

Bonni: [00:00:00] Today on episode number 196 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast Nicholas Hengen Fox joins me to talk about his book Reading as Collective Action.

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Bonni: [00:00:22] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our personal productivity so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:50] I'm excited to be joined today by Nicholas Hengen Fox, an instructor of composition and literature at Portland Community College. He is currently a full time faculty member and received his Ph.D. in American literature from the University of Minnesota. In Oregon, he teaches literature, writing and courses in Portland Community Colleges social justice curriculum. Nick, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Nicholas: [00:01:19] It's awesome to be here. I was just listening to your show on my drive home yesterday. So I feel very in the future.

Bonni: [00:01:26] I'm so glad we have been recording episodes a little bit in advance over the holidays and all that stuff at the end of last year so it is kind of funny to be in the future and in the past and all those things. In fact, on a recent episode I had mentioned Storify which is on its final days because that was a way of collecting tweets in a chronological or whatever order you wanted to put them in. So yes, sometimes prerecording gets us into a little bit of trouble but we try to have most of our episodes be timeless.

Bonni: [00:01:56] I was laughing about having you on the show because you so graciously emailed and offered to come share about your book. "Oh yes,

definitely have the publisher send it to me. That would be great". And then some time passed. Of course I don't know how much time passed but I received a book in the mail and I thought "well that's curious I wonder what this book is all about. Isn't this nice just getting the book for nothing". Then you emailed me "Did you get the book?" And I was like "what book?".

Bonni: [00:02:19] It was like "Who's on first" sort of thing but I finally got it figured out and got it together that we get to have this conversation about your book. And I want to just dive in and start asking you what got you started thinking about Reading as Collective Action?

Nicholas: [00:02:36] Well I wasn't thinking about it as Reading as Collective Action that name came really late actually in working with the editors and I love it. I have been thinking about this for a long time. It's simply really in grad school, I sort of got bored with writing papers about kind of like my special interpretations of poems or novels. You know. I would write these- I remember writing this really long essay about Shakespeare's or something and then saying like the final paragraph was like "And now I just wrote 30 pages about a sonnet. Huh." And I mean I couldn't see that - I had lost... You know maybe that would have been a time to quit grad school, but instead I didn't.

Nicholas: [00:03:17] And I started to get interested in what other people do with books and I was like, "What do people - especially people who are not like me do when they read literature?." And so that was the seed and it took me, like I worked on this all through grad school and it took me you know ten years to finally gather all of these little pieces together to sort of showcase some of the things that people do when they read books; which are not typically the things we think of or associate with reading culturally.

Bonni: [00:03:46] And what were some of the major shifts in your thinking as you progressed through this work over ten years?

Nicholas: [00:03:51] Well I mean I think the biggest thing was I had to get out of my own head and stop imagining or maybe projecting what people were thinking or doing when they read and really sort of figure how to track the sometimes difficult to find traces.

Nicholas: [00:04:09] We'll talk a little bit later about the chapter about folks reading *The Grapes of Wrath* I think. But I went out and interviewed those folks shortly after they had done their reading groups. And with my students, I was sort of doing some synchronous teaching learning from them but also kind of

studying their work and that's allowed me to figure out some ways to capture those traces.

Bonni: [00:04:31] That's such an important process that you're describing of being able to put aside our own perceptions and our own ways of doing things. I imagine that took a lot of discipline to do that.

Nicholas: [00:04:43] Well yeah and I'm sure that in the book I haven't fully done it. We never can fully escape that. I mean I've chosen to write about you know the political things people do with they're reading. There are other things they do too. So there's there is some of my bias kind of coming into that. But you know that's just where my interests are.

Nicholas: [00:05:02] But I agree and I think you know part of my initial shift to this project was realizing that a lot of scholarship kind of imagined the political reactions that people were having when they read things and I kind of started to think well yeah how adequately do I really imagine you know a lot of people's experience because like a lot of faculty members or a lot of grad students, I have a lot of privilege. And so that shapes the way I see the world and the way I interact with text.

