Chapter 12. The Resonance Is the Composer: Students Soundwriting Together

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Figure 12.1. From The Medium Is the Massage by Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore (1967, p. 112).

We chose this McLuhan/Fiore sample as an epigraph (of sorts) because amplifying soundwriting in our class (advanced composition) in turn amplified "a world of simultaneous relationships" in our scene of writing (a course wiki).¹ We grew accustomed to listening without earlids, with our whole being. There's a certain point in writing together where the interference patterns determine what we're hearing. We need these interference patterns of persuasion/invitation/celebration/dissipation, and we need to learn how to listen deeply to one another there. Soundwriting helped us create this space of writing and this sense of community.

In an advanced composition course for the University of South Florida St. Petersburg's (USFSP) Department of Verbal and Visual Arts, we (the professor and students enrolled in the class) formed a community both in person and online on

^{1.} A gif of this image, created by the authors in GIMP, is available on the book's companion website.

a classroom wiki. Right away, we named our wiki space "emergeconvergefall2017" to assert our plan to balance emergent techniques of compositional practice with classical strategies for the invention, arrangement, and sharing of prose.

Our experiments and exercises proceeded on this course plan: We divided the semester into two phases (emergence and convergence) and created a portfolio for each phase. First, we took emergence as an Ur-metaphor for our own individual and collective compositional practices. For the second phase, we created "convergence portfolios" that directly combined our separate portfolios into new forms. The soundwriting assignments and examples in this chapter share some of those moments of compositional convergence.

Soundwriting, a central theme and practice of our semester, allowed the class to embrace some of the oldest approaches available to writers: listening, dialoguing, and engaging the practice of our own writing with our whole beings. The assignments and responses we share here both demonstrate and facilitate the power of emergence to bind a community of writers. These exercises are adaptable to allow students to experience compositional emergence (our first phase) through collaborative writing, where they learn that low-stakes, high-frequency writing on a common medium activates prior knowledge: When everyone brings together their own knowledge and background, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. To us, soundwriting is the convergence of oral and written traditions and the collaborative practice of sonic and textual composition-creating a common space of exploration that transcends intellectual boundaries. We recognize that this definition is somewhat larger and more organic than the manipulation of recorded sound, as others in this collection use the term. Although a wiki is great for forging literal connections in hypertext, soundwriting opened up our collaborative process to a deeper sense of connection, and an experience of older, oral rhetorical traditions.

Throughout the early stages of the class, students were encouraged to post links to their most valued writing resources in the wiki and share them with the class. We completed a "communities of practice" exercise where students were encouraged to list places they often go and the characteristics of those places and the people found in them. Then, students were invited to comment on each other's reflections and informative writing about their own scenes of composition, their own communities of practice. The result was a growing group sense of the ways students were connected and the areas where they may have held differing opinions. The wiki facilitated the low-stakes space for this to happen, and the classroom environment brought it life.

As the class continued to engage in the prompts and exercises shared below, it became apparent that the emergence of ideas from the many exercises performed had facilitated a larger conversation and a more detailed map of our discourse community. Students were excited to engage and were committed to the conversations they were having. And as they completed these exercises, soundwriting was fundamental. Students embedded noise clips into their wiki posts. Students played guitars and instruments in class while other students read each other's assignments aloud. Students remixed each other's works, and one student even composed music to go along with the sensory writing projects posted by her classmates. Some students turned other students' poems into songs. Some students recorded the in-class discussions and made actual musical compositions by mixing in the voices of their classmates. There were no strict guidelines, but the overlying principle was this: Take what your classmates are doing and use it in your own new unique work.

Workshops and Exercises

On the first day of this advanced composition class, we shared prior knowledge through a prompt that invited each participant to write about their own communities of practice. This assignment set the stage for soundwriting in two important, related ways. First, it allowed the practicing musicians enrolled in the course to share in detail the compositional practices of their own music communities. Second, it put musical practice into a generalized space of compositional practice available to all the enrolled students. Through conversation and sharing, students—whether they identified as musicians or not—began to see how compositional practices threaded through different communities of practice.

The following workshops were introduced mid-semester, after the "emergence" segment of the semester, to encourage new collaborative dynamics for the upcoming "convergence" segment of the semester.

Exercise: Freesound!

