Sarah Harper

Tenderness Between Strangers:

Intimate exchanges on *banlieue* wastelands

On a cold dark misty morning in November a young man hurries to work, hunched, his hands shoved into pockets. "A coffee for the road?" I ask. He frowns. "Er…no", "Sure?" "Well, I'm late -" "Take it with you!" He smiles and sighs, grabs the coffee and biscuit, throwing "Thanks, I didn't have breakfast!" over his shoulder as he runs off. An elderly lady walks past. I offer her a tiny bunch of flowers. "What's this for?" she asks. "Just for you". She stares at the bunch. We talk for a while. She used to like this place "It was full of fruit trees you know, but now…". Her husband died last year. She doesn't get out much.

Fig. 1. Pop-up Postcard Day on the wasteland's central path, Villetaneuse, 2019. Photo © Pascal Laurent

A group of students giggle and search the maps application on their phones for the address of a friend. They lean in, crowding over a table and then fall silent as one carefully writes a message with a fountain pen on a postcard. I walk away a little, as a private space of thought quietly opens up an unexpected moment of care for someone far away.

Fig. 2. Neighbour on the wasteland path. Photo © Sarah Harper

These are interventions in the project *Tendresse Radicale (Radical Tenderness)* on a disaffected wasteland in Villetaneuse, a suburb north of Paris. Our brief encounters with passers-by casually but consciously layer alternate, affective experiences onto its central pathway, our presence a catalyst for moments of vulnerability, intimate feelings or memories in this most public of spaces. On a site perceived as hostile, with an aesthetic of repair and a "fine-grained attention to space" (Koch and Latham 2013), our repeated unexpected encounters, intimate exchanges with gifts and "tender" gestures, aim to re-build a social imaginary for this in-between urban space to become again a valued "place" (Massey 1991, Cresswell 2014).

As an artist and theatre director with urban arts company Friches Théâtre Urbain, I create long-term, socially-engaged participatory projects in "super-diverse" (Vertovec, 2007) multi-cultural Paris suburbs. Our work includes sited performance, sound installations, art-walks or community gardens, addressing critical contexts or conflicts manifested in public space. We practice what Regan Koch and Alan Latham identify as its "domestication" (2013), "performing" kitchen table chat, gardening or cooking, creating street-corner sitting-rooms, cafés or *lieux de rencontres* on housing estates where few public spaces invite encounter or conviviality. Friches Théâtre Urbain is led by myself and Pascal Laurent. We are joined for each project by long-term collaborators: photographers, actors, video or sound artists, costume designers, scientists or landscape gardeners, depending on the form.

A situated process

Tendresse Radicale, initiated in Autumn 2019, was a *carte-blanche* commission by Villetaneuse council.[1] Having appreciated a previous project, *Aroma-Home* (2013-14), they were keen for us to apply our "sensitive approach" to another problematic space.[2] The wasteland lies between a social housing-estate, the *cité Saint-Leu,* and the University *Sorbonne Paris-Nord,* who own this valuable real-estate asset. Once a vast orchard, paths now criss-cross an open field punctuated with copses of dying fruit trees. Long grasses, ivy and brambles recolonise the land in different stages of succession, its potential beauty spoiled with an abundance of litter, dog turds, and over-turned supermarket trollies. Villetaneuse is a small town of 13,000 people and the university campus to the north of the wasteland, with its 15,000 students, forms a town within a town. Aggressions and theft of student and university property resulted in the installation of

high railings, fences, and digicodes in 2011 (France Info 2011). The percentage of Villetaneuse residents who attend as students is startlingly low.