Bonni: [00:05:30] Your book addresses three stories or three examples and I'm just going to give an overview of them now and then we'll we'll talk about each one in a little bit more depth. The first one we'll look at is the two months following September 11th and then we'll look at the Grapes of Wrath that you mentioned and some exploration you did in 2009. And then we will end with an example from Working Class Literature. You had mentioned that the last two examples The Grapes of Wrath and the Working Class Literature, we will probably spend a little bit more time on because they're more specifically relevant to our work in the classroom. But let's start out with the two months following September 11th.

Nicholas: [00:06:15] So this was kind of my first step towards thinking about what folks do with texts right. And it's still very text based. So I sort of started to poke around this time and I was curious what poems were being published or what people were doing with poetry. I found there were a number of homes that were showing up in all these weird places like on food co-op newsletters. And there were more poems being read on NPR and there were poems in the New York Times, which is a pretty rare phenomenon.

Nicholas: [00:06:47] And so I started to create this big spreadsheet of all the poems and where they were published and what people were saying about

them. As I started to look at them I saw yeah there's some patterns here and a lot of the poems I think were chosen both recent ones and the old ones that were sort of symbolically pushing back on some of the rise in anti-immigrant sentiment in that moment coming from the Bush administration and elsewhere. They were kind of giving voice or I think they offered a way to give some counter narratives or counter arguments in the media with some of those feelings. And I think poems are uniquely good for that in a way that statistics and data are sometimes not as effective.

Bonni: [00:07:28] And what did you discover about how collective action was able to occur through the reading of these poems?

Nicholas: [00:07:37] Well I wasn't- because I was studying them in the media I wasn't always able to see what people who are reading in there were doing with them. But I did find lots of kind of mysterious you know references like one essayist said, "Oh, I found this copy of the W.H. Auden poem September 1st 1939 which is about when the Nazis invaded Poland." But it was a poem about September and it has a lot of symbolic resonances with I think the way that a lot of people in the U.S. Felt after September 11th 2001.

Nicholas: [00:08:12] So I saw people saying, "Well, I found this in a school copier and then I copied it," or you saw people taking poems and posting them like there are pictures of this archives of this posting poems on street signs in New York City or in lower Manhattan. But they were sort of using them as a way to kind of give voice. I think where voices might not have been heard.

Bonni: [00:08:34] And let's move on to the second one, even though I know we could spend the whole rest of the episode on the September 11th one but tell us a little bit about the Grapes of Wrath and how readers used it as a means to alleviate poverty.

Nicholas: [00:08:47] Yes. So I started, after I did the September 11 research I was like, "OK. I got to see what real people are doing with books." And so I kind of reached out to some communities that in 2009 at the start of the Great Recession or the early moments of it were really feeling the pain but also had gotten rewards from the National Endowment for Humanities / National Endowment for the Arts to do this Big Read program around the Grapes of Wrath; which I thought well there's a strong kind of historical connection here right. This is a book about the Great Depression. This is the great recession.

Nicholas: [00:09:20] And so I actually went and interviewed folks to see what they had done and what they had made of the book. I mean I write a lot about you know I had just like really amazing conversations with librarians in a small town in Michigan. And with also librarians in Tennessee but also with community organizers and I talked to the mayor of Knoxville who read the book with a group of folks who were first language Spanish speakers who were reading the book and talking about it.

Nicholas: [00:09:47] So I just wanted to know what they did. So I'll just give you like one example of what I thought was really really cool. In both cities that I visited Knoxville and in Jackson, Michigan - both used book groups as a way of - private groups like the ones people always read their books with and also more public like library based groups - as a way to sort of gather and distribute food to people in the community.

Nicholas: [00:10:13] So they were taking, by sort of using their reading of books to bring people together, they created these kind of shared practices that I talked about in the book like redistribution ways to talk about this family that's really struggling and have you know empathy and the feelings that we have when we read and started to translate those into immediate actions in their communities.

Nicholas: [00:10:36] So that's one example that I was just kind of amazed to see, we don't usually think of reading clubs as actually producing immediate benefits for people beyond their reading clubs, right?

Bonni: [00:10:46] Oh absolutely. And what's going on with it today is that still a program that exists now in 2017? Has it changed or expanded?

