and resources). However, Gabay (2018), in her interview study, identified how diversity work in Canadian TLCs is often performative (Ahmed, 2012) and that centres have not engaged with significant and critical interrogation of Whiteness. While institutional logic might suggest that equity work belongs in TLCs, it is worth considering the extent to which centres are equipped to support academic developers who do this work.

Researching academic developers' identities and politics

Academic developers use research to critically reflect on and understand our work. This scholarship often grapples with our positioning in the academy, considering our relationship with university leadership and academic staff (Little & Green, 2012; Manathunga, 2006). There is discomfort with being associated with neoliberal imperatives (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2016) and discussion of our presumed liminality in the academy and how it shapes what work we can do (Mori et al., 2022). Our positioning, and the language we use to describe our work, has received critical discussion, in particular, the troubling use of neutrality as a descriptor for academic development (Holmes & Manathunga, 2012; Holmes et al., 2012). And yet this critical reflection on our work is often coupled with the presumption that we possess a unique combination of skills and competencies used to respond to a broad set of stakeholders with differing values and expectations (Timmermans, 2014) *and* that we are capable of 'diplomacy, resilience, and adaptability' (Bovill & Mårtensson, 2014, p. 263). Further, academic developers are often also expected to be researchers (Green & Little, 2016; Peseta, 2007). This portrait we paint of ourselves seems to include a boundless skillset. It is unsurprising, then, that academic developers experience burnout and fatigue (Kolomitro et al., 2019).

Less often, we consider power relations in academic development or what we do to contribute to making the academy more equitable (Behari-Leak & Mokou, 2019; Gabay, 2018; Wuetherick & Ewert-Bauer, 2012). The ability to contribute to equity work is rarely included in the breadth of competencies that academic developers should have. We understand little about academic developers who engage in equity work, framed here

as efforts to redress inequity through formal (e.g. institutional programming) and informal (e.g. activism, mentorship, community-building) activities in their institutions and centres. In a field that prioritises critical reflection, it is worth considering how well equity work, and those who do it, is supported.

Methodology

In developing this project, I thought closely about Ahmed's (2012) book, *On Being Included*. Ahmed's investigation focuses on the experiences of diversity workers as they try to engage the university in change, a process it resists or evades. She documents the insatiable appetite that the university has for performative diversity activities, and the link between performative diversity and the pervasive Whiteness of the academy. The release of Ahmed's book sparked discussion amongst academic developers who do equity work. Yet most of us are not diversity workers but institutional colleagues who collaborate and support with them. But what does it mean to be amongst what Ahmed's participants describe as 'diversity champions' (p. 131)? I am eager to understand how academic developers engage in equity work and to think critically about our capacity to do this in Canadian TLCs.

Interviews

This project draws on 15 interviews with academic developers who currently work or have worked at Canadian TLCs. Following ethical review, all participants provided written informed consent and engaged in discussion about anonymity, selection of pseudonyms, use of pronouns, and presentation of research results. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via video conferencing and ranged from 75–100 minutes in length. Audio files were transcribed by research assistants, after which I reviewed and edited all transcripts.

All interviews were analysed using a multi-stage process of listening to audio files and reading transcripts. The development of the coding and analytical approach is a methodological bricolage that is informed by three modes of conducting and analysing interviews. First, I draw from coding approaches premised upon close and careful reading of transcripts and the subsequent identification, collapsing, and condensing of codes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2019). Second, I developed a multi-stage process of listening to interviews and building my analysis through adaptations of The Listening Guide research methodology. The Listening Guide is informed by a feminist research praxis that privileges listening to participants (rather than focusing primarily on transcriptions) and consideration of the social and relational networks in which the subject is situated as well as the relation and dialogue between interviewer/interviewee (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). Finally, the analysis of these interviews is shaped by my reflective position as a feminist researcher who shares something with the interviewees. This is not a strategic position from which I can successfully extract better data. Rather, it demands taking seriously feminist ethics in interview research (Thwaites, 2017). I aimed for good ethical practice in discussion of risk, working carefully to ensure anonymity, and taking seriously participants' commitment to telling difficult stories about their work.