The freesound! exercise takes its name from the collaborative database of uncomposed sound elements at freesound.org. Although the script seems strict, in practice it functions best as an icebreaker on the terrain of soundwriting, and that's how we'll leverage the prompt in this community. This exercise helps you work on questions such as, "How much experience do the writers in your community or class have with soundwriting?" and "What are the different attitudes and dispositions towards noise and music in your scene of writing?" The exercise also asks us to consider relationships between how we respond to different sounds and our awareness of/responses to the different premises and conclusions we encounter in compositional practice.

Writing takes work, but writing together requires play. So, in this exercise, you'll listen to each other's freesound compositions (instructions below) and add layers of sounds in response. Actively responding to each other in sound focuses the class's collective attention on important steps in collaborative rhetorical processes and teaches us the art of identifying and reconsidering the premises we bring to our acts of reading and listening.

Step 1

Sequencing and layering sound can alter how you feel and where you focus your mind.

Navigate to Freesound.org, browse the sounds that are there, choose a few to combine, and download those audio files.

Then choose an audio editor in which you'll edit together the audio files you've downloaded to create a new sonic composition. There are plenty of online audio-editing sites cropping up these days; feel free to compose with any sound technology of your choosing. Audacity is a great free software option.

In your audio editor, edit the audio files you've downloaded from freesound. org to create a new audio file, layering the sound however you'd like. Create a wiki space for your composition and upload your new audio file along with links to the Freesound audio that you used. At this stage, you might want to write on our course wiki about your recording process and experience. Think like a composer (you are writing a "score"), or even a game developer (you are creating the rules of play); listen to the layers of sounds you've selected, and tell others (performers, listeners, and fellow composers and players) about them (by giving us directives, establishing rules, writing out liner notes, sharing associational thoughts, etc.). You may be compelled to place images, links, and previously composed text (prose or poetry) on this page as well.

Upload. Now, your peers can open the Freesound pages you selected and concatenated, and in doing so, read your writing while they listen to your composition.

Step 2

Listen again to your classmates' compositions. At your wiki space, post links to the two you liked best. What effect does the music seem to induce in listeners? Are the compositions you selected musical or just plain noisy? Write a couple hundred words and post to your wiki.

Step 3

Perhaps the easiest way to make something new is to simply "mash" two things together and then carefully consider the new "mesh" that results.

Listen again to our Freesound compositions. Select two compositions that you think would sound good together. Now, create a mashup with your web browser by simply playing both scores at the same time.

What is the relationship between your intention (what you want it to sound like) and the outcome (what it sounds like)? How would you alter it to improve it? You could think in terms of "rhetorical effects," along the lines of the three appeals (logos, ethos, pathos), or any other effect that you might create with sounds, words, or images. Go further, add sounds, images, or words to your remix. Or subtract sounds, images, and words from the compositions you selected for remixing. Describe the effect of the composition before and after your additions and repurposing. What do your additions and/or subtractions do? Do they amplify the effects of the composition as you found it? Reverse them? Did your changes simplify or add complexity?

Exercise: Bring a Small Noisemaker

This exercise aims to help participants share personal writing in the context of a playful atmosphere. This time, we focused on using our objects to provide feedback on our various drafts on the wiki by reading/singing peer drafts to collective

improvisatory noisemaking. Responding to each other's wiki writing in sound opened up the text and the conversation to larger possibilities. An excerpt of this process can be heard in the sample student projects for this chapter.

Step 1

For this workshop, each of us will bring a noisemaker and/or a musical instrument to class. Also bring a pencil, pen, and paper.

We will move through the workshop in timed increments, according to a rhythm of timed writing (solo), group work (pairs and small groups), written dialogue, and council circle activities. Take notes throughout this activity (in preparation for Step 3 below).

- We will warm up with a timed writing exercise, during which you will describe your object for your classmates, in writing.
- We will then place the objects all together on one table. Then, each of you will select an object other than your own object. Then, we'll mix it up informally for a short duration, each of us with the common aim of finding out who brought the object we selected.