Nicholas: [00:10:55] Well, yes. I haven't been back to either of those places. I was really lucky to have some support to go there and actually spend some time interviewing folks. What I saw - and the National Center for the Arts Program continues for sure. But what I saw was that these folks who were reading- I call it reading text as tactics, that organizers especially of these groups saw this as a chance to build connections between the library and social services agencies or between you know like a middle class feeding group that meets in a restaurant downtown. And people on the other side of town people who they would never speak to.

Nicholas: [00:11:31] So, I don't know. I talk a lot and I won't go in-depth here about Jurgen Hebermas' Theory of Communicative Action which is a great 800 page book of German philosophy that everybody should read.

Bonni: [00:11:44] [laughing] I'm going to put you on pause while I get right to that.

Nicholas: [00:11:48] Yeah, yeah. But he talks a lot about how we sort of create these networks that we create what he calls lifeworlds. What I think I started to witness there - and I think what you might see if you went back to those places - is these sort of kind of social networks that people are building with people who are really different from them. They formed, this is my argument, around the Grapes of Wrath reading kind of community building projects but then these people also have kind of shared ideas, shared language that they use around certain things that I think can impact the community, subsequently.

Nicholas: [00:12:22] I didn't study this. I didn't see this one happen. But in Jackson the previous year, they had read the classic novel To Kill a Mockingbird and a bunch of folks who started to talk about racial profiling coming out of that. And it actually had created a new community group called they were called Jackson Justice watch. So that's an example kind of of how that process - how I can imagine that process continuing later.

Bonni: [00:12:46] This is just so intriguing to me because I think about having been a part of book groups and how special they've been to me. But you're so right that it does remain mostly within that group of individuals. Hopefully we pass it on in our teaching, those of us who teach, or in our families.

Bonni: [00:13:02] But what a magnificent idea to be able to spread those experiences more collectively. I was thinking about one way I think- maybe we maybe I don't know- maybe we do this well in higher ed is when there's a book for first year students that is adopted by many universities. The one that comes to mind for me is Bryan Stephenson's Just Mercy.

Bonni: [00:13:26] And again I don't know is that in my imagination? Or did the wider adoption of that somehow permeate in a way that wouldn't have been possible if it was just one or two isolated universities.

Nicholas: [00:13:38] Yeah. I think you know there's that there's a way that I guess one could dismiss it and say well we don't know it's understandable how could

we possibly know that. And definitely while this project of mine was going through review there were people who were like, "I don't believe you."

Nicholas: [00:13:54] And maybe there's people listening right now who are like, "I don't believe that happened," right? And they may be right. But I also at a certain level makes some sense to me from some of the really specific encounters that I saw to imagine the way that changed. This is part of how change happens. It isn't the overthrow of a dictator that you can see the films than the photos of...

Nicholas: [00:14:15] But it is, you know when 2000 universities and colleges and thousands and thousands and thousands of students are all reading a book and talking about it, it's hard to imagine that doesn't create some changes in language and thinking across time and space.

Bonni: [00:14:33] One of the things I know you're concerned about it might be related to this topic are some concerns you have over civic engagement and also against service learning. Would you spend a few minutes talking about that? Or actually, should we bring in our third example or is it not time?

Nicholas: [00:14:52] Oh yeah. So a lot of what I saw in Jackson and in Knoxville kind of shaped the assignment that I that I talk about in the third chapter. That's an assignment where I basically ask students without telling them that - telling them the story of these folks I met. But I ask students to do stuff like that.

Nicholas: [00:15:10] I think the way the assignment was written and I talk about it in the book basically says what I really really really really want. It's for you. I think that's the actual assignment.

Bonni: [00:15:19] How many really's? I want to make sure we get that right.
[laughs]

Nicholas: [00:15:22] There is probably (I was going to look to see if I could see it) - I think there is really three really's. I really really want- two really's- I want you to think about working class literature and it's a place in the world. And so I talk about some students who actually really went out of their way to put the stuff that was happening in our classroom out in the world.

Bonni: [00:15:40] When you assign that do students usually know what working class literature is or do you have to back it up and give some examples?

Nicholas: [00:15:46] Yeah. I mean that their understanding of it really develops over the course of the term I think. But they also part of what's cool about that project is that they realize- I write in the book about two really amazing students who went and did 56 interviews on MAX, which is like our subway trains in Portland, where they just went up to strangers and said, "Who's your favorite working class writer?"

