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By Thea Fitz-James

Abstract

In her project *A Woman's Work Is Never Done*, artist Eliza Bennett offers an explicit critique of the performance of the feminized hand, and female body, and historical embroidery. A photograph created in 2012, and a film made in 2014, *A Woman's Work Is Never Done* is an evocative, painful, and historically rich meeting of object and body. Using her hand as canvas, Bennett embroiders into her skin. This piece invokes a performative and phenomenological experience, not only between Bennett and her object, but between the image of Bennett's hand and our own. This paper explores the performance of 'woman's work' and the domestic through Bennett's *A Woman's Work is Never Done*. Combining a historical look at embroidery, along with a performance studies and material culture studies reading of Bennett's intervention, this paper will explore how craft and the female body come to disrupt concepts of the domestic sphere. Bennett's piece "challenge[s] the pre-conceived notion that 'women's work' is light and easy. She aims to represent "the effects of hard work arising from employment in low paid 'ancillary' jobs, such as cleaning, caring and catering, all traditionally considered to be 'women's work'" (Bennett "Needle and Thread" 20). All these tensions meet at/in the moment the needle meets the hand, and in piercing, evokes the pain of women's work, of historical embroidery, and the subjugated feminized body.

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Women's Work: Queer Phenomenology and Performing Domesticity

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In her project ***A Woman's Work Is Never Done***, Eliza Bennett offers an explicit critique of the performance of the feminized hand, the female body, and historical embroidery. A photograph created in 2012, and a film made in 2014, ***A Woman's Work Is Never Done*** is an evocative, painful, and historically rich meeting of object and body. Using her hand as canvas, Bennett embroiders into her skin. Using a technique where the needle pierces only the top layers of skin, Bennett describes how painless the process is, experiencing “only a mild discomfort” (Bennett “Needle and Thread” 20). Yet, there is certainly something painful in the images. Red, irritated skin stands in contrast with even stitches. The imagined delicate hand of the feminine embroiderer is at odds with Bennett’s worn, weathered, laboured/ing hand. Stitches trace their way along the life lines, along the natural creases of Bennett’s unique palm. Purple, red, pink, and green threads detail the hand like a bruise; we may feel an empathetic itch in our own hands, a desire to delineate between threads and veins, between object and experience. This piece invokes a performative and phenomenological experience, not only between Bennett and her object, but between the image of Bennett’s hand and our own. This paper explores the performance of “woman’s work” through Bennett’s *A Woman’s Work is Never Done*. Combining a historical look at embroidery, along with a close reading of Bennett’s intervention, this paper will explore how craft and the female body come to disrupt concepts of the domestic sphere. Bennett’s piece “challenge[s] the pre-conceived notion that 'women's work' is light and easy.” She aims to represent “the effects of hard work arising from employment in low paid 'ancillary' jobs, such as cleaning, caring and catering, all traditionally considered to be ‘women's

work” (Bennett “Needle and Thread” 20). All these tensions meet at/in the moment the needle meets the hand, and in piercing, evokes the pain of women’s work, of historical embroidery, and the subjugated feminized body.



A Woman's Work – Image 1

The fact that embroidery was considered women’s “work” is key to understanding its historical and political importance. From early modern English women across upper and lower classes, to Victorian colonialists in England and across Europe, embroidery was essential in female education, as well as in the construction and maintenance of respectable femininity.¹ Rozsika Parker discusses the importance of embroidery, suggesting that

¹ This is only a small sliver of the history of sewing and embroidery. While needle-like implements are some of the earliest human-made objects, common steel needles were invented in China in the 1200s. The making of a needle was an art in itself; the eye of the needle needed to have a specific angle in order for the needle not to break, and for it to be used properly. Before they were completely made by machines in 1826, it took up to nine days to make a needle. As they were harder to make and thus more expensive, sewing needles tended to be more treasured than other sewing objects. There were also multiple objects that go with the needle—the pin, the thread, the thimble, the needle case, the workbasket—as well as multiple specialty needles for different purposes.

seventeenth century enlightened educationalists added it to the curriculum for tactical reasons, as it gave an “acceptable face” to female education (7). During this time, embroidery became a way to “inculcate femininity” for young girls— fundamental to the “maintenance and creation of the feminine ideal” (Parker 11). A century later, this performance of femininity would take on a classist aspect, as embroidery began to signify a “leisured aristocratic life style – not working was becoming a hallmark of femininity” (11). By the nineteenth century, the distinction between femininity and embroidery was invisible; “[w]omen embroidered because they were naturally feminine and were feminine because they naturally embroidered” (11). As Parker outlines, from the Renaissance to today, embroidery was a key aspect of the construction of the ideal feminine ideologies.

Writing about sewing in early modern England, English literature and culture scholar Susan Frye suggests that social status and education aside, women embroidered because there were few alternative acceptable forms of work. With the stereotype that all “working women” were prostitutes, and that idle women were prone to temptations of the flesh, embroidery was a safe way to keep women “working” (Frye 127). The image of a sexually volatile female body, always only moments away from succumbing to temptation, is exemplified by printer William Barley in 1596, who suggested that women must “keep cleane [sic] their samplers” as their “white cloth,” like female virtue, is “readily soiled” (qtd. in Frey 164). The “work” that women do through embroidery is at the center of a complex performance of female virtue, sexual availability, and idealized femininity.

Despite centuries when embroidery was a significant female pastime, a form of female labour, and an ideological performance around class and gender, needlework is often relegated to the background

compared to other art forms. Within the art/craft hierarchy—especially before the Art and Craft Movement of 1860s England—embroidered couches, cushions, purses, and gloves were the literal and symbolic ‘background’ of paintings or sculpture in galleries or museums.² Even recent scholarship that focuses on embroidery approaches it from a particular direction. For instance, where “reading” or analyzing an embroidered image, scholars most commonly encounter the embroidered object from the “right side,” where the embroidered image is, analyzing the embroidery as if it were a painting.³ This approach is not out of place. Early modernists assumed that a woman “sewed her mind;” the embroidered image was directly reflective of her thoughts and emotions (Frye 119). The subjects and themes of embroidered work were read as a direct form of self-authorship. This approach focuses on the finished embroidered product. If one were to simply turn the embroidered pieces around, revealing the backwork – the “wrong side” – we would orient ourselves towards that object in a different way. The wrong side might reveal where and how the work was started, the type of stitches made, whether the embroiderer knotted or left a tail.⁴ It reveals the process of

² The seventeenth century marked the division between art and craft, where art was seen as superior to domestic crafts. This coincided with the development of the female ideal (Parker 5). Embroidery, associated with women and an expression of ideal femininity, was considered a ‘craft,’ prostrate to the more highly regarded ‘art’ of painting and sculpture. This gendered and cultural divide carried with it social and economic assumption: namely that the practice of embroidery was done by female amateurs within the domestic sphere: “Embroidery, by the time of the art/craft divide, was made in the domestic sphere, usually by women, and for ‘love.’ Painting was produced predominantly, though not only, by men, in the public sphere, for money” (Parker 5).

³ The “right side” and “wrong side” are terms used in knitting to describe the way your work is facing. For instance, when knitting the heel on a sock, you need to ‘turn’ your work so that you are knitting with the “wrong” or “right” side facing you. These terms help orient you when following knitting patterns. The “right” side is the part of the work that is visible, or public, when the project is finished—the outside of a sweater for instance. The “wrong” side is hidden—the inside of a sock, sweater, etc. The “wrong” side is where the seams and work of the pattern are visible.

⁴ A knot is when you knot the end, as you might expect in any sewing project. When you leave a tail it means there is no knot—instead you weave the ‘tail’ of the embroidery thread through the previous loops until it is secure. Weaving in the tail gives a ‘cleaner’ finished look, and knots are colloquially understood to

the piece. Besides being simply a change of perspective, turning the work reflects a desire to locate, or map, the now invisible needle.

Drawing on Sarah Ahmed, what does an orientation to the front, or “right” side of the embroidered piece ignore? Sara Ahmed’s understanding of queer phenomenology provides a powerful response to this question. Queer phenomenology is not a phenomenology of sexual difference.⁵ “Instead,” Ahmed writes, “by showing how phenomenology faces a certain direction, which depends on the relegation of other ‘things’ to the background, I consider how phenomenology may be gendered as a form of occupation” (27). What we encounter, the way we encounter it, and the embodied experience of that encounter, result in an experience of the body in space and time that is gendered. “Gender could thus be described as a bodily orientation, a way in which bodies get directed by their actions over time” (Ahmed 60). Ahmed outlines her queer phenomenology by suggesting that we encounter objects with a certain perspective, and thus a certain orientation. To have one orientation is to not have another, or, an object “takes me in some direction rather than others” (27). When we face a table, and encounter it in time and space, we turn our backs on what is in the “background.” The background may be as simple as what is behind us, and as complex as the domestic work that went into cleaning the table (29-31). In facing something, we must ask what that orientation ignores; we must ask what we do not face. Analyzing an embroidered piece as if it were a two-dimensional painting ignores the process of embroidery, the functionality of the embroidered object, and the “work”

be a less desirable, or ‘messy’ look. There are even ways to create temporary knots that you can cut away or untie and weave in when you are finishing the embroidery project.

⁵ Phenomenology is the experience of the body in relation to, and in communication with, an object in space. Merleau-Ponty describes experience as the thing that happens between the subject and the object—that encounter is experienced in and through the body: “The thickness of the flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer for her corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is a means of communication” (4).

of embroidery and its related politics. The way we face our world, our objects in space, becomes a way that our bodies are gendered. Direction, and the body, become a way to queer the world around us.

This is the historical and theoretical “background” of Bennett’s piece, *A Women’s Work is Never Done*. Following Ahmed, both the photograph and the film intentionally complicate the background/foreground of our phenomenological encounter. Bennett performs the typically invisible, or “background” pain of domestic labour on her body, through a performance of skin and thread.⁶ Here, she joins the many performance pieces that explore the performance of gendered or domestic labour. For example, US-based Mierle Laderman Ukeles and her piece *Manifesto for Maintenance*, purposefully relocates domestic tasks of cleaning and childcare within the public gallery. In an associated performance piece, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside*, performed on July 23, 1973, Ukeles washes the front steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. By performing typically ignored performances of domestic maintenance, Ukeles sheds light on the invisible maintenance workers of a museum, but also re-situates domestic activities in the “public” sphere. In doing so, she invites us to reimagine the politics and ideologies typically associated with the domestic. Is art always creation, or is it sometimes an act of maintenance; what are the performances typically invited in to the

⁶ Scholarship on the domestic, and the separation of genders into separate spheres, is wide and varied. The dichotomy of the public/private, male/female sphere has been greatly challenged by feminists and socio-cultural historians: “Most studies of [the domestic sphere] have revealed the permeability of the border that separates the spheres, demonstrating that the private feminized space of the home both infused and bolstered the public male arena of the market, and that the sentimental values attached to maternal influence were used to sanction women's entry into the wider civic realm from which those same values theoretically excluded them” (Kaplan 581). And yet, the metaphor of the spheres has also helped delineate the history of men and women, and speak to the specifics of female experience, history, and culture. In her excellent review of this history, Linda K. Kerber offers an explanation to why the dichotomy between public/private, between men/women has lingered: “The metaphor remains resonant because it retains some superficial vitality. For all our vaunted modernity, for all that men's ‘spheres’ and women's ‘spheres’ now overlap, vast areas of our experience and our consciousness do not overlap. The boundaries may be fuzzier, but our private spaces and our public spaces are still in many important senses gendered” (39).

public museum—the canon—and how are these gendered? Can domesticity be read as intrinsically political and worthy of artistic appreciation?

Bennett's embroidery project enacts a similar binary explosion. Both the photograph and the film attempt to showcase the invisible act of embroidery. By relocating the domestic practice of handicrafts within public, artistic space, we are asked to simultaneously examine the dichotomy of public/private space, and by extension reinvestigate the politics implicit in craft/domesticity. However, it is not as simple as just moving the background to the foreground. Instead, embroidery take its historic place in the background, but as a "performance strategy," one that provides a "theoretical frame for analyzing contemporary performance practices and the performance of self in everyday life" (Levin 5). Bennett still embroiders, but in collapsing the space between hand and thread, she asks us to encounter it in a different way. The embroidery on her hand acts "as a political critique on structures of visibility; as mischievous tactics of infiltration; as an empathetic response to the other; as a form of eco-activism" (Levin 15). In performing "women's work," Bennett invites us to think of the political possibility of not just moving the background to the foreground, but in seeing the background itself as political.

Reading the background of embroidery and embroidery as background invites a change in focus from product to process. It is an encounter with a different object: the needle. What else is embroidery but a needle in motion; the performance of the needle? What is our orientation to the needle? How are we moved by the needle, and our encounter with it? Following Ahmed, how does the needle "arrive" to the phenomenological encounter—what is its literal and metaphorical background—and once arrived, what does it do? Armed with a queer phenomenological perspective on the needle, I ask how does Eliza

Bennett's needle meet her hand, disrupt the perceived ontology of the hand, and with it, perceptions of embroidery and female labouring bodies, or "women's work?"

Bennett's use of needle on hand rejects the ways that embroidery has been historically placed in gendered, racialized hands. As William Barley stated in a poetic forward to a Venetian pattern book in 1596, "in their milke [sic] white hand the needle finer fits/ with silke [sic] as gold to prove their pregnant wits" (Frye 164). This comment reveals not only the racial assumptions of idealized femininity, but also the sexualization of women's bodies within an economy of reproduction. Barley describes the needle as something "natural" to the female body, a more natural "fit" and form of expression than the pen or the sword. While historically, both men and women sewed across Europe and the UK, still, the needle is gendered.⁷ For instance, a 1911 book on sewing objects in English history suggests that pins and needles were used ritualistically in witchcraft, or in love spells, both of which have a long and complex association with the construction of femininity (Longman 30-37). Specialty needles and needle cases were symbols of status and wealth, but they were only sported by women (Beaudry 71, 85). Even looking at men who sewed, we see a complex gendered binary between professionalism and home sewing. The tailor was a male-dominated professional job, with a guild, whereas the seamstress, and the making of dresses and domestic sewing, is relegated to the feminine domain.⁸ Even sewing had a glass ceiling which men

⁷ Mary C. Beaudry discusses how this assumption has influenced the field of archeology. Needles on an archeological site are indicative of the presence of women. However, as Beaudry uncovers, "textile production and sewing of some sort have been tangled up with aspects of culture—technological, social, economic, ritual—since early in human history. As a result, the products of weaving and needlework, and the tools used in those products... were enmeshed in a system of symbols with multiple meanings" (5). Thus, while the association of needles with women has "more than just a grain of truth," to look no further than this indicative relationship is to drastically reduce the symbolic and literal uses of the needle (Beaudry 5). Needles were used for more than just sewing, and sewing was not only done by women.

⁸ While Louis XIV established the Parisian seamstresses' guild in March 1675, with much protest from the tailors' guild, seamstresses were still not allowed to make men's clothing. This would be

“guarded closely” (Beaudry 175). This is pervasive in literature and myth as well. Simply looking at the fairy tales associated with needles is evidence of this. In the classic German fairy tale *The Valiant Little Tailor*, as published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812, our titular hero employs crafty tricks to outsmart giants, capture a unicorn, and win the hand of a princess. Turning to Italian poet Giambattista Basile’s 1634 version of *Sleeping Beauty*, we see a woman prick her finger, fall asleep, get raped by a prince, and wake up to give birth.⁹ Contrasting these two tales demonstrates the gendered divide within needle narratives: men are active, cunning, and out in the public world, wearing their achievements quite literally on their belts; women are silent, still, sexual objects, asleep in private rooms, and volatile to multiple forms of penetration.

the first all-female guild, and this would eventually influence the professionalism of seamstresses in England and the US. Even when women did attempt professionalism through sewing as seamstresses, they were attached with sexual stigma. Historically, seamstresses were linked in the public mind with prostitution, as the income was not enough to supplement the cost of living (Beaudry 173). Beaudry tells of the forced emigration of prostitutes from England to Australia in 1849, where one official referred to the prostitutes as “needle women.” While Beaudry suggests that this claim is unfounded, as records show that only a fraction of the women sent to Australia were seamstresses, she also points to the number of needles and other sewing materials found on the archeological sites of brothels. The needle is, as many symbols of femininity, one that represents both extremes of female stereotypes—the virgin and the whore. Even with its diverse history, symbolism and usage, the needle is intrinsically connected to women in social and public consciousness. For more, see Beaudry’s *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing*, and Clare Haru Crowston’s “Engendering the Guilds: Seamstresses, Tailors, and the Clash of Corporate Identities in Old Regime France.”

⁹ This is from the Italian fairy tale “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” by Giambattista Basile from his 1634 book *Pentamerone*. Charles Perrault retold the story as *Sleeping Beauty* in 1697, and The Brothers Grimm told it as *Little Briar Rose* in 1812. In all the versions after Basile, the rape is turned into a kiss, which wakes *Sleeping Beauty*. From the ‘original’ text: “Crying aloud, he beheld her charms and felt his blood course hotly through his veins. He lifted her in his arms, and carried her to a bed, where he gathered the first fruits of love. Leaving her on the bed, he returned to his own kingdom, where, in the pressing business of his realm, he for a time thought no more about this incident” (Basile).



A Woman's Work - Image 2

Returning to *Woman's Work*, Bennett reclaims the act of penetration by piercing her own hand. Looking at the photographs as a map of the needle's performance, and her hand as stage of centuries of feminine performance, Bennett flips the script, criticizing the hand, and its association with femininity, through/with her own hand. This self-inflicted, sadomasochistic piercing allows Bennett to wield the power of the penetrative phallic object, reveal the damage it does, and simultaneously make her body art/work. The performance of the hand is an important aspect of embroidery. Historically, great attention was paid to *how* women sew: Victorian etiquette books detailed how to hold a needle gracefully, advising to "sew with a long point—that is to push the needle nearly its whole length through each stitch, instead of pulling it out, so to speak, by the nose" (qtd. in Beaudry 45). Sewing is a form of bodily display. "Holding needles properly, perhaps evocatively, [would show] off their hands as well as their skill" (Beaudry 45). The performance of the needle in/on hand can be read as a performance of the feminine body. With Bennett's piece, the hand performs both as creator and as stage. It occupied both

foreground and background. In this meeting of hand and needle (and needle and hand), the brutality of “women’s work” comes to the surface like a splinter, sitting in juxtaposition to the elegance of the needlework. At times meandering, stitches ripple down Bennett’s hand like liquid. Or sometimes they sit stubborn in the lines of the hand, deepening that ditