

Flagging Spaces: exploring representations of ownership on the Australian beach.

Abstract

The Australian beach is a significant element of our national identity. Since the majority of the population lives on the coastlines of the continent, the beach (rather than the Bush) plays an important role to many Australians. Yet the beach can also be a complex setting because of the often complicated concepts of ownership that surround it. 'Flagging Spaces' examines the layers of complexity surrounding textual representations of ownership of the beach space. In particular, this paper explores the Indigenous representation on the beach moving through to the role of multiculturalism on the beach space in the wake of the 2005 Cronulla riots, using specific textual examples such as *Sacred Cows* (Heiss 1996), *Australia* (dir. Baz Luhrmann 2008), *Heaven* (dir. Tracey Moffatt 1997), *Radiance* (dir. Rachel Perkins 1998), *Butterfly Song* (Jenkins 2005), and *Bra Boys* (dir. Sonny Abberton 2006).

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Introduction:

Ann Game stated in her paper, 'Nation and Identity: Bondi', that "no one owns the sun, sea, surf – or everyone, all Australians, own it" (1990, 115). Although many Australians feel an affinity with the beach space, concepts of ownership are complicated. Indigenous Australians came into conflict with British colonisers on the beach in 1770. Since settlement/invasion, the Australian beach has been considered as a leveller of class, gender, race, and physical appearance (see Game 1990; Booth 2001: especially discusses the equality of the body on the beach). As Leone Huntsman states in her book *Sand in our souls*: "Generally people take it for granted that everyone belongs on the beach provided they don't interfere with anyone else" (2001, 178). Australians have long battled to keep the beach a public space with free access for all.

Australia the continent and home to a recent settler society has experienced much of its modern history on its many beaches. The beach is an important site of human experience and cultural association because of its varied functions: it provides a field of resources (hunting and gathering, recreation, a space for assembling people, and a location for arrival and departure). Geoffrey Blainey in *The Tyranny of Distance* highlights the noteworthy function of the beach in early white settler history during the 1820s: "most early Australian towns faced the sea and won most of their wealth and gained their importance from the sea and its trade" (1983, 118). Initially, it was a direct source of livelihood for the European settlers, and the evidence of this is still seen in the population density in modern Australia: the majority of the population lives on coastal stretches. The importance of the beach as a site of conflict with the Indigenous inhabitants of the country, and as a place of interaction with trade, is continued with the ever continuing significance of the beach to contemporary Australian culture. It is clear that the beach has played, and continues to play, a significant role in Australian history. Simultaneously, the beach has remained a space of cultural interactions, and this is represented in Australian literature and film. In examining some examples of these textual representations (from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous creators), this paper aims to chart a historical understanding of the Australian beach space.

Perhaps on the surface, Australia appears to reject the class separations of its British heritage. Yet, there are class differences in Australia and the beach is a space that can reveal these markers of difference. Some of these disparities are seen in relation to problematic ownership questions of traditional Native Title, and also surrounding concepts of multiculturalism, an ongoing issue that Australia has faced since World War II. On December 11, 2005, serious

disturbances broke out on Cronulla beach involving Anglo-Australians and Lebanese-Australians and the police. This resulted in several arrests and injuries and further violent encounters over the following week. As this incident showed, the beach can be a place of discord. The Australian beach acts as a site that reveals anxieties about cultural and national understandings of Australia and Australian identity. Thus, this paper aims to explore the Australian beach and the concept of, and representation of, ownership of this space.

Captain Cook ‘discovered’ Australia in 1770. The coastal beaches of the continent were the stage of many early confrontations between the Aboriginal people and the colonisers on Australian shores. The Indigenous people suffered the loss of large numbers of their population. Australia’s Indigenous population makes up only 3% of the country (Taylor 2006). Yet, the Australian government did not recognise traditional ownership of country until 1992. As Collins and Davis state in their text *Australian cinema after Mabo* (2004, 4): “Australian colonial histories show that, from day one, European settlers/invasers recognised the fiction of *terra nullius*”. The Australian legal system only declared the concept of *terra nullius* (empty land) a lie with the Mabo decision in 1992 and this paved the way for the 1993 Native Title Act, which recognised traditional ownership of land by Indigenous populations. However, this remains a contentious issue in Australia with ongoing legal cases, such as the 2006 case of Noongar Native Title in Perth, Western Australia.

The small numbers of Indigenous people in Australia are widespread across the continent, and can be compared to the 97% of non-Indigenous Australians who predominately live on the coastlines of the continent. Langton (1993) attempts to categorise Aboriginal groups by region: the ‘settled’ and the ‘remote’. The settled region refers roughly to the coastline and includes “a myriad of small Aboriginal communities and populations” (12). The remote region is “where most of the tradition-orientated Aboriginal cultures are located” (12). Langton introduces the concept of frontiers for Indigenous areas, and discusses the impact that frontier confrontations, under titles such as ‘protection’ and ‘assimilation’ had on the Indigenous population (12-13). Therefore, functional usage of the beach is dominated by non-Indigenous and urban/‘settled’ region Aboriginals.

There is still some contention between access and acknowledgement of the beach space, although the immediate functionality of the space remains the same (see the Nyangumarta case at 80 Mile Beach, Western Australia, resolved in 2009). In a practical sense, individual municipal Councils govern the use of beaches and are responsible for beach authority. However, the

beach space remains public – it is free to enter and use, although swimming is recommended for only flagged and patrolled areas during daytime hours. The beach becomes an interesting space in regards to ownership, and representations of ownership, of the land.

Because it is a public space, the beach superficially seems to belong to all Australians and this is how the space is used. Native Title usually does not (except in some cases) grant exclusive possession to the space, and this is the case for beach regions. Beaches are areas open to all ages, genders, and ethnicities, and usage is governed by the local Councils. British theorists Knox and Warpole in their study on public spaces suggest that ownership of the space is not of importance: “To members of the public, it is not the ownership of places or their appearance that makes them ‘public’, but rather their shared use for a diverse range of activities by a range of different people” (2007, 4). In terms of usage, the beach then is open to all and is owned by all Australians regardless of ethnicity. However, usage alone does not represent ownership. Indigenous ownership and use of the beach is often problematised by the negative or romanticised representations of Aboriginal people in texts. Dr Anita Heiss, an Aboriginal author of fiction, poetry, and academic writing, caustically examines predominately Anglo-Australian beach culture in her debut novel *Sacred Cows* (1996). Her intention is to write not from the margins, but from a position of authority:

What I have done in this book is something that non-Indigenous authors have been doing for years. I have looked at an opposing culture from an assumed authoritative position, stating perceptions as well as suggestions for bettering it, coupled with humour (1996, xi).

Heiss then proceeds to satirically examine aspects of ‘Aussie Culture’, including the beach. Lifeguards, considered the bronzed hero of Australian popular culture, are “bowlegged, broad-shouldered, mirrored-sunglasses and walkie-talkied lifeguards [who are] on a power trip as they blow their whistles and pump their biceps...” (1996, 28). Aussie women are too self-conscious to show their flesh, while overweight men shamelessly parade around in miniscule swimwear. Heiss creates an uncomfortable position of awareness for a white reader by humorously criticising Anglo-Australian culture from an outsider’s perspective. She maintains a distance away from this version of Australia, self-consciously assigning herself as Other. Interestingly, in Heiss’s chick-lit novel *Avoiding Mr Right* (2007), her main character, an Indigenous woman in her late-20s, interacts very ordinarily with the beach space in her beachside suburb of Sydney. Heiss’s scathing indictment of the way Australians use the beach is contradicted in her own novel that sees Alice interact with the beach in much the same way as any

other Australian: she walks the coastal path from Bondi and Coogee, sunbakes near one of the rock pools, uses sunscreen, and cools off in the water.

Langton (1993) and Jennings (1993) both examine Indigenous representations, primarily focusing on film. Much has been said about the dangers of romanticising the concept of ‘traditional’ Aborigines, and Jennings states that this romanticising in fact leads researchers, filmmakers, and anthropologists “to ignore vital topics such as miscegenation, fringe dwelling and the urban population, and have mobilised popular notions of ‘full-bloods’ and ‘part-Aborigines’” (1993, 13). As far as beach culture is concerned, there appears to be a gap in contemporary films portraying Indigenous characters, who remain largely positioned inland. An element of this may be because of the reification of the mystical, traditional Aboriginal, which does not allow for representations of urban Indigenous people. As Jennings says:

Such distinctions [referring to scripts that ignore facts to combine appealing elements of Indigenous culture to create a better, yet inaccurate, product] which deny the viability of a modern distinctive Aboriginal society, are manifest in white Australian literature and cinema which virtually ignore urban Aboriginal life in their preoccupation with the traditional and the exotic (1993, 13).

A recent example is Baz Luhrmann’s film *Australia* (2008), which not only sets the majority of the story in the Northern Territory (many representations of Indigenous characters are limited to this area) but also includes blatantly mystical representations of Indigenous culture and spirituality, particularly in the character of Nullah, a boy born of an Indigenous mother and white father, and his grandfather King George, the ‘magic man’. Although the late 1930s – 1940s setting of the film limits how the Indigenous characters can be represented because of the political climate of the time, *Australia* is certainly guilty at times of romanticising the Indigenous spirituality.

The beach plays a small yet significant role in *Australia*. Nullah is taken against his will (and despite the care of Lady Ashley and Drover, both Caucasians) to Mission Island along with other half-Aboriginal children. Lady Ashley is attempting to return Nullah to her care when Darwin is attacked by the Japanese. Mission Island is the first hit, and Luhrmann slowly pans over Nullah standing on the beach staring upwards as he hears the drone of the engines overhead. This image of war is very different from other representations, such as Peter Weir’s *Gallipoli* (1981), not only because it takes place on Australian soil rather than in Europe. Australians themselves

are the targets, not the ANZACs, and in this instance Indigenous and Caucasian Australians are attacked as one. Once the bullets begin, Nullah and the other children start running for shelter. Drover and his Indigenous friend, Magarri, sail out to Mission Island to try and rescue them. Magarri sacrifices himself to make sure the boys make it onto the boat. In a scene strikingly reminiscent of *Gallipoli* (1981), Magarri drops his weapon and runs along the beach as a distraction until he is shot in the back, telling Drover in his last breath to “drove ‘em home, Drover”. It is Drover’s duty to see the boys safely off the island because he has family now and therefore needs to live. The unorthodox family of Sarah Ashley, Drover, and Nullah are reunited – if only briefly before King George summons Nullah on a ‘walkabout’. Nullah sheds his clothes, throwing his shoes off with relish, and departs from his western carers into the hands of his ‘real’ family.

Allowing Nullah to be rescued and returned to his grandfather and be raised amongst his own culture suggests perhaps Luhrmann is in fact attempting to atone for the Stolen Generations. Nullah’s life is threatened on multiple occasions throughout the film, most significantly on Mission Island and when Fletcher tries to shoot him. Both times the attempt is thwarted by an Indigenous man – Magarri and King George. The westerners, although clearly showing Nullah love and affection are not enough to keep him from harm – thus he is returned to his ‘blood’ family. Luhrmann condemns the racist treatment of Indigenous Australians through both the narrative and also the sympathetic portrayal of his Indigenous characters, particularly Nullah.

Tracey Moffatt, an Indigenous filmmaker, chose not to focus only on Indigenous characters in her short film *Heaven* (1997). Set on an unnamed beach, the film is a voyeuristic experience of watching young men changing after surfing on the beach to a soundtrack of lapping waves. Moffatt retains control as the author of the film and transfers the traditional male gaze into the female gaze on to the young, masculine body. With clear appreciation of beauty and athleticism, Moffatt’s camera tracks the men from within a house, framed through windows and blinds, and then continually moves closer to her object. At times, she appears to engage the men in conversation as they undress or dress, crossing boundaries of acceptability for both the object and the audience. One moment sees a man attempt to light-heartedly swat her away as her camera darts in, attempting to catch a glimpse of his genitals. The film showcases all types of nationalities or heritage: Caucasians, African Americans, Indigenous Australians, and Asians. All of these men are joined by their love of surfing and the almost ritualistic changing experience that happens after a day at the beach. However, Natalya Lusty suggests that Moffatt is in fact creating a type of mock-ethnographic film:

The intense scrutiny of Moffatt's ethnographic gaze as she films and contemplates this peculiarly beachside ritual serves as a reminder of the colonial gaze of white male anthropologists who documented the naked and semi-naked bodies of indigenous subjects (2005, 3).