To invite participants, I used the phrase 'politicised pedagogy' to describe their work. Participants used varied and specific descriptions to describe their work including anti-racism, decolonisation, Indigenisation, Indigenous pedagogies, universal design for learning, mad pedagogies, feminist pedagogies, queer pedagogies, accessible pedagogies, anti-capitalism, and environmental justice. Specifically, I sought participants who could identify concrete examples of work they undertake in their centres or institutions (e.g. workshops, consultation, committee work), rather than simply holding particular values. Through this paper, I describe their work, for brevity and to preserve anonymity, as 'equity work'. However, it cannot be understood as a meaningful umbrella term – to do so risks presuming that these pedagogies have shared values or approaches. Participants' work can be in tension with others' areas, and one pedagogy may critique another (e.g. mad pedagogies and universal design for learning). Some areas are unique from and cannot be collapsed within other bodies of work (e.g. work on Indigenisation and anti-racist pedagogy). Further, many participants engage in intersectional approaches. Thus, 'politicised pedagogy' was what participants were willing to accept as an invitation but is not a vessel to hold the breadth and depth of their work.

Findings

Off the side of the desk or formal portfolio

Through the interviews, I sought to understand the breadth of work in which participants engaged and how they became involved in equity work. We spoke broadly about job descriptions, their involvement in projects and initiatives, and collaboration in equity work. We discussed how they came to be working in AD more broadly and with equity work specifically.

Most participants did not have roles with identified responsibilities related to equity work. Several participants described this as happening off the 'side of their desks'. For some, this approach was key to working well with campus partners. Aron explained,

> I was doing it off the side of my desk at the beginning. Nobody had any concrete outcomes that I had to meet and it gave me time to build relationships. To work really slowly on things, to not put pressure on partners. It gave me that flexibility to, kind of, do it in a way that was mutually defined, as opposed to, 'Aron has to report on something in six months and needs an output'.

Others felt that when work was off the side of the desk, it risked being neglected or deprioritised. Charlie explains how a project on which they were working suffered because of lack of time, 'Those projects, we consistently hit a lot of red tape and I think part of it, again, because I wasn't able to focus on it squarely'. Quinn Wells echoed this noting how in her centre, 'There's not one particular person that's responsible for this, and that's important, I think. But also, when there's not one . . . then it becomes the side project'. Most people noted that this work was off the 'side of their desk' and had full portfolios for which they were responsible.

A couple of participants were in positions formally focused on equity work and they expressly sought out these roles. Some participants in equity-focused roles noted that while the position was advertised as focused on equity, their job descriptions were generic and included no specific duties or competencies related to equity. Participants in generic

positions described bringing equity work into their portfolio. Zoey directly stated, 'I made it a part of my role', but noted how when interviewing for the role, she highlighted general competencies. Others, like Erik and Edith, described being grateful with flexibility they had in their roles, which meant they were able to undertake equity work. Contrastingly, Mia described feeling stifled in a 'conservative' centre and Dawn explained why she was unable to stay and thrive in a 'play-it-safe' centre where equity work was perceived as unrelated or interfering with her role. Others explained that some of their equity work tended to be more clandestine or unacknowledged.

Why pursue equity work?

Why would so many of these academic developers take on side-of-the-desk work in addition to their formal portfolio? Participants' choices were intentional and deeply connected to their politics and identities. Some connected their work to their experiences of higher education. For example, Ali explained, 'My personal experience in education has meant that I've experienced a lot of different discrimination and types of oppression and abuse'. Others noted how they, their family, friends, or community members have experienced injustice. Others spoke broadly about systemic inequity and their decision to engage in this work. Several participants had been involved in activist work outside the university. Participants also spoke about engaging because of a clear imperative from their communities (e.g. Indigenous communities, religious communities, queer communities). Rae described learning about histories of injustice as a child and how this was connected to calls for action and vigilance against injustice, noting, 'I think of all the ways that my ancestors, or my queer ancestors, were treated and then you know what my role is in preventing that from happening to other people'. This need to redress and respond to injustice is one that many participants echoed. Louis Riel noted that he pursued work on Reconciliation and Indigenisation in higher education with deep trust and knowledge that his 'ancestors put me here, they'll put me where they need me to be'.

Participants also highlighted that equity work typically does not garner reward and recognition. Sean laughed and observed that his work on accessibility would hardly lead to higher paid or leadership positions. Lena emphasised this saying, 'Social justice work is not centering work. . . . You don't get into social justice work because you wanna be like on a dollar bill'. Aron expressed frustration with academic developer professional development that focuses heavily on profiling one's portfolio/expertise, which he sees as contradictory to equity work that is focused on relationships. Participants were motivated by how they could make their universities more equitable, rather than on its benefit to their careers.

