



Globalism and Multimodality in a Digitized World

Computers and Composition Studies

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The global turn necessitates new collaborations and frameworks, broader notions of composing practices, critical literacies that are linked to global citizenship, a reexamination of existing protocols, and divisions and the formation of new critical frameworks in the light of a changing world.

—Wendy Hesford

Ethnographic practices . . . need to consider how the classroom is a location that connects to other locations, locations that subjects constantly inhabit, dwell in, and move between.

—Christopher Keller

Living gracefully in a globalized world and understanding its cultural, linguistic, and communicative complexities is not a skill for which the United States has been renowned. Nor, we might add, have those of us in rhetoric and composition always been up to the task of carrying out research studies that, in Wendy Hesford's (2006: 788) terms, pay "particular attention to the methodological challenges we face as we turn toward the global." As Hesford suggests, we could also do better at connecting literacies with responsibilities of a global citizenship. Yet as we interact daily with students from around the

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world, many of us have come to realize, at some level, that our current life-worlds and futures are intimately connected to those of people in Australia, Norway, China, India, and parts of Africa, and on dimensions that extend far beyond the limits of the world market. For these reasons some of us in computer and composition studies have begun to focus our teaching and research on the life histories and digital literacies of students with *transnational* connections, attempting to take into account their local perspectives — within and outside the classroom (Keller 2004) — and the complex processes of globalization.

With the term *transnational*, we hope to signify a growing group of students who are at home in more than one culture and whose identities, as Wan Shun Eva Lam (2004: 79) notes, are “spread over multiple geographic territories.” These students typically speak multiple languages, often including varieties of English from outside the United States, and maintain networks of friends, family members, and other contacts around the globe. Often, transnational students, alone or with their families, “move physically, economically, and emotionally back and forth across borders and between cultures” (Smith and Martínez-León 2003: 138), using their “multiple subject positions situated in various cultural and sociopolitical arenas to subvert the social categories imposed on them by any one system” (Lam 2004: 81). Some — but not all — of these students are part of diasporic movements motivated by wars in their homelands; some migrate and travel along the economic vectors of globalization; and others move across conventional geopolitical borders because they seek education abroad and, in the process, develop new literate practices marked by their latest cultural experiences. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, all the students with whom we have worked have been touched irrevocably by what Alex MacGillivray (2006: 14) calls the “tools of globalization,” that is, the Internet, mobile phones, e-mail, instant messaging, Skype, and an array of digital media that populates their everyday life.

In this article we focus primarily on new methods of multimodal digital research and teaching that allow for the increasingly rich representation of language and literacy practices in digital and nondigital environments. These methodologies — inflected by feminist research, new literacy studies, critical theory, and digital media studies — give us teacher-scholars a promising set of strategies for conducting research and for representing students’ work and our own scholarship in digital contexts. These approaches to scholarship and teaching have been increasingly taken up as digital tools make their way into the academy and beyond. But there are other issues as well. As the field has matured over the years and as digital media have become ubiquitous in

our professional, pedagogical, and everyday lives, it has become incumbent on those of us who study digital media and literate activity to both name what we do and ensure that the departments we inhabit recognize the field of computers and composition as worthy of scholarly inquiry. As women and senior scholars in this rather unusual area of the humanities and as faculty members inspired by the recent report from the Modern Language Association, *Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion* (2007), we have made it our goal to make certain that the scholarly work of emerging computers and composition scholars counts in decisions about tenure and promotion, especially as more and more graduate students, not to mention undergraduates, take up multimodal composition.

As we have gone about our teaching and research, we have also noted that multimodality has become a key feature of much of the current work in computers and composition studies. As James Paul Gee (2003: 18) explains, “In the modern world, print literacy is not enough. People need to be literate in a great variety of different semiotic domains. . . . The vast majority of these domains involve semiotic (symbolic representational) resources besides print.” People raised on and successful in print communication may find it difficult to accept that multimodal literacy is fast overtaking traditional print literacy. In our highly technological culture, committed to developing even more powerful digital tools, we daily witness the emergence of a new literacy ideology, but that new ideology sometimes feels alien, especially to those of us in the humanities. Gunther Kress (1999: 69) suggests that the very nature of language shifted in the last century, even before *Pedagogy* came on the scene. He maintains that “the landscape of communication of the 1990s is an irrefutably multisemiotic one; and the visual mode in particular has already taken a central position in many regions of this landscape.” Yet in the twenty-first century many of us cling to the familiar educational tools of the immediate past and continue to teach the rhetorical means to manipulate limited alphabetic representations of reality. Some of our students—both graduate and undergraduate—raised on visual media find school increasingly irrelevant—often a burden to be endured in order to obtain degrees that will enable them to pursue their goals.