We will then get into pairs and small groups, and talk about what these objects mean and why we have brought them to our first meeting. Your primary purpose in these interactions is to prepare a short, written description or argument to be shared on our course wiki before our next face-to-face meeting. Your report will introduce the owner of the object and articulate that object's significance in a way that is informed by your interview session, your reading of your peers' wiki posts, and by your understanding of our course goals. You will experiment with and leverage an introductory progymnasmata exercise (fable, tale, chreia, or proverb) to develop your report. Crucially, your presentation will direct audience attention to the writing you produce in Steps 2 and 3 of this workshop, which can provide further details and offer readers opportunities for further exploration of what we can create meaning through dialogue and exchange.

Step 2

Engage in written dialogue with the aim of introducing the owner of the object—and the object itself—to the class via wiki. Complete this report before our next face-to-face meeting. Conduct research and cite sources that help you articulate the significance of the object in broader terms, asking yourself how this object could hold meaning for others.

You can pursue your conversations on the wiki or any other medium that facilitates timely response—just be sure to post conversations that take place in other media (which you can revise, enhance, and develop as you would any draft) to our course wiki (fodder for revision!). Begin posting this process to the wiki immediately—share early and often! Feel free to also experiment with video chat technology to record conversations for review and to spur further exploration of presentational techniques.

During our next class meeting, we will gather in a circle, so that each of you will have a chance to articulate the significance of a peer's object in a brief (60–90 seconds) presentation.

Step 3

As you reflect on your live workshop experiences and subsequent interactions in writing, you will need to do research to support your presentation of the interviews and conversations. Analyze the information from the sources that you found or encountered in this workshop: sources that you or a peer researched and deliberately referenced, that you discovered via a reference in a peer's writing, or that you feel the need to search out having discussed, and in preparation for your presentation (where you will introduce and illustrate the significance of a peer's small object). In your analysis, critically focus on the sources that you used in terms of audience, genre, modality, and rhetorical situation. How are these texts put together and who produces these texts? What is the exigence driving the production of these texts? What is at stake? For whom? What is the function/role of "genre" and "mode" in the rhetorical situations, narratives, arguments, and research programs you encounter? What shifts in tone, poetics, or persuasive technique did you notice as your object and the objects of others came in for renegotiation and interpretation? In your own report, which progymnasmata exercises did you work with, and what did this exercise do for your writing?

Exercise: Sensory Writing on the Harbor

This exercise can take many forms, and in this case, because soundwriting was beginning to be a regular routine in our scene of writing, music and soundwriting became an important part of the way our community responded to the prompt. As part of this exercise, we read Steph Ceraso (2014). Our understanding of soundwriting expanded when, during an outdoor sensory writing workshop, Chris opened his laptop and began to type directly to the wiki in live response to sounds and music made during the workshop. Chris's response, in turn, became subject to subsequent soundwriting responses and was revised into a song. In this way, students continued to build new compositions with the elements of their peers.

Instructions

Sensory writing exercises will help us discover how a writing practice can engage our whole being.

We'll start by going outside and writing together near the water. Bring paper and pencil. With two or three other students, choose different spots in approximately the same area/space, but be sure to create some amount of space; do not sit to write too close together. Then begin to take notes on what you see, hear, and smell there. Think of what you write as notes to yourself that will be used to write something else in the future, even though we haven't decided what that will be yet.

Bring your notes back to the wiki: Photograph or scan them and transcribe them. Approach the transcription as you would a revision session. Don't worry about spelling, correctness, or grammar; write in whatever way allows you to capture on paper what you observe, imagine, and feel during this timed exercise. Be certain to include thoughts and feelings about what you observe and the process of recording it, as well as recording some sense of what everything around you looks, sounds, and smells like. After we write together on the harbor, we will transcribe/upload our sensory writing to the wiki, where we will discuss and workshop further.

Further Experiences: Sample Texts Online

Our experiences always exceeded the boundaries described in these exercises; see our sample texts and their surrounding commentary on the companion website for more ways that our soundwriting emerged and converged in practice.

Sample Student Projects

The ambient penumbra of creativity, learning, and collaboration around the instances of direct soundwriting sample texts in this chapter are just as important to us as the texts themselves. For example, Chris+Amber+Ivan+Trey grouped together for sensory writing by the water, and the professor (Trey) was surprised when he arrived to see Amber and Ivan armed with guitars. Crucially, the ensuing soundwriting acquired amplified meaning in Chris's writing that happened alongside the acoustic guitars and singing and in the way this experience built on previous workshop experiences to further weave different types of soundwriting throughout different learning itineraries. Each soundwriting event manifested in and as part of a larger rhetorical ecology, and some soundwriting events changed the prompt that prompted them in the first place.