The occasional tribal chanting soundtrack aids this reading. When viewed through this lens, the white body becomes a space that is caught in near nakedness, vulnerable and objectified. Lusty also suggests that there is an "implicit shame of the naked white body that has served to define the very terms of racial difference" (2005, 3).

The white body is not the only focus in *Heaven*, however, and there is certainly a performative aspect to the work as well. Moffatt's work, on one level, captures the universal experience of a beachgoer that can unwillingly (or perhaps willingly, as in this case) witness surfers changing in car parks or footpaths. By examining the male body through such an obvious, appreciative gaze, Moffatt almost eliminates concepts of ethnicity and nationality and creates a beach space that is a place of admiration for aesthetic, physical beauty.

Another Indigenous director, Rachel Perkins, adapted Louis Nowra's play *Radiance* for the cinema screen. *Radiance* (1998) shows three sisters, Mae, Cressy, and Nona, coming to terms with their mother Mary's death in her beachside house. The beach on the mainland is a space of revelation in the emotionally charged final act of the film. It is here, on the way to Nora Island to scatter the ashes, that Mae tells of her struggles with their mother's precocious senility and the rage she felt at her inability to cope with her, screaming in her Indigenous language, "I hate you, I want to kill you" the day she died. Perkins emphasises this scene by layering the sound of Mae's screaming so that it appears to echo around the women in the entirely natural beach space. Mae's dark skin is contrasted by the white of her mother's wedding dress. It is the first time Mae shows any emotion but rage, and expresses her fear that her mother hated her – "In her heart of hearts, she hated me". It is also the only moment that is specifically Indigenous. Although *Radiance* features an Indigenous cast and director, the story itself has universal themes of loss, grief, broken families, and un-revealed secrets.

The secret of Nona's parentage is the most shocking secret of the film. Cressy reveals that Nona was the result of one of Mary's boyfriends raping her when she was twelve. Nona responds with disbelief and runs to take the tin of Mary's ashes to Nora Island while she can. The way to the island is only accessible once a year, and the tide is unrelentingly creeping closer and closer. By this stage of the film, the water is up to Nona's waist as she wades

across the ocean. An aerial shot of Nona scattering the ashes is now layered with meaning as Nona now knows the truth – that Mary was in fact her grandmother, and Cressy her mother. The beach remains unflinching and pure, a witness to this horrible truth. Nona returns to the mainland the next day on a barge and joins Mae and Cressy in the car, and the equilibrium – although disturbed – is regained.

Although Rachel Perkins is an Indigenous director, the play *Radiance* was written by Louis Nowra, an Anglo-Australian. *Radiance* therefore is a challenging example of an Indigenous film about Indigenous women, written by an Anglo-Australian male. Indigenous literature has been explored previously, although the beach is not a trope that features often. Anne Brewster (2003), in her article titled 'The Beach as 'Dreaming Place'', has explored the beach in Aboriginal literature. She labelled it as a "border zone where the invader occupies the indigene's land" (39), but also as a "zone in which different temporalities conjoin" (35). The use of memory is significant for Australian Aboriginals, Brewster noted, because of its role in "[inventing] local future" (39). Therefore, Indigenous understandings of the beach differ greatly from Western understandings, as Brewster stated:

Aboriginal literature challenges the fiction of a traditional Indigenous identity fixed in time and for whom parallel worlds, time travel and the future are unavailable (2003, 40).

Byrne and Nugent (2004) suggested that a better approach to understanding Indigenous cultural heritage is through 'landscapes' rather than 'sites'. The term 'landscape' in this instance refers to coastal regions as a whole, creating spaces of heritage on large stretches of connected land. Comparatively, 'sites' tends to indicate individual areas of beach space – for example, individually named beaches like Manly, Surfers Paradise, or Cottesloe. Although landscape can be a problematic term in regards to beach analysis, (see Huntsman's concern about "the lack of a word for land or landscape that also evokes and includes the coastal fringe" (2001, 166)) it connotes the appropriately broad scale concept required to better appreciate Indigenous attitudes.

One interesting point I have come across so far in my research is that the use of water in Indigenous texts appears to focus on rivers and waterholes rather than the beach. One immediate point of significance is the importance of fresh water. This is not to suggest that the beach is unimportant in Indigenous life but rather that the attachment may reveal itself in a different way. For example, Terri Janke's novel *Butterfly Song* (2005) is the story of Tarena, an Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander. She returns to Thursday Island after she

finishes her law degree to help her mother retrieve a family heirloom. *Butterfly Song* mentions the beach – Tarena grew up in Cairns – but it does not feature heavily in the narrative. Instead, Thursday Island appears to be more significant as an island whole: when Tarena arrives by plane, the sand is noticeable purely in that it borders the island and is a gateway to the ocean. Tarena’s grandfather is a pearl fisherman, and one day his non-Indigenous boss leaves him behind in the ocean. Kit manages to swim back to shore, but again the focus is on the contrast of land and ocean, which still excludes the beach space. Indigenous perspectives of the beach are limited perhaps because of the role of the beach in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history of Australia. The beaches were places of conflict when Anglo Saxon settlers began arriving. As Cathcart said in the introduction to his book *The Water Dreamers*:

...the contact between white settlers and the Aboriginal owners triggered a battle for resources. In a country where water was scarce – and where it was central to the cultures of the Aboriginal peoples – the battle for land was also a battle for water (6).

Since the newcomers mostly settled in coastal colonies for close proximity to coastal ports, the Indigenous population was pushed inwards to the centre of the continent. Thus, it is possible that their relationship with the beach landscape shifted after the arrival of Western settlers.

The concept of ownership on the beach also begins to problematise non-Indigenous discourses of ownership. Usually in Australian society, it is accepted that working earns money, which allows us to gain ownership of property. However, the beach is not a space of work (except for the lifeguards on duty), and it is classified as a public space. Despite not *earning* the space in traditional concepts of ownership, however, the beach feels like a communally earned space for enjoyment and relaxation. Game suggests that the lack of distinction between classes in Australia, particularly on the beach, does not suggest that ‘we all work’ (as would traditional discourses of egalitarianism), but instead means ‘we all have the same fun’ (1990, 115). Therefore, the beach is a shared space of relaxation rather than a space linked to a work ethic.

Yet the beach can also be a stage of discord. December 11, 2005 saw Cronulla Beach become the stage for violent rioting. Initially triggered (according to the media) by an attack on two male Anglo-Australian lifeguards by Lebanese-Australians, the ensuing violence made international headlines. Slogans such as ‘Aussie Pride’ and ‘We grew here, you flew here’ were painted on signs, bodies, and the sand itself. Affrica Taylor, in her book

chapter ‘Australian bodies, Australian sands’, suggested that the beach itself is not passive – instead, it is “co-implicated in the construction of the authentic Australian subject and must therefore be understood, at least partially, as a cultural construct” (2009, 115). The Cronulla riots stood against Australia’s policy of multiculturalism. Australia as a country is primarily inhabited by migrants; 97% of Australians have ancestral origins from outside of Australia; that is, all Australians not of Indigenous descent (Taylor 2009, 118). In the Cronulla situation, the migrants, especially those of Lebanese descent, were marked as ‘un-Australian’, thus allowing the Anglo-Australians to affirm themselves as the ‘real’ Aussies. Yet, as Taylor remarked, this was a case of “selective amnesia of the White postcolonial ‘custodians’” (2009, 118), once again excluding the position of the Indigenous inhabitants of the country. Multiculturalism is a significant element of Australian life, and some of the fictional texts written about the beach confirm this.

A text like *Diasporas of Australian Cinema* (Simpson, Murawska, and Lambert 2009) suggests that filmmaking in Australia still engages specifically with marginal identities. Simpson, Murawksa, and Lambert suggest this evolved from Australia’s cultural policy:

In order to cope with the diversifying population [as a result of increased migration after World War II], a policy of cultural assimilation governed official rhetoric during the post-war period, arguing that ‘new Australians’ would be absorbed socially and culturally into the mainstream Anglo-Australian community” (2009, 18).

Texts are representative of cultural identity, and Miller (in Simpson, Murawska, Lambert, Eds; 2009) suggests that some Australian texts are representing a lack of belonging: “More and more people feel as though they *do not* belong; more and more people are *applying* to belong; and more and more people are not *counted* as belonging” (9, original emphasis). Asylum seekers remain a politically charged topic in Australia. Interestingly, the beach in this context acts as an impassable border. In traditional island narratives, often the beach is a space that traps inhabitants in, castaways stuck on an island with no hope of rescue, seen often in literature and film: for example, HG Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954), and the film *Castaway* (2000, dir. Robert Zemeckis). However, in Australia, the beach often acts as a space that shuts people out, rather than keeping them in. The Australian continent is not a traditional island despite geographical definition; rather it is a country surrounded by a sea border designed to protect the sanctuary of its people.

Bra Boys, the documentary following the life of the three Abberton brothers (dir. S Abberton, 2006), showcases some elements of the violence of that same period. Set in Maroubra, the film follows the brothers through run-ins with the police, a court case, and their surfing lifestyle. The Cronulla riots occurred before the filming was finished, and becomes part of their story. The Abbertons represent themselves as makeshift ambassadors for peace during the riotous period. However, the focus of their involvement lies more during the retaliation incident – where some Australians (mostly of Lebanese descent) responded to the riots with violence, attacking property and people in Maroubra. The Bra Boys of Maroubra are men who deal in violence and footage from the film captures and enforces the traditional anti-authoritarian and aggressive stance the surfers take in their home ground.

Australia is a country of multiple cultural backgrounds, and the beach appears to be a space that can unite cultures as well as highlighting differences. Taylor believes that “through immersions, revisitations and sensory imprintings, beach play becomes ‘second nature’ for many urban children and naturalises a passageway into Australian adulthood” (2009, 120). Therefore, it can be suggested that the beach plays an important role in ‘Australianising’ people of different cultural backgrounds. Yet, comparatively, the beach can be considered a place that accepts different cultural backgrounds.

The mythically egalitarian space of the Australian beach is a fractured concept. The Australian beach plays a continually significant role in Australian national identity and in the lived experiences of the Australian people. As Huntsman says:

It seems to me that the place of the beach in Australian life is too prominent, our attachment to it too deep, for its history to remain unrecorded and its deeper significance to be ignored and unexamined (2001, 5).

In order to examine the beach’s ‘deeper significance’, then the representations of problematic ownership between Western colonisers and Indigenous Australians of the beach space needs to be explored.

In particular, this paper has analysed the role of the beach in some Indigenous texts, including *Sacred Cows*, *Avoiding Mr Right*, *Radiance*, and *Butterfly Song*. It appears that the beach appears significant primarily in the same way that it emerges in Western texts, as part of an urban setting. Previous work suggests the folly of romanticising the ‘traditional’ Aborigine in that it can be as damaging as continued negative imagery of Indigenous

culture (Langton 1993; Jennings 1993). Luhmann’s epic *Australia* (2008) is a complicated example that, while clearly glamorising the mystical ‘magic man’ figure of King George, appears to be making amends for the Stolen Generation. It does portray an alternative invasion – the Japanese attacking Darwin during World War II – one that affects all Australians of any colour. The death of the Indigenous Magarri represents many Indigenous deaths at the hand of Imperialists on the Australian shore. However, the beach in this text is certainly a secondary setting to the romanticised Outback. The beach is an urban concept purely because of the geography and settlement of our country and the positioning of the majority of people living along the coastlines. It is not unexpected then that the role of the beach in Indigenous texts is as an urban, ordinary space quite in comparison to often nostalgic representations of the Outback.

Non-Indigenous Australians also have problematic questions of ownership of the beach space, perhaps seen most clearly in the rioting in Cronulla. *Bra Boys* (2006) explores some aspects of the complicated issues surrounding immigration and multiculturalism in Australia, suggesting that the beach is a space where these questions can unfold on a public stage. The beach is certainly far from an idyllic scenic setting in these texts.

The analysis in this paper suggests that it cannot be said that Australia is returning to a period where all Australians (or none) own the beach, yet it is clear that the beach is a complicated site. Whether it is or ever will be, as Game suggested, a place where all ethnicities, genders, and bodies can democratically interact without fear, remains uncertain and unlikely. But what does emerge is the way that these contestations cannot be hidden on the beach. The beach becomes a space which forces revelation – not to create equilibrium, but to expose truths regardless of whether they fit with our understanding of Australian national identity.

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