We hope to demonstrate here emerging teaching and research approaches that both recognize the importance of multimodal texts and issues of globalization and describe how digital tools can capture literate practices, in this case, those represented to us by students with transnational connections. Sometimes we employ digital media as research tools for collecting and exhibiting life history interviews. At other times we ask students—as part of

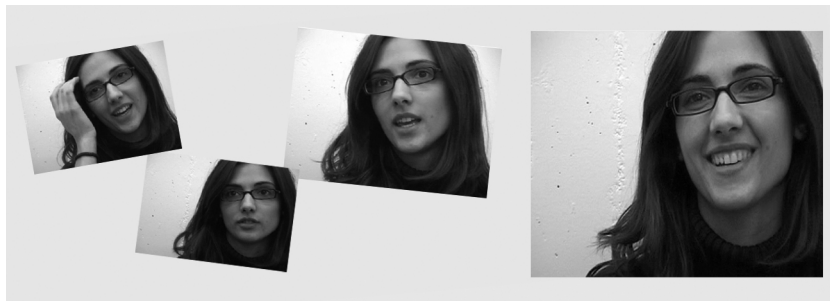
their digital portfolios — to represent their literate practices by videoing their own writing processes. In earlier research, we conducted life history interviews with student participants or asked them to complete an online interview protocol to which they contributed written responses. As part of our pedagogical practice, we also asked students to write autobiographical essays in which they traced in writing their work with an array of digital media. In other words, although we focused our teaching on digital media, we neither encouraged digital multimodal compositions nor took up digital tools as part of our own research methodology.

In *Pedagogy*'s ten-year emergence as a major journal in English studies, our own work and the field of computers and composition have moved toward multimodal composition. Although the field has always been interested in teaching reading and composing in the broadest possible sense of these terms, students' assignments have often been limited to print even as the assignments migrate online. Research reports similarly continued to prize print despite the growing use of programs like PowerPoint, capable of supporting sound and image but often used more as digital mirrors for print text. That is not to say that today the field's turn to the multimodal has displaced print. But here we argue for a "more capacious notion of scholarship" (MLA 2007: 5) and teaching. As we discuss our recent work with digital media in exploring transnational literacy practices, we hope to demonstrate pedagogical and research developments that mark the field of computers and composition in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Literacy Narratives, Writing Process Videos, and Digital Stories

When we met the students and coauthors of this article — Gorjana Kisa and Shafinaz Ahmed — they were, like many students, both situated in their respective universities and connected to distant locations and contexts. Gorjana was an undergraduate attending the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, while Shafinaz was a graduate student in a writing studies class at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, in the United States. Although both students occupy a transnational landscape, they differ markedly in their motivations, experiences, and positioning within the topographies fashioned by globalization. Gorjana, for example, was born in Sarajevo, Bosnia, and describes herself as a Bosnian Serb and an Orthodox Christian. Shafinaz, a Muslim, was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, grew up in the United Kingdom, and at the time of crafting her writing process video had spent the past thirteen years in the United States. Our efforts to understand their stories — how literacy, schooling, and technology were inexplicably connected to trans-

national lives —led us to explore video as both a research and a learning tool. Here we briefly describe the digital interview (in the case of Gorjana) and then describe the writing process video (in the case of Shafinaz). A major component of this transnational research, however, has been to feature our coauthors online through video footage in order to represent more fully their oral narratives and interpretations of their literate lives, something not possible in a print journal. The description included below is a summary of Gorjana's video interview.



Gorjana

We talked with Gorjana in an empty classroom at the University of New South Wales, where we were attending an international conference. She was one of several students who attended our session on digital literacies and were eager to contribute their digital literacy stories through life history interviews.