The sample student projects give glimpse to our process by sharing key sound-writing texts that we found ourselves reflecting on often as we assembled this chapter.

1. "Well This Is Different than What I Expected . . . ": Kathleen and Amber singing poetry written by Alex over music performed by the classroom collective. During the noisemaker workshop, we improvised feedback over read-alouds of each other's drafts. In doing so, students were able to provide auditory feedback to written works. Some students created songs that were inspired by their peers' works so that their peers could see what resonated with them and how the other students viewed their work. The experience is similar to standing up in front of a live audience, reading your piece aloud, and seeing how the reader reacts to which pieces. Through this other form of feedback, the author then has more insight on how to go back and revise their piece. As you listen to what follows, we especially want you to notice these things that you could adapt to your own classes: that the desire for such authentic feedback trumped self-consciousness; how the spirit of play provided a platform for students to experiment, emboldening one student—Kathleen—to reinterpret another

student's draft through song; and how the results were not expected, but perhaps impossible to achieve without that spirit of play.²

- 2. "Thymesis" by Alyssa Harman: This video, which began as a poem by Alyssa Harmon, became a soundwriting composition driven by Emma's guitar, and finally grew into a video that Alyssa created by mixing her words and Emma's music into a slideshow of photographs culled from her "convergence portfolio." At first, Alyssa's "Thymesis" sequence emerged gradually, over the course of many weeks. Then, after the freesound! and sensory writing workshops, Emma provided soundwriting feedback on Alyssa's poems with multitracked acoustic guitars. Alyssa then responded by creating a new narrative, selecting key passages from the poems, and arranging them with a sequence of images over Emma's guitars. As you listen to and watch this project, we especially want you to notice these things that you could adapt to your own classes: how multimodal composition created a new digital space of play; the way that collaboration allowed these students to venture outside of their comfort zones; and the new feedback that can be achieved for students when peers interpret texts sonically instead of through written prose.
- 3. "Chop-n-Whine" by Chris Burton (lyrics), Amber Nicol (guitar), and Ivan Jones (guitar): Whereas Amber Nicol (a practicing musician) and Ivan Jones (a practicing musician and DJ) embraced the nonsemantic and asignifying force unleashed in the freesound! and noisemaker workshops, Chris Burton was at first a bit perplexed by all this noise. Chris at one point challenged the turn to soundwriting, asking what all this noisemaking had to do with our recursive process of growing compositions by emergence. But his question was earnest-he was curious, not annoyed. This question was a watershed, a critical incident for the community. Trey shared Steph Ceraso's (2014) multimodal listening article with Chris, added this text to the freesound! sequence, and shifted the calendar so that we could do a sensory writing workshop for our next class session. Chris's sensory writing, which he composed directly to the wiki while listening to Amber, Ivan, and Trey sing and play guitars outside during the sensory writing workshop. This example shares an audio-recorded conversation between Amber, Trey, Ivan, and Christina, lyrics for "Chop-n-Whine" written by Chris, an audio file of chords written for Chris's song, and Chris's reflection on his experiences. Although he had no prior knowledge of or interest in DAWs, Chris, after working with Ivan during class, taught himself Audacity and reframed DAWs as a valuable and generalizable writing tool for his process. Following Paul Théberge (1997), we noticed the ways that compositional practices and procedures are built into the design of DAWs.

^{2.} Four example student projects (audio or video files and descriptive transcripts with accompanying introductions) can be found on the book's companion website.

4. "Refrain" by Ivan Jones: In this song, Ivan stacked three guitar tracks, marked transitions with reverse-reverberated gongs (a trick we had discussed in the context of comparing analog and digital techniques for this trope), leveraged Ableton's sampling/soundswitching affordances to create percussion (handclaps, 808 bass-drops, high hats), a bassline, and a refrain built out of various utterances and exclamations he recorded during a workshop. As you listen, notice how even musically experienced students can benefit from simple soundwriting exercises, like this student who created a refrain with just seemingly throwaway phrases.



Reflection

Figure 12.2. Harmon, Hamilton, Burton, Olinger, Nicol, and Conner (not pictured) reflect together.

Trey Conner: I'm Trey Conner. I'm associate professor of writing studies at University of South Florida St. Petersburg.³

Chris Burton: I'm Chris Burton. I'm actually a student—a senior at USF St. Petersburg.

^{3.} The audio version of Trey Conner, Emma Hamilton, Amber Nicol, Chris Burton, Kathleen Olinger, Alyssa Harmon, and Ivan Jones's reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

Alyssa Harmon: My name is Alyssa Harmon. I am a USFSP student, and I'm an English writing studies major.

Emma Hamilton: My name is Emma Hamilton, and I'm also a USFSP student and an English major with a concentration in writing studies.

Kathy Olinger: I'm Kathy Olinger, and I'm a USF English major with a concentration in writing.

Amber Nicol: I'm Amber Nicol, and I'm a USFSP English major as well.

Emma: In a broader sense, I thought the communities of practice exercise was really great for kind of defining and starting to think about our discourse communities that we're all members of and sort of like a cool first exercise to act as a precursor to the class that ended up being like a huge discourse community.

Amber: When I started going back through the wiki for our podcast today, I thought, this is really where it all started, because once we did the communities of practice assignment, we realized what we had in common with each other.

Alyssa: I liked starting the class off with discourse communities, and I've had Dr. Conner for a few classes, and we normally start with "bring a small object," which is where you bring a small object and then you interview someone else and then you write about it. But this one was almost, maybe better for a first class because it was interesting to see different interests for everyone within that discourse community—like we had music....

Trey: I couldn't help but notice how many musicians were in our midst. [laughs]

Amber: People do seem to be drawn to music.

Alyssa: I think it's something that we can all connect to. I read somewhere it was saying that music is kind of like a universal language, like no matter what language you speak everyone can understand music and it makes them feel a certain way.

Amber: And the nature of just having the ability to be able to turn something like a sound pressure wave moving through air into what we experience as a person is amazing.

Trey: It is, and it's something that we don't want to render as something that's exclusive to experts. This community really surprised me, to tell you the truth, in the way that we all manifested as musicians, really, and just expanded, I think, our definition of musicianship through this idea of soundwriting. We took, we all are affected by the vibrations that you describe. We should all be able to participate that in our writing practice too in some way. And I love the way that we explored different ways that sound weaves its way into our writerly lives, yeah.

Amber: It made us comfortable to the point where, as writers, we were talking about very personal things with one another. We got to this level in Dr. Conner's class, and now we all know each other.

Alyssa: It was kind of nice to be able to come into this class for an hour and 15 minutes and just use music and writing as a way to forget everything else that was going around. Like during that semester, we had Hurricane Irma, and it was

difficult to recover after that, so coming into this class and being able to focus on just this was a nice way to vent and get our feelings out and just ignore the rest of the world for a little while.

Kathy: I think getting together with everybody and just chilling, just chilling out—it is very therapeutic.

Emma: I think that I agree with you guys because, to me, it was the structure of the class or—not lack thereof, because I don't want to say that it was unstructured, but the sort of the jamming, freewheeling, evolving structure of the class was what really made me excited, even with a busy semester, to get home and work on the stuff for 4311. Because I felt that in soundwriting there are so many infinite possibilities that it's exciting to explore and kind of opens your mind rather than an assignment that has so many parameters and so many requirements that you have to consider when you're working on it.

Trey: Everything started to, like you say, and they started to emerge, and you didn't know what was gonna happen next, but you knew it was gonna be interesting. It gave us a space to speak from our heart, and to try to bring those complexities into the space, to me are sometimes more challenging than the elaborate headspace logos vertigo that we usually experience in the classroom. So, it just, yeah—the way that you took that turn and the way it sort of played out during the sensory writing on the seawall was amazing, too. That was a fun day. Everybody was within earshot, so it was one of those "we don't have earlids moments" that McCluhan (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) talks about, right? In discussion of sound, modality. Everybody, whether they wanted to or not, got to hear Trey, Amber, and Ivan play guitar.

Chris: I remember thinking, you know, I can sit here and just write about what I'm hearing, what I'm listening, what I'm experiencing. And in the end, Ivan basically started looking at what I had written, and he was creating an actual song, playing the guitar and just reading everything I wrote in that little short poem, and it was fantastic.

Trey: You took that turn, and the way it sort of played out during the sensory writing on the seawall.

Amber: And that's what's so cool about the wiki, too. Earlier, Emma was talking about how she didn't wanna call it not organized, or something like that you said, and I thought, yeah, well, it's super organized the way nature is: Everything exists, and it works somehow.

Kathy: [As opposed to] "Here do this, do that at this point in time, at that point in time, and how many words all the time," and it's nice.

Chris: It felt very organic to me.

Amber: Yeah, natural and very open, which is great for inspiration and just connecting with one another. Because when you go around life and you're all closed up and you're stressed out all the time, you don't get to enjoy it at all, and you're probably not in your most inspirational moment.

Alyssa: I think it's also important as writers to have an open space and be able to share all of our works, because the way we get better is by reading other

people's writing and helping each other with our writing, so having the wiki and the open space allows us to do just that and become better writers.

Emma: Yeah, yeah. I think the wiki is a real mirror of your teaching style too, Dr. Conner, that you said you went into a certain day thinking, "I am not thinking, 'I'm the professor of this class,' and I don't think any of your"—I mean I guess I can only speak for myself—but to me, your teaching style is so much more like a catalyst, and that's how the wiki is too; it just kind of is a catalyst, and there are little spots for you to jump off and explode. It's almost like soundwriting, like your teaching style kind of embodies all the benefits of the possibilities of soundwriting.

Amber: I feel like I learned more about life in that class than any class that is more of a textual-based, rigid, top-down approach. I really learned more how to be patient.

Emma: That's perfectly said—the top-down approach. Day one to day . . . whenever.

Chris: Exactly.

Kathy: I learned to expand my horizons more.

Trey: I guess I'd have to definitely defer all credit and attribution to my teachers when you say something like that. That's all I can say. I guess maybe what you all are—what a nice transition we just wrote too! I like the way that music and wiki were . . . we're weaving them. That's really beautiful what we're doing the past five minutes or so. But, I guess that's maybe what we're signifying with this handle of "the resonance is the composer." Maybe that's . . . because I would certainly—I mean, it's beautiful testimony, and I hope that's what's happening! [laughs] But it certainly is the resonance that's doing that. It's certainly something that's manifesting between us; it's this figure of rhythm, I think, is what I'm trying to invoke with the idea of resonance; it's manifesting between us somehow. I wish it could happen every day every way like that.

Amber: This really could help change the world for the better. This could be applied to our city or to a work environment.

Chris: I think one of the things I enjoyed most is when Emma added music to Alyssa's poem.

Amber: That was my favorite thing ever.

Chris: It was fantastic. I mean, the music you played to it went right along with the . . . I guess you could say the ambience of the poem itself.

Emma: It was fun; I was inspired by when Alex brought the metronome in, and I just thought that was so cool like to read his work along with the metronome, and that was really cool, because that's maybe not necessarily soundwriting, but applying sound to prose that was written without any type of apparent rhythm in mind and finding the rhythm, or maybe discovering the rhythm that maybe was subconscious was kind of a cool exercise that I would never do, you know, in any other class.

Alyssa: It was also helpful, as the author of the poem, when I head Emma's song it kind of showed to me how she perceived the poem and what undertones

she interpreted, I guess, and it was interesting to go back to that poem and see which spots were the best, which spots maybe needed work, and how different people interpret it, which can help me as a writer.

Emma: It was cool to kind of create your own assignments in that way; it's interesting to see what everybody created, had created, by the end of the semester and how they all had a similar foundation, but they were all really different projects. And I think that's the difference between this sort of class and teaching style—soundwriting, wiki, whatever you wanna call it—and another class. It's the difference between logging on to meet a deadline for an assignment, and you're doing something because you have to. And it's frustrating when I experience that as a student because I don't have to be here, you know, I choose to be here, and it's a weird dissonance that I feel. Whereas, in this class it's like you get excited to log on and take what you're learning and mold it into what you want it to be, and you get so much more out of it than a typical, like you said, top-down class.

Alyssa: And you can tell people feel that way because people will still log on to old wikis and still post and everything.

[excited laughter and talking over each other]

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