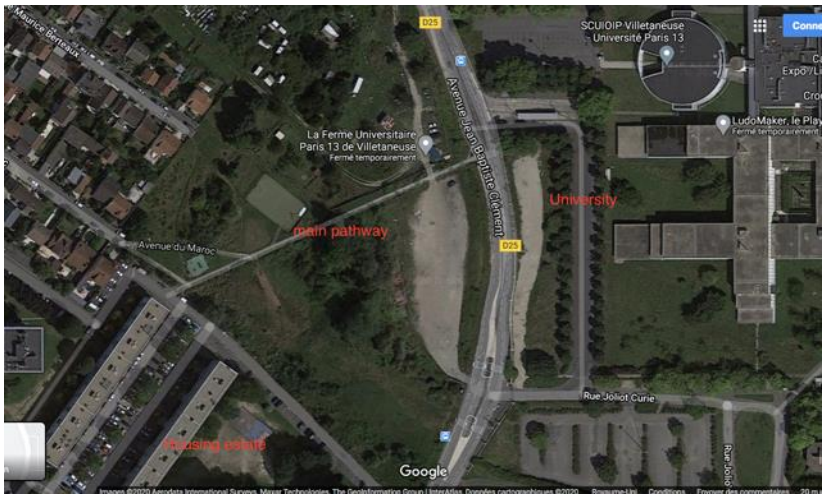

Fig. 3. The wasteland and its central path, between the *cité* St Leu and Université Paris 13, Villetaneuse, Google Maps.

With little interaction between two distinct populations, one transient and one stuck, there is an unspoken conflict of use on this "heavily patterned ground" (Amin 2008, in Koch and Latham 2013). Young men from the *cité* smoke weed on dumped overturned sofas; a pair of trainers hanging from a telegraph wire indicates the location as a site for deals. Local families consider the wasteland dirty and neglected, in spite of its rich biodiversity and a new handball pitch and mini-playground built by the council. A local association's request to create a vegetable garden was refused by the university fearing potential attachment to the land and a city-farm, appreciated by local inhabitants, recently lost its tenure and moved its animals away. Students and staff rush across the terrain to and from the bus or tramway, while for the kids living in the *cité*, the university on their doorstep has become a symbol of what many will never achieve or cannot access, more interesting perhaps as a target for distraction than as a possible destination. Renewed aggressions on students or staff by youths, presumed from the *cité,* combined with the absence of any imminent development-project led the council to commission two art projects to address incivilities and to somehow valorise or defuse this unresolved space. Our project, an optimistic form of "urban acupuncture" (Lerner 2014), is an example of the passing of social and urban problems requiring massive investment to artists. It is symptomatic of left-wing councils' well-intentioned, but systematically underfunded response to what, in French politics and media, tends to be amalgamated into *"le problème des banlieues".*

Fig. 4. Student on the wasteland path. Photo © Sarah Harper

After urban architects, *ICI*,[3] installed bright orange benches, tables and loungers, we have chosen to "perform" tenderness with fragile, bumbling interventions: we offer small gifts with a practical, relational presence that Jane Jacobs might refer to as "effective eyes on the street" (1961, 36). Our friendly availability to chat, around gentle mediating objects which might give pleasure or comfort, is aimed at recreating positive emotional connection with us and, by

association, with the wasteland. Interrupted by successive Covid-19 confinements, an intended regular weekly presence has become a more erratic pop-up, yet to reach its conclusion.

Over twelve years working in the northern suburbs I have observed tenderness to be rarely visible, public, or demonstrated. "*Faire la gueule*" (to scowl, to look daggers at) is the accepted and expected public face, particularly of young people. Rarely threatening, it is a protective, sometimes unconscious, defence against being taken advantage of, against betrayal. If you don't know someone, you don't look at them, communication between strangers holds ambiguities: a smile might disguise a lure and friendliness from an outsider can be interpreted as an aggression, an infringement of personal space or lack of respect for an unspoken street hierarchy. Kalawski (2010, 161) identifies tenderness as the opposite of anger or hostility, and in French, as in English, there is a nuance between *gentillesse* (kindness, with historical links to genteel nobility) and the more intimate *tendresse* (tenderness). It is not cool to be kind but even talking about tenderness seems to cross a line of intimacy that imposes careful negotiation. Accepting the inevitable degrees of refusal and awkwardness that unsolicited acts of tenderness towards strangers might provoke, no assumptions were made about what "success" would look like. We hoped our gestures might be reciprocated and perpetuated, but *at least* tolerated.

Fig. 5. Sarah Harper and pop-up flower stall. Photo © Friches Théâtre Urbain

I and a performer, sound artist, painter or photographer, costumed to seem slightly out of place and semi-performative, appear on the central pathway from early morning until night proposing deliberately naïve, even sentimental gestures. We intercept passers-by to offer shots of hot chocolate or coffee in the rain, watermelon in a heatwave, or tiny bunches of wild flowers labelled *belle journée* (beautiful day). We have proposed special-edition postcards of the wasteland, offering to stamp and post them for those who took the time to write a tender note to someone they cared for. We have also invited people to write postcards to strangers. We have composed and typed poems to order on two old typewriters. Polaroid snapshots or hand drawn portraits were offered to those ready to pose for five minutes, and a hundred tiny pots of quince jam were cooked on site in deepest winter, to honour a dying quince tree, marking people's names on jars for collection later that day. For a while we were joined by a lonely donkey tethered nearby for company by the city-farm. He had recently lost his mate, and his mournful braying suited our tender neighbourliness very well.

Fig. 6. Poetry on demand. Photo © Pascal Laurent

In return we have invited interview contributions, recording people's understandings of what tenderness is for them. In a year punctuated by Covid, reflexions naturally drift towards tenderness received, offered, or sorely lacking during the lock-downs. Phrases from these conversations have been integrated into the landscape, fly-posted onto walls, rocks or gate posts, written in chalk on the ground, or on tags hung like decorations on trees. In Summer, as the first lockdown lifted, we began *tending* to the wasteland itself with gentle pruning and a botanical survey to identify its wild flowers and woody species, worked into long, graphic panels displayed on-site.

Fig. 7. Vox pops interviews on Radical Tenderness. Photo © Pascal Laurent

We collated neighbours' stories and drawings into a *carte de tendre,* a map of the emotional heritage of the site, its' varied uses and value slipping between orchard, football pitch, dealers' rendezvous, motocross rally-track, jungle playground and treasured, scarcely perceptible, "dens".[4] A group of teenage girls confirmed that the one activity the wasteland was *not* used for was kissing "unless you want the whole *quartier* to know who you're seeing!" The project's culmination *En-tendre* (to hear), an art-walk with sound installations of spoken words along the path and among the trees, with an accompanying map of secrets and emotions, has yet to take place.

Fig. 8. Flyposting neighbours' definitions of tenderness. Photo © Sarah Harper

Responses and reception

In proposing acts of tenderness as a radical resistance to isolation, indifference and aggression, infusing the wasteland with delicate, personal, poetic, practical gestures hoping to activate reciprocity, our essential practice is what sociologist Les Back calls "the art of listening" (2007). While offering a pot of jam, I am opening up a "space for vulnerability" (Burton and Turbine 2019), nurturing conversation, listening carefully, being available for an elderly neighbour or a young student to talk, sometimes at length, about what is wrong with the neighbourhood, their studies, or family situation, in a momentary safe place "held" by the mediating object of the jam.

Fig. 9. Boys helping to clean-up after Jam Day. Photo © Sarah Harper

Never intended for a crowd, these interactions are one-to-one, or in small groups, our days involving a steady stream of passers-by, some curious to see "what we've come up with this time", others taking a few weeks before even approaching. We encourage participation when it arises. Kids have eagerly taken over the hot chocolate service or made up their own mini bouquets to give to passing adults; some people wrote their own messages on the pavement, stuck labels on jam-jars, washed up or have helped load our van at the end of the day. In an active reciprocation, some brought presents. We have been given empty jam-jar supplies, a pack of decorated post-it notes, home-made doughnuts or a flask of home-brewed *eau-de-vie* (strong alcohol), "to keep you warm!" Our own mediating objects are chosen for their one-off, quaint or personal uniqueness. Hence a retro polaroid camera, a typewriter or the almost-forgotten format of postcards have elicited as much curiosity as their results. Amazed at first at the heavy robustness of the old typewriters, kids queued up to bash away at the keys with a hilarity that overcame any reticence at composing poetry. Adults engaged in discussions of the chemical reaction of a polaroid, the best recipe for quince jam, or how to prune a fruit tree. Some students, having never written a postcard, wrote over the space allotted for the address, generating laughter or hazy memories of holiday postcards a decade before. Academics mused at the last time they had written a physical letter rather than an email, while some students did not know the format of a postal address at all.