Gorjana's family migrated to Australia in 2000 as refugees from the Bosnian war, leaving behind their possessions and homes, first in Sarajevo, then in Belgrade, where they had moved to escape the rising prejudice against Bosnian Serbs. These experiences, she said, strengthened the family members' ties to one another and heightened their understanding that local material conditions can change rapidly in unstable times.

We came to Sydney, actually, as refugees from Belgrade. Yes, so we came five and a half or six years ago. . . . In Sarajevo because of the war, we had to leave our house and all our belongings, and we moved to Belgrade, where we settled once more. However there was another war of 1999 bombings, and that's where we had to leave everything all over again, and that's when we came to Sydney. . . .

We . . . realized that all the material things around us can disappear very quickly, and that what's important is that we keep our bond really strong, and that — by

just loving each other and understanding each other and just being there for each other — we can just keep moving on and building everything around us again.

Despite the family's migration experiences, the literacy environment in which Gorjana grew up was richly textured, and the two languages spoken also added to the literacy environment. Gorjana, her nineteen-year-old sister, and their parents speak, read, and write both Serbo-Croatian and English. The family was also able to provide the children with access to digital communication at home. Gorjana's family bought their first computer in 1999 when she was in high school in Belgrade. At first she was the only one who knew how to use it, but she soon taught her parents how to use the machine, and her sister taught herself. Gorjana is convinced — from these experiences and others — that most young people discover how to use computer applications by themselves, just as she did, and without a great deal of formal instruction.

Yes, I taught my parents how to use a computer. Sometimes I had to write little instructions how to do it. But as they practiced, they learned a lot more, and then they were starting to find out things by themselves without asking me. And at the moment they both use it quite well. I didn't have to teach my sister how to use a computer. Now I think sometimes I ask her questions. As I said, young people, it's amazing; they don't need any help; they just sit there and figure out everything by themselves. My little cousins, seven and six years old, and the moment they sat in front of the computer they just figured out so many things. I couldn't believe it. I said, "Haroun, how did you do it?" They made a PowerPoint presentation. I said, "How did you do this?" They said, "Oh, you just click around, it's so easy."

By the time that we talked to Gorjana in 2007, her parents were frequently using the family computer along with their cell phones to stay in touch with friends and family in Bosnia and Serbia — choosing the specific mode of communication (e-mail, phone calls, letters) to match that of the person they were contacting. Gorjana's mother and father, and Gorjana herself, recognized that not all their extended family members had access to the same computer technology as they did in Sydney. As Gorjana described her parents' choices, "When they need to keep in touch with people, friends and families overseas, it depends really who it is. If it's their parents they don't have computers or Internet access so they would always give them a call. If it's some other friends of their age, they send them e-mails, usually, or give them a call. Probably not text messages — it's overseas and it [text messaging] is for a very short conversation, and they can't get much out of it, so they just avoid doing that."

Like many transnational young people with personal experience of how widely access to communication technologies can vary depending on national and regional infrastructure, personal wealth, and the availability of regional technical expertise, Gorjana also understood well how different technologies shape her communication and social networking. This sensibility was based on not only an assessment of material conditions and the accessibility of various technologies, but also the particular resources offered by media.

I have lots of family and friends in Sarajevo. I . . . communicate with them quite often, actually. I write e-mails to my friends and I have a couple of friends to whom I write real letters, and we also meet in chatrooms and sometimes even video conversation so I can see them and talk to them. . . .

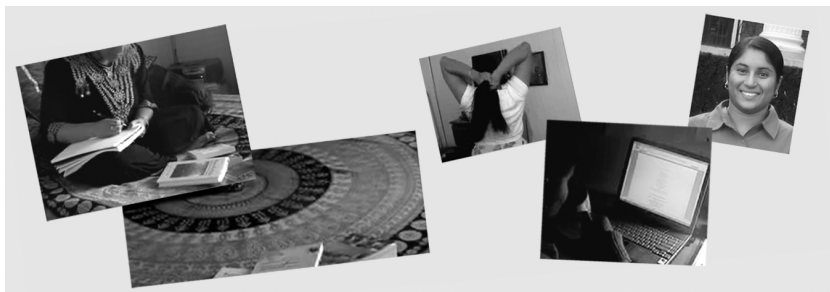
When I'm deciding on which technologies to use when communicating with my friends overseas, I think it's a matter of convenience, and sometimes we talk a lot more if we meet and we can have a chat and a video conversation, and we end up telling each other a lot more than just writing an e-mail. It also depends on . . . how comfortable with technology are some of my friends. Some of them cannot . . . afford to have a video camera or something like that so they'll just write an e-mail or a letter. It depends also how close I am to the person. Sometimes it's just a short e-mail to the person to congratulate them on something or let them know something. Or if I really want to have a really long proper conversation then I'll arrange something else.