Nicholas: [00:16:09] And part of what they learned there was that that language was confusing to people and off putting to some people. There are people who responded pretty negatively to those questions. I thought that's the really important learning experience and I write about it how I could see in their reflective writing later on that they were like, "So this thing that we've been talking about for four or five hours a week for the last couple of months is a thing that doesn't resonate with a lot of people outside of this classroom."

Nicholas: [00:16:39] And I think they also saw themselves as doing some important work in again shaping that conversation, not with millions of people but with 56 people who might have gone home and said to their you know their kids or their spouse or whatever like, "I had this weird conversation about working class literature," and then that person is like, "What's working class literature?" Right? And I mean that's the way I think the ideas can percolate out.

Bonni: [00:17:00] With the students, did they - did you have any instruction to not explain what that was and to just ask more open ended questions or did you just let it go wherever the conversation might lead?

Nicholas: [00:17:12] Well that was their project their uniquely defined project and I guess this is more of an answer to your question specifically about service learning but so that's just one example of something that students do in that project. It really says like I want you to put this work out in the world so people do it in really really different ways.

Nicholas: [00:17:27] I had no idea that that was sort of going to be their encounter. But one of the things I really value about not doing this in the framework of civic engagement or working with community partners or whatever it is that it really gives students the space to create and to kind of create things that are messy and maybe don't work because I think there's a lot of learning in that.

Bonni: [00:17:49] Yeah talk a little bit more about that. Like what. What do you see as some of the real concerns over the focus on civic engagement we can sometimes have?

Nicholas: [00:17:58] Yeah well I mean there's you know there's so many well articulated critiques especially of kind of the early ideas of service learning this idea of kind of like noblesse oblige. And like we are we are the people with privilege who will come and fix your you know your classroom or your community center right up if we can just come in for like an hour a week.

Nicholas: [00:18:17] I know that many people who are involved in this movement don't see it that way. But I think I think that is sometimes latent in some of those interactions. And I know that the people have studied that you know partner organizations can feel that way, even, despite our best intentions within the university and college systems.

Nicholas: [00:18:33] What I like to have my students do -and I talk about this in the book -in terms of the political engagement project (which is a big multi institution research project that sort of wants to think about how to teach students to be political agents). What I think about this product is that it really encourages students to figure out how to kind of see where their work might matter or where it might not matter.

Nicholas: [00:18:57] With the example of these women who did their research on the train. I can't imagine a partner or organization that would have made that possible. Does that makes sense?

Bonni: [00:19:08] Yeah yeah. I think about this often in terms of just this whole "I'm going to save you thing". And "yeah I might learn a thing or two but really I'm here to teach you how I can fix you from my own context and cultural understanding?" and that- talk about messiness but often unrecognized messiness (both on the account of the supposed learner and also on account of whoever is attempting to teach them) because I think that the lessons can so often be lost.

Bonni: [00:19:41] There is some some wonderful reading I've been able to do from anthropologists that I know who really talk a lot about this but we're just really trying to insert our culture into a culture we completely don't understand.

Nicholas: [00:19:53] Yeah, absolutely. I had a few friends who work in nonprofits and they talk too about the real costs on their end. So my students don't

necessarily have the free time and space. Also to sort of structure in hours during business hours with organizations that do but not all of them do. And so this sort of messy project of saying go out there and put this out in the world gives them a lot of different points of access to do that work.

Bonni: [00:20:24] One of the things that I know happens so often with my students but if I'm really as self-actualized as I would like to be also can happen to me is just this idea of shutting down. Because I see it often with students who just it starts to seem like, "Oh that's one of those political conversations where everybody is fighting and nobody is listening. And I don't even know what I can believe anymore."

Bonni: [00:20:49] So there's that that whole shutting down of one's learning process or even if I reflect back to my own reaction a couple of months following September 11th, not wanting to ever turn on the news and just I didn't want to be confronted with images like that. And I think sometimes it is important to be confronted with really hard images. And but but then there has to be something after that where I believe there's something I can do.

Bonni: [00:21:19] So how do we do that? I mean when when we're not even necessarily doing so well ourselves? I mean how do we help our students and help ourselves not just get stuck at that shutting down process?