The UK charity *People United***,** facilitators of artworks to explore kindness, cite a "multiplier effect", also performed by our "gifts" (People United 2017, 7). Some people gave away the bouquets to their office co-worker or cleaner, or took the pot of jam home for a mother or a son. Some commissioned us to write poems for lovers or friends while one mother asked me for a caring "but direct" poem for her adult son who "would not get up off the sofa although she'd given him everything". One week, sixty postcards carried tender messages from students or residents of Villetaneuse across France, Algeria, Thailand and Japan.

Fig. 10. Wild-flower bouquet offered to passers-by. Photo © Sarah Harper

This ineffectual bumbling and bearing of small gifts in an urban wilderness has provoked conflicting reactions of delight, surprise, hugs, tears, mistrust, and sometimes pity at the futility of our actions. To the question "why are you doing this?" our initial reply of "for you" or "to spread tenderness" is left open-ended, hanging in the air, the enigmatic vying with ethical authenticity. If our interlocutor's face breaks into a delighted smile, we leave it there. But despite a commitment to what Tom Andrews (People United 2019) affirms as the importance "of doing something that may seem impossible to others", this project is also my job. For those

needing to understand the practicalities, or the *reasons* for our presence, I clarify the commission and financial conditions. Surprisingly, the more pragmatic response has not seemed to undermine or commodify the offering. People appreciate "this attention from the council".

Fig. 11. Pascal Laurent making quince jam. Photo © Sarah Harper

While many people have accepted our gifts, just as many have refused. The tendering of gifts outside of a commercial setting has aroused suspicion or discomfort or an inability or unwillingness to pay. Sometimes our "free gifts", if identified as such, are grabbed rather than cherished. But refusal is part of the dialogic function of the project, which puts something uncomfortably, childishly simple, but needed, into a public place. It is not necessary for someone to accept, or to participate in our gestures, for them to have value. Their function is also to be seen, to be witnessed, even while being refused.

The association of radical with tenderness does, however, leave many I talk to in Villetaneuse perplexed. The project's title is a critical provocation, its radical potential intended to be questioned. In their manifesto on the subject, d'Emilia and Chávez state, "Radical tenderness is being critical and loving at the same time".[5] Artist Maria Amidu "puts radical in front of kindness" as a "conviction to do kindness without apology" seeing it as a value that requires courage and honesty, as "something robust and complex and challenging rather than something squashy and easy and soft around the edges" (People United 2019, 11). "[N]ot just 'being nice' to one another" (Burton and Turbine 2019) but critical of the lack of tenderness in this wasteland, our bumbling micro-gestures are deliberately and evidently inefficient and not "loving" enough to change anything. And, despite that, we do them.

Is it really tender?

While my position as an outsider has not created overtly hostile reactions or evidence of an "unwelcome gift" (Nicholson 2005), it does raise the ethical question of how much are these gifts without return? Thinking of this project through the framework of gift exchange (Mauss 1921, Winchester 2013), we are hoping that any reciprocal relationship with us will translate into the gift of care towards the urban space itself. However, as initiators, we are defining tenderness and, supposing a lack on the part of the recipient, perpetuating privilege in our role

as the giver, of "the something 'I' or 'we' have" (Ahmed 2014, 22). This overlap of care and power within these acts is negotiated hesitantly, the parameters redefined as we go: parameters needed to keep the tenderness radical and aimed, rather than aimlessly sweet. One young boy, having received a small pot of jam, came back and asked for five more. After hesitation, I said no. He insisted that the pot was small and he had "a big family". In the moment, I had to weigh up our unspoken (and as-yet unclear) contract of inter-action and personal contact in exchange for jam, against whether it would be more tender to give him five more pots because the pots *were* small, jam is food, and the family might be hungry. This time my refusal seemed necessary, to differentiate our art-project inviting connection and exchange from the function of a food bank. But it laid bare the emptiness of the gift, with its' unspoken embedded social reciprocity which erased any tenderness for that child. Too little to share, I imagine he ate his jam in the stairwell before he got home.