During her high school years, Gorjana used the family computer primarily for writing assignments and for chatting online with friends. Although she appreciated the value of computers and other information technologies for these pragmatic purposes, she felt that online activities such as computer games and MySpace distracted young people from interactions with family or friends: the "real things" in life. "What's the point of meeting someone out there who is also sitting in front of his computer?" she asked. "I don't think you can build some great friendships by sitting in front of your computer. . . . There are other things young people should do."

It was not until her university studies that Gorjana began to use computers regularly for her schoolwork and more. By that time it was quite clear to both Gorjana and her family that—in the context of increasingly technological local and global cultures—computers had become a necessity rather than a luxury.

Gorjana now uses digital technologies extensively as a means of social networking. To maintain her network of friends in Sydney, she relies on cell

phones, MSN Messenger, Facebook, SMS, and e-mail. Perhaps most interesting and amusing to us as members of an earlier media generation was a comment by one of Gorjana's classmates who is also Bosnian: he observed that writing a letter to a girl he was dating would be perceived as "creepy" and "clingy" in his Australian youth culture. Text messaging, he said, was the preferred method for such communication by students in Australia. The same is no doubt true for students in the United States.



Shafinaz

As we refine our methods for collecting literacy narratives with digital video cameras, we have encouraged our students to use video cameras in tracing their own writing processes and digital literacies. Students have crafted videos of their writing processes in response to the following assignment: "You should attempt to capture a representation of your writing processes on camera. You do not have to video yourself, but you do need to try to represent some of the thinking and processes you experience as you approach and carry out a writing task."

Inspired by Maria Lovett's "Writing with Video" course and her advocacy for video as a rhetorical narrative medium (Lovett and Squier forthcoming; Hawisher et al. forthcoming), we have given this assignment since 2005, first with graduate students and, more recently, with participants in the University of Illinois National Writing Project site. Before that, we had asked students in our classes to draw, by hand, images of their writing processes—drawings where writers feature texts, writing tools, clocks, food, people, pets, and various scenes and activities. As we incorporate video cameras into our work, however, we find that the students tend to feature some of the same sorts of "things" but also shoot more complex clips that portray various cultural practices and a local sense of place as connected to their writing processes (Reynolds 2004).

In the video described below, Shafinaz Ahmed details her way of

writing and being in the world as she composes her “Born in a Dish.” The videos themselves take advantage of sound effects and pacing to convey affect, atmosphere, and modes of engagement impossible to render in our written text here.

In Shafinaz’s video, we see Shafinaz eating, reading, and writing on her bed, books at feet. We hear Bangladeshi music in the background as the camera focuses on Shafinaz, the writer, who now sits in front of a computer screen. Then, as the music stops, we shift to Shafinaz’s brushing and braiding of her hair, which reminds her of her grandmother. She tells us that her grandmother would say: “A woman is like a braid, simple yet complicated, delicate but strong, plain but elegant.” Her grandfather, in contrast, would insist that “a woman’s true beauty is not what lies on top of her head but what she possesses beneath it.” We also see in her video a 1950s Western representation of “Babe in Total Control of Herself,” that is, a “bitch,” with all capitals, an image that directly contrasts the concept of woman with which she grew up. Throughout the narrative, we watch and listen as Shafinaz composes her poem, “Born in a Dish,” a play on how “Bangladesh” is sometimes pronounced by those of us who are not Bangladeshi.

In writing about and reflecting on her video, Shafinaz talks about the “unique perspective” she has as one who claims “a multicultural background.” She admits, however, that when she was growing up, first in the United Kingdom and then, from age twelve on, in the United States, she “hated the fact that [her] culture wasn’t the same as everyone else’s.” She did not always prize her ability to speak more than one language and often resented the fact that her mother’s English could not keep up with her own. As she puts it, “I was incredibly impatient with my mom and would get mad at her very quickly when she didn’t understand something. On many occasions I would speak to her in English and she just wouldn’t understand me. This frustrated me and made me reluctant to talk to her. I remember thinking my mom doesn’t understand me, so why should I talk to her? Why should I even bother?”

Thus Shafinaz expresses some of the difficulties students face as they try to cope with the competing demands of family language and customs and those of the new countries where they find themselves.

Shafinaz also admits to bringing to the classroom a perspective on literacy and learning that differs from those of many U.S. students and writing instructors. When, for example, her class participated in an electronic discussion group using Moodle, an open-source class management program, Shafinaz explained that it “took [her] a long time to realize that with Moodle there are no

‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. . . . I’ve never been a big fan of using technology—it scares me because I have no idea how to use it. The thought of doing anything dealing with technology makes me cringe; it’s foreign to me . . . and if I had my way, it’d stay like that. However, I know this cannot be.”

Shafinaz’s response to digital media is complicated. It is not, of course, the Moodle that dictates open discussion rather than correct answers but an instructor’s pedagogical use of the software. Despite her resistance to, even fear of, working with new computer applications, however, Shafinaz takes pride in what she has been able to achieve. “The process of doing the [writing video] itself was hard, but extremely rewarding,” she says. “Deciding which images would best represent my writing process was time consuming. But I am happy with the end product. Once again, I proved to myself that I can work with technology!”

Shafinaz takes on a dual challenge, negotiating a university setting in which instructors sometimes expect students to take risks rather than find the “right” answers and to use digital media in doing so. “I see many similarities between my mother’s linguistic abilities, and my technological ones,” she concludes. “My apprehension about technology is the same as my mother’s about English. She doesn’t like using it because it’s foreign to her. But she does it. Everyday my mom interacts in a foreign language in situations that make her uncomfortable. She may not do it perfectly, but she does it with dignity.”

As she has come to take pride in her mother and her family heritage, Shafinaz has begun to incorporate images from Bangladesh into her writing, especially when she is writing poetry outside of school: “I visit Bangladesh once every three years, but I think about it every day. [My poetry] talks about the different images I associate with Bangladesh: exotic fruit, the sweet laughter of children, the dark-skinned women with their beautiful silky hair. The poetry also addresses the war Bangladesh fought with Pakistan. We fought for the right to be a free country, for the right to speak Bengali, and for the right to be called Bangladeshis.”

When Shafinaz crafted her writing process video, she began to bring together some of these disparate strands of her life. Since she was representing her writing process, she chose to represent her own poetry—her passion for writing. She also chose to touch on Bangladeshi life in her video through the poetry she had written. “Born in a Dish” deals with the political realities that many students who live between countries experience. The title’s play on words reflects the fact that the poem “represents what [her] native homeland means to [her].” In the last stanza of the poem, Shafinaz writes:

I tell them of the red earth of sorrow
 through which the lotus blooms.
 Of sons who gave their lives,
 daughters their blood and honor.
 We waited through the long night
 to rise again in the fresh air
 to say we are free.
 We are not India! We are not Pakistan!
 Yet,
 they still ask me if
 Born in a dish is the capital of India.

Here she suggests the difficulties in trying to talk to speakers of English in her adopted home about a country that some do not even recognize as a nation-state. In doing so, Shafinaz's passion for her homeland comes through in writing that began outside of school but made its way into the classroom and onto the Web.

In some sense, Bruno Latour's (2005) notions of "assemblies of things" and "attachment to things" apply here. As he notes, "When we are focused on things, we are actually focused on ourselves" (Prieto and Youn 2004).¹ According to Latour, things—or, more precisely, the displaying of things—leads us to draw connections to other people, places, and attachments that may not automatically be evident in the things themselves but rather appear in the "different ways of gathering things together" (ibid.). Shafinaz, like other students with whom we have worked, arranges her writing space with images, food, objects, and music from her home country—cultural artifacts that comfort her as she immerses herself in writing. Students like Shafinaz mix these artifacts with tokens of the new places where they dwell—in Shafinaz's case, a small U.S. flag on her desk. Other students surrounded themselves in their writing process videos with a Brazilian Portuguese version of "The Girl from Ipanema"; an reproduction of Edvard Munch's *Scream*; video clips of Faye Wray in *King Kong*; and Chinese pillows from T. J. Maxx—all of which, we would argue, are part of our larger, shared global landscape.