Working with colleagues: experiences doing equity work in TLCs

Participants spoke about who they collaborate with, learn from, and are supported by. Several participants identified a particular colleague, someone they trusted and who they felt shared their goals and values. Lena, who left a previous workplace because of discrimination, spoke high praise for a TLC colleague,

> She's basically the best colleague I've ever had in my life. I've worked a lot of places . . . and so she's, you know, allyship is something that you cannot claim, it is given to you by someone by means of you showing and demonstrating that you actually understand allyship and a thousand percent [colleague] every time gets it.

Lena's observation about a specific colleague was like other participants who tended to focus on just one or two colleagues as their support within their TLCs. Only two participants suggested that their centre was collectively engaged in equity work. Contrastingly, multiple participants felt isolated. Jennings described themself as 'the only one in my centre that would do anything on social justice'. And, while some people felt they had some general support from a colleague, they typically did all work related to equity in their centres. Interestingly, Edith observed how she repeatedly uses 'we' when describing equity work she does with other campus staff, though it is only her contributing,

> I was the only one who took up that work because I don't know if there's anyone else in the centre that really has that kind of background . . . It's mostly me, that was just something that I was interested in . . . I guess when I'm saying 'we', I kind of mean 'the centre'.

This led some participants to wonder if their work would be abandoned or taken up by colleagues if they quit. Edith questioned this, concluding,

> If they posted my position tomorrow, it [her position] wouldn't say necessarily these things [her equity project work]. It may just say sort of 'in alignment with the academic plan' or . . . 'we're committed to equity and inclusive pedagogy'.

Participants also noted that support might have been more tacit, in that they were not prevented from doing equity work but did not receive explicit support from leaders or peers.

Hanging back and equity work in TLCs

Discussing their relationships with colleagues, participants noted how their equity work was often perceived by peers. Jennings and Mia observed how their equity work was treated as a passion project or special interest rather than core work. Mia described a conversation with a non-TLC colleague about TLC dynamics related to equity. She explains her colleague's observations,

> When you're in a group of people, in a team of people, and some people are quiet and they expect the other person to speak up, what they're essentially doing is expecting the other colleague to take on that extra load and so therefore they don't have to step up to this. 'She's gonna do it'.

Mia commented on her own reflections after this conversation:

> That's a really good way of thinking about it because I never really thought about it that way. So when I, when somebody's, doing educational development or any of this and decides to do the equity piece, often on top of their jobs, or infusing it into their jobs, everyone else kind of sits back and says, 'Well, she's gonna do it'. You know what I mean. And, I wouldn't say I'm resentful about that but it also kind of really makes me think about like this idea that well, okay, well, 'We're off the hook because one person's doing it'.

Other participants experienced this similarly. When they step up to do equity work, they observed that their colleagues often hang back. This lack of engagement continued when participants sought support from co-workers. Louis Riel describes his experience:

> They're very good at being present and available but they're not actually turning that into direct action so it's been a challenge that I have and one of the things that happens is when I bring things forward, sometimes I get, it's called privilege of silence, where they'll sit there respectfully shaking their heads and nodding, but nobody speaks . . . There's this sense of me having to motivate them or excite them but that's counter to our cultural perspective right, Indigenous people's autonomy and we give people autonomy to do things they need to do as a part of our culture. So, by me having to motivate them, I'm actually having to give up my cultural perspective in order to meet their Western demands for somebody to tell how to do it, when to do it.

Mia and Louis Riel observed colleagues hanging back, perhaps seeing the work as done because others are tending to it or not stepping up because it does not overlap with one's own 'interests'. Erik observed a similar challenge of bringing people to a place of action around equity work:

> I think people know it's important but they're not sure how to proceed . . . They have big hearts and they want to help but they also know they don't know something, which makes them . . . settler culture or dominant culture people, reluctant to act for fear of making a mistake.

In Erik's description, perhaps colleagues want to act but are uncertain of how to contribute. It was not uncommon for participants to support their colleagues' learning, for example, by organising activities to develop understanding of a particular equity issue. Participants explained that they do this in the hope that their centre's capacity and commitment to equity would grow.

Many participants, even in discussing the challenge of colleagues' lack of engagement, tended to use fairly positive descriptions of their peers. They acknowledged that academic developers become overloaded and burn out. However, participants also described experiences of discrimination. Jennings discussed considering leaving their role and how a conversation with a senior leader was meaningful in their decision to continue. They explained,

> I was two minutes away from giving my resignation and he said, 'Hold on', he's like, 'Let's talk about this. Let's see what's going on, how we can make changes' . . . I essentially kept three years of notes and so he said, that's, he was flabbergasted at the shit that I put up with and so he was like, 'That's systemic racism and that needs to change'.

Although it postponed their decision to leave, Jennings doubted whether change could happen because of academia's history of racism and colonialism. Ali described frustration with centre leadership when he observed that racialised, female academic developers experienced rude, aggressive, and discriminatory comments from participants in TLC programming, and that little was done to address this. He explained,

> There's actually no action plan for how to respond the next time it happens or whether the faculty members should be talked to . . . Debriefing is not enough. Like real action is necessary after this [racist incident] and I don't care if they're faculty or not. I don't care who's doing the abuse.

He went on to say that he found it difficult not to doubt the work of his centre around equity issues as a result.

> The hypocrisy is a little hard to swallow, right, being the centre that's supposed to do the anti-racist and, like, decolonial work in the whole university. But then the centre itself is not anti-racist nor is it like, you know, welcoming of diversity.

For many participants, speaking about frustrations within their own centres was difficult. It revealed that their workplaces were perhaps not as safe and welcoming as espoused. The discrimination experienced was often used to explain when, why, or how participants decided to find new roles. Some participants observed that their peers, in particular, racialised and Indigenous peers, often quit their positions or took leaves from work.

Some participants noted that undertaking more radical, rather than liberal, approaches would be challenging for TLCs. Both Erik and Noah highlighted that the Canadian academy is a late capitalist institution where liberal versions of equality have flourished. For example, Erik discussed how some academic developers see working for more student-centred approaches in teaching as 'activism'. Noah noted how use of language around equity in the TLC has tended to put a 'liberal glaze' on this work, which prevents more critical engagement. He noted how direct critiques of inequity are re-oriented towards more palatable initiatives. He used the example of how criticisms of policing on Canadian campuses gradually became reoriented towards performative diversity work that is more appealing to the institution. His question, 'Is it that we want our campus cops to be nicer or do we want cops off campus?', illustrates this shift. For Noah, the problem of 'niceness' is important for academic development to consider. He noted that 'an organisation that is very nice . . . sometimes doesn't acknowledge when there are inequities therein'. Both Erik and Noah offer some critical discussion of the culture of academic development, seeing this as at least partially indicative of why TLCs struggle to engage in equity work.

Discussion and conclusion

Whiteness and Canadian TLCs

Gabay reports how conversations about equity and diversity within Canadian TLCs have been 'polarizing' and that those engaged in diversity discussions receive 'the designation of the "unpopular voice"' (p. 185). To name and resist systemic inequity is disruptive. It reveals that the academy serves the needs and interests of privileged groups. Participants experienced being this 'unpopular voice', the one that speaks up about inequity and brings it into the space of TLCs. Although many participants had one trusted TLC colleague, the phenomenon of most colleagues 'hanging back' warrants attention. Scholars have identified actions associated with White fragility such as electing not to engage in discussion, looking for ways to exit/end conversations about racism, and failing to act despite hearing numerous examples of injustice and racism (H. Smith et al., 2022). The concept of White fragility has been useful for understanding how Whiteness is maintained, even whilst discussions of difference and injustice take place. H. Smith et al. in their analysis of coloniality, institutional racism, and White fragility in higher

education in Aotearoa New Zealand, posit that 'coloniality festers through colleagues and students who demonstrate a White agility, or a racialised ability, to evade robust adoption of Indigenous pedagogies'. I urge consideration of how 'hanging back' can be seen as an example of White agility, wherein individual academic developers are able to avoid sustained and meaningful consideration of inequity in academia, broadly, and in their centres, specifically. The limited scholarship on equity, social justice, or Indigenisation in Canadian academic development (Gabay, 2018; Raffoul et al., 2022) points to the maintenance of Whiteness and colonial organisational structures as barriers to social change and decolonisation. It may be useful to consider how dialogue about coloniality is taken up by scholars in the Global South and for Canadian academic development to take seriously the invitation to 'disrupt, with care and intentionality, the many normalised and internalised ways of being in the academy' (Behari-Leak & Mokou, 2019, p. 145). It is perhaps through disruption that possibilities for redressing structural inequity in TLCs might become possible.