Fig. 12. Jam awaiting collection by neighbours. Photo © Sarah Harper

Kalawski, following criteria proposed by Ekman (1999) defines tenderness as an "active, relaxed and pleasant" momentary experience, and as "the other-oriented empathic, emotional component to sympathy" associated with caregiving and vulnerability (2010, 161-2). He also cites that tenderness cannot be willed. In Villetaneuse, refusal of these unsolicited gestures have been numerous and offering something on a path with people frequently burying their heads in their phone is not easy and demands courage. Bernadette Russell remarks that during her project *366 Days of Kindness* she began leaving anonymous gifts as a relief from the potential violence of refusals.[6]

Fig. 13. University staff member, early morning chat. Photo © Pascal Laurent

Working through refusal has necessitated careful listening and our real work begins with learning how to graciously accept it, or to turn it around. When offered a tiny bunch of flowers, a man in a hurry retorted brusquely "What would *I* do with that?" but when I suggested he could give it to someone else his face lit up and he said, "Oh yes! the woman who shares my office, I never know what to say to her, and she always does things for me". Our offer of postcards stimulated reactions of sadness or loneliness, with people saying, "I've got no-one to send it to". But we learnt to probe gently, until the person remembered an old friend or a sister living far away. One student, living at home, eventually thought of her father, with whom she had argued because he had bought the wrong kind of orange juice. So she wrote a postcard, which we posted for her, to say she was sorry and that she loved him.

Halfway through the project, the municipality changed. The new mayor struggled to understand the moments of joy and connection, that I assured him the project provoked, as being a cultural intervention of value. He wondered if I could "do something more concrete involving larger groups of people" to bring visible, tangible change to the site. He suggested I organise school visits, or groups to clean up the litter. While we have not done those things, his concerns need addressing. Our relational art work is by nature invisible, tricky to observe and delicate to photograph. While the mayor might not have commissioned tenderness to address local tensions and misuse of space, he is undoubtedly in the business of kindness, although his manifestations are necessarily more practical, visible and accountable. As artists, at ease with the abstract and the invisible, we have faith in the intensely positive, arguably short-lived effects of the "unusual labour" and immaterial production of relational interventions (McAvinchey 2013, 366-7). Mingling "optimism and boldness" we can say clearly "[y]es, I do believe in compassion, empathy, and kindness" (Andrews, People United 2019, 14).

Fig. 14. Coffee and neighbourly chat. Photo © Pascal Laurent

Although the change that these ephemeral, micro-gestures might provoke is impossible to prove, these instances of connection, inconsequential, sometimes hurried and slipped into a daily journey on a grey morning, are very "concrete" to myself, my colleagues and our public. If not quantifiable, we have learnt that they are reproducible occurrences. Yet the very intimacy of our interactions makes it both harder and more pressing to evoke their resonance, or to create traces of the experience that can be shared, felt, or imagined by others. A woman who returns two weeks later to tell us "I've thought of a poem I need", or an elderly resident's comment "You're the first, and probably the only person I will talk to today" confirms their necessity. Those who rush by shouting "Excellent jam!" six months later confirm their longevity or ripple effect.

How far can a smile, an exchange about innermost emotions, tentatively defined as tender, erode apprehensions about a shared but not *owned* space in an unremarkable, desolate area of town? Sue Mayo argues "We must continue to trace the links between ourselves and others, or they will get overgrown, like neglected rights of way" (People United 2020). On this overgrown wasteland, tracing and retracing, reopening old desire paths or creating new ones is a hopeful, humble, often invisible radical process.