Teaching, Research, and Globalization

For most of their lives Gorjana and Shafinaz have lived in worlds of communication networks—linked telephone and computer systems, fax and telex connections, cell phones and text messaging—and rapid technological change. These technologies, and increasing migration and international travel, have

been part of their lives since the 1980s. Amid the rapid growth of multinational capitalism and globalization, students like Gorjana move across the globe because of war or, like Shafinaz, because of a father's career path but always for what their parents see as increased opportunities for a good life.

Gorjana and Shafinaz became part of a pattern of migration for students that is more than merely “an awkward interval between fixed points of departure and arrival” but also a “mode of being” (Carter 1992: 101). Moreover, their relocation and subsequent adaptation to new places changed not only their literacy practices but also the kinds of subject positions and identities available to them and often to their parents or other family members. Gorjana, and Shafinaz especially, were aware of their mothers' struggles with the dialects of English and realized that these difficulties changed how their parents were viewed in the new country compared with in their homeland. Both examples demonstrate how family lives, languages, and cultural customs are folded into everyday literacies and that identities are no longer constituted solely by nationality or ethnicity, if they ever were. The local-global hybrids we see emerging here—the blurred identities that are at once Australian but also Serbian and Bosnian, American but also British and Bangladeshi—are surely part of a larger global culture. They suggest that as we move toward a global networked society, many of us need to stay rooted in particular cultural subjectivities.

Here we offer several tentative observations that grow out of our initial work with students who claim transnational connections. Such students share several characteristics.

- They have a perceptive and personal sense of events in both localized contexts and a transnational world.
- They possess a rich set of linguistic resources—including variations of English—that help define and situate their multiple identifications both locally and globally.
- They learn, read, compose, and communicate in various print, digital, and online contexts. Through these practices, they have, in part, created their own transnational identities.
- Their digital literacy practices extend across national, cultural, and linguistic borders that, in turn, help sustain and extend these multiple cultural and social identifications locally and globally.
- Their personal senses of their responsibilities as citizens dwelling on the blurred borders of nation-states inform their ways of being in the world.

With this article we have attempted to demonstrate how some of us in the field of computers and composition balance our understanding of global trends—the increasing reach and scope of expanded digital networks—with students’ own local senses of place, identifying the specific historical, political, and social factors that influence the use and availability of digital technologies in various places and at various times.

We come away from this project increasingly convinced, along with Carmen Luke (2006), that experienced educators can learn a great deal from students like Gorjana and Shafinaz. In particular, we can explore and come to know more about the increasingly complex and extended global landscapes that many students in our classrooms and institutions now inhabit. And, as we explore these landscapes, we can also take up the responsibility of creating curricula that “facilitate spaces and practices of cultural complexity, complex connectivity, and difference,” helping all students develop the “capacity to understand and negotiate identity in a global setting, where national differences remain salient but are inflected by a range of other elements” (ibid., 115).

Within globalized environments and the curricula we adapt to them, we think the critical use—and study—of digital networks and media should assume a major role. Certainly, observing how people make use of—and, in doing so, transform—extended technological environments and the digital tools of human communication can help teach both educators and students a great deal about the changing transnational landscapes that now shape our lives and the lives of people we know.

Through the students’ rich narrative and video, we have also attempted to include personal understandings and appropriations of digital communication technologies as well as to suggest issues associated with gender, age, class, cultural values, historical circumstances, pragmatic needs, and local living conditions that play a role in literate lives. If we have succeeded at all in this effort, this has everything to do with the generous insights of the students with whom we live, write, and sometimes teach in this globalized world. As we constantly discover in our own work and literate lives, it is ultimately these students who teach us.

Notes

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1. We are grateful to Bertram Bruce (2007) for drawing our attention to this article.

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