For participants to speak about and act to change inequity is risky. It could tarnish the presumed neutrality of academic development (and by extension TLCs). When participants speak about inequity in the Canadian academy/TLCs, it demonstrates that these institutions and workplaces are not as good as imagined. Dyer (1997, p. 76) describes how Whiteness comes to be associated with neutrality, justice, goodness, and cleanliness wherein 'to be white is to have expunged all dirt, . . . to look clean'. Importantly, hanging back from engaging with equity is not a neutral act; it is not just letting some colleagues do their work. M. S. Smith (2017, p. 242), in her analysis of race, Indigeneity and gender in Canadian social science, argues that 'silences in the discipline cede power to the already powerful by assuming, for example, that the master could be neutral'. The silence created in hanging back re-establishes the already well-documented inequitable power relations in the Canadian academy and it reinforces the presumption that the academy – and, by extension, the TLC – can be a good and neutral space. It is imperative to trouble again, as scholars such as Manathunga (2006) have urged before, how neutrality and goodness are deployed in academic development and to see this as racial discourse (not just institutional positioning).

Creating supportive workplaces for equity work in academic development

The participants' experiences are useful for considering how TLCs can be better equipped to support those doing equity work and for redressing workplace inequity. I argue that this is important for thinking about how to support staff in general and in equity-focused roles. First, some participants described experiencing and observing harassment and discrimination in their institutions/centres. This, taken with the phenomenon of colleagues hanging back from engaging with discussions of equity, signals how ill-prepared TLC staff are to address injustice, both proactively and reactively. Gabay (2018, p. 193) points to how failing to develop explicit materials, such as anti-racism vision statements, signals how centres intend to 'retain a reactive stance to anti-racism'. Second, participants report having few close supports inside their centres. For racialised and Indigenous participants in the project, their limited support in their centres is compounded by working in the primarily White space of the Canadian academy, which situates them as bodies out of place (see Mohamed &

Beagan, 2019). Academic development tends to conceive of itself as a welcoming community but in the absence of concrete strategies to address inequity, this claim risks glossing over inequitable power relations. If we persist in claiming that we are a good and welcoming community, knowing that there are concrete examples of inequity, we silence those who speak out, flatten out differences between TLC staff, and try to evade critical reflection and change in TLCs.

I turn to consider the implications of participants' experiences of doing equity work 'off the side of their desks', coupled with their motivations for their work. In thinking about the kinds of equity work that are done at TLCs, and the creation of equity-focused positions, it is worth noting that at least some of the existing equity work done in TLCs has occurred despite, rather than as a result of, any intentional organisational work. The absence of equity work from job descriptions, formal portfolios, and from the interests and purview of most TLC staff suggests an inadequate amount of preparation and capacity to this work meaningfully. Further, for staff hired into equity-focused roles, there is a risk that there are few people, structural supports, histories, or collective expertise available to support them in their work. If these positions are taken up by staff from marginalised groups, there are further structural inequities that shape their experiences in the academy. Importantly, we know that equity work at institutions already represents a significant area of unacknowledged additional labour taken on by marginalised people (Dhamoon, 2020). While I try to hold space for hope that equity-focused roles can contribute to change, the observations from participants about their work experiences and structure of their work suggest that hope is not enough. What is needed is intentional and deep work to plan for, support, and engage with equity work in the context of TLCs. This includes thinking actively about and advocating for the amount of time and staff needed to do this work. Already, from the work of Raffoul et al. (2022), there is evidence that those working on Indigenous educational development are at risk of portfolio creep, burnout, isolation, and a collapsing of the work on Indigenisation with other areas of equity work. Looking at their work, and considering what participants have explained, it is clear that Canadian TLCs must think structurally about how this work can be planned for and how it can shape academic development, rather than be collapsed into existing practices.

Lastly, I invite consideration of how the experiences of this group of academic developers can be useful to international academic development communities. What critiques and challenges have higher education institutions globally faced related to equity? How has/does colonisation shape academic development work globally? How are the anti-gender movement and far-right politics impacting our institutions? What work do we do to resist inequity? How have we contributed to inequity? To what extent is equity work conceived of as an area of competence in the field? I bring this project and these questions to our community to spur rich and difficult dialogue about what we contribute to our institutions – and to think about where our action and inactions take us as a field.

Note

1. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada focused on those affected by Indian Residential Schools (including former students, their families and communities). The TRC

released its final report in June 2015 and included 94 Calls to Actions (some directed to postsecondary institutions and professional fields).

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Notes on contributor

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