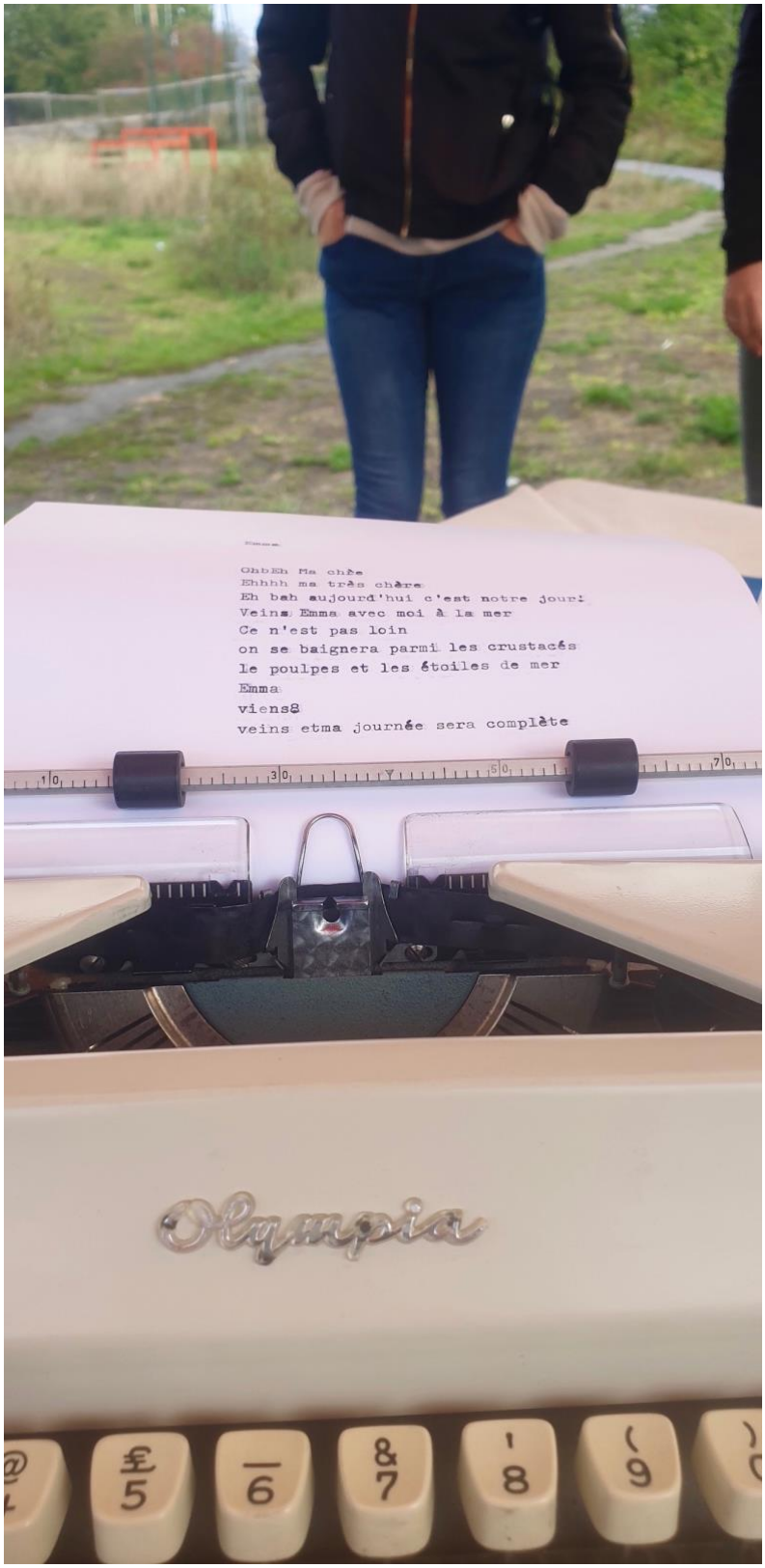

Fig. 15. Poetry on demand. Photo © Sarah Harper

Notes

[1] The project was funded by *Politique de la Ville, l'APES* (an association of social housing landlords), *l'UTRU (l'Unité Territoriale pour le Renouvellement Urbain)* and Villetaneuse council.

[2] *Aroma-Home* was a tiny roaming caravan serving *tisanes* (herbal teas) which accompanied the tending and aromatic planting of the town's left-over verges. https://www.friches.fr/projets/aroma-home Accessed 1 April, 2021

[3] See: https://www.associationici.com Accessed 20 November, 2021 and https://www.facebook.com/initiativesconstruites/ 16 février 2020. Accessed 11 April, 2021.

[4] *Carte de Tendre*, is an allegorical and topographic map depicting an imaginary country called *Tendre* and tracing the different stages *of la vie amoureuse* of the period of *les Précieuses.* Invented in the XVII century by different personalities eg. Catherine de Rambouillet, inspired by the novel *Clélie* de Madeleine de Scudéry.

[5] Dani d'Emilia and Daniel B. Chávez' manifesto honouring and developing La Pocha Nostra's original conception of the term. http://www.danidemilia.com/ www.dccperformance.com http://www.pochanostra.com Accessed 10 November, 2020.

[6] See: http://www.thewhiterabbit.org.uk/projects/366daysofkindness/ Accessed 21 November, 2020.

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