Nicholas: [00:21:31] Yeah and I mean I think with talking about this same I like I see some students at that point where they're like, "Not only is what you're asking me hard, but, I don't want to sit with these issues anymore."

Nicholas: [00:21:42] So to give you one example it's another class for our capstone class for social justice focus award here at Portland Community College. I've had that last winter. So January through March and a lot of folks in the class were undocumented or had friends who are undocumented or documented and to go in there and talk about how do we change the world every day put them- You know they expressed felt really like exactly what you're saying like oh my god I can't believe I have to think about this in every waking moment of my life and it has to be part of my learning, too.

Nicholas: [00:22:15] So the best answer I have and I don't know that there's a good answer that I always give students the example that you can read all these depressing books that that literature instructors love to assign. Yeah they're there depressing. The world is full of sad and hard things. Part of what I'm trying to create in the way that I structure classes around students using text to tactics

is to say I don't just have to be depressed right. Somebody wrote this really hard story. We can do something with it that might make whatever they're describing less intense for somebody in five years.

Nicholas: [00:22:49] I know that doesn't make people's life easier today but it's the idea of like radical hope. We're doing this hard difficult depressing thing for a reason. It's because we don't want other people to go through this and maybe if we kind of stick with it and sit in that discomfort a little bit maybe we can make it like a little bit easier for somebody else in our community now or somebody else who will live in this community in the future.

Bonni: [00:23:15] My mom has a habit of always reading the end of books first before she decides if she's going to buy them and or read them and I sort of use her super power to do that so that I don't have to have the surprise ruined at the end of a book to see if it will be worth it.

Bonni: [00:23:30] But what I hear you describing is a little bit where it can be helpful to try to provide a hopeful ending to whatever book or even just chapter it is that we're about to have them entered into and to be able to set things up well from the beginning to prepare ourselves for that sort of thing.

Bonni: [00:23:50] And then also as we're closing down to debrief and provide that hope that we might be able to make some kind of a difference but at the same time like you're saying not a very transactional difference like I'm going to go fix everything because these are really difficult issues.

Nicholas: [00:24:05] But I think also having - this goes back to your earlier question too about how do we know what changed. I write about a couple of other students from the working class literature class who one of their great struggles and their project was they they made a tumbler that they sort of. It was like a mixed media digital project with the old pictures of working class people from the Pacific Northwest with poems.

Nicholas: [00:24:27] I thought it was a really cool project. But, their big struggle wasn't anything with that, it was that they couldn't figure out who to talk to to get it projected on the TVs that are up around our campus. And after they figured it out finally we talked about I was like, "No you just figured out a real skill. You just figured out how to navigate a pretty complex and opaque bureaucracy. I mean what is higher ed if not complex and opaque bureaucracy. But you figured out how to get that out. You figured out how to reach people. And not only that but you're in this position as students you

convinced some person power to do this thing that you wanted to do and you might just be like OK well we got that done check. But that's actually kind of what politics is right. That's a version of changing."

Bonni: [00:25:11] It's so interesting just to be thinking about organizations that are popping up now to try to get everyday people to run for office. I wonder what we're going to be seeing in five 10 years from now because some of these early efforts and that's really powerful. And to reinforce that young people and give them the confidence for the next time for even more complex systems they're going to need to navigate.

Nicholas: [00:25:33] Yeah, absolutely. And I think that is what I hope when I bring this idea into classes that students take away is that you read for fun, you read for enjoyment, you read learn things but also that the things that you read that are most moving to you. You do have agency and by using the literature that you care so much about you may be able to kind of connect and respond to others in your community or you don't even know. Right. And actually change some of the things that we read about.

Bonni: [00:26:01] This is the part in the show where we get to share some recommendations. And as you were talking I thought of a recommendation that might be a little dated by the time people listen to this so I'm not sure where it will be possibly on Netflix or somewhere else. But there is a wonderful movie called The Post and it is making me think about how we can take something from history all this course in this case it's watching it not reading it but just the parallels to what is happening today is pretty magnificent.

Bonni: [00:26:30] And I think it's going to be a movie that will impact many of us and it just got me thinking, "Oh, gosh. What do I need to read next to get my hands on to learn more about that point in our history and some of the people that made such courageous decisions?" So, I'm going to recommend people go see The Post whether it's still in theaters when you get this episode or find out how you can buy a copy or watch a copy on whatever your streaming movies services is.

Bonni: [00:26:53] And then the second thing I wanted to recommend was actually I guess it's more of a thank you to Suzanne Reinhart who recommended a data detox tool from the people over at Mozilla and if you've had any of these thoughts like, "I find ads that follow me around on the Internet creepy. I don't think companies should be making money off my personal information

without my permission. I don't like not knowing what information about me is recorded. I wish I felt more in control of my digital life."

Bonni: [00:27:23] If any of those things apply to you, I would suggest going and checking out Mozilla's data detox and I'll have a link to that in the show notes which will be teachinginhighered.com/196. And I'm going to pass it over to you, Nick.

Nicholas: [00:27:38] Thank you. Wow. I rarely get to recommend things though this is really exciting. I'll try to dial it in. So thinking about the idea of reading literature and thinking about how it might- we might be able to use it in our lives. And since I'm right that year in Southern California right now Bonni, true?

Bonni: [00:27:53] That's true.

Nicholas: [00:27:54] I'm going to recommend the book the novel and I'm not going to check in to see if you read it or anything but the novel Gold Fame Citrus by Claire Vaye Watkin. She's one of those people who's she's a little bit younger than me and makes me realize like wow what have I done with my life. This novel is an amazing novel about how the Southern California in the desert in the not-maybe-too-distant future when we've run out of water.

Nicholas: [00:28:23] It's like an incredibly moving and beautiful book. I think that it's also an example of what you're talking about. It's like something that we don't want to think about it. That's something that we need to think about. And so I would really recommend to anyone that I think it's like a really on point example of a book that if you read with ten people would spur some really interesting conversations about what we might do to contribute to maintaining the earth a little bit.

Bonni: [00:28:46] Wonderful.

Nicholas: [00:28:47] And that I were really quick pedagogical one which is I went back and scrolled through and I'm pretty sure you never had - Have you ever had Asao Inoue on your show?

Bonni: [00:28:55] No.

Nicholas: [00:28:57] OK. He is an incredible writing instructor. He directs the writing program at the University of Washington in Tacoma and he's coming down to visit us in a couple of weeks. So I've been really geeking out on his work.

He teaches writing so that's his field but I think for almost everybody I've been recommended to so many friends and business schools and my friends in psychology departments.

Nicholas: [00:29:16] He wrote an essay while back called a gradeless writing class and he talks about the ways that instead of evaluating the quality of students work if we literally just evaluate how much they work. He sees results that are both sort of equitable and fair and also sees crossings that are super focused on learning rather than on grades.

Nicholas: [00:29:42] His work has really done a lot for me need you about how you know when we're talking about justice and changing the world like how we disconnect that a little bit more from the reward system of education and really focus on the things that matter. So sorry that was two recommendations but I think they're both really worth people's time.

Bonni: [00:30:00] I did, too, and I... As well, I should say. And I think we're still doing just fine on time. I really appreciated hearing about both of those. Sounds like I may have gotten a perspective guest in the deal as well. I'll have to check him out.

Bonni: [00:30:15] Well thank you so much for sending your book out to me from the publisher and for sharing about this important work. And just thank you for how you're challenging us to be better about both bringing real issues to our students to grapple with but also leaving them with this radical hope that you described.

Nicholas: [00:30:33] Yeah. Thank you so much. I'm grateful for the time and I'm grateful for all the work you do on the podcast. It really is such a great way to stay plugged into a lot of really exciting conversations. So I'm really happy to be a part of it. Thank you.

Bonni: [00:30:45] Thanks once again to Nicholas Hengen Fox for joining me on today's episode number 196 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast. I enjoyed our conversation and I'm going to be reflecting on it for weeks if not months to come. And thanks to all of you for listening.

Bonni: [00:31:01] If you have yet to ever rate or review the podcast is episode number 1,96 you can celebrate the upcoming 208 episode by going to whatever service you use to listen to the show and giving it a rating or review. I'd really appreciate that. Or if you pass a colleague in the hall you might ask them

if they are listening and share a little bit about the show and what it has meant to you. Thanks so much for listening and I'll see you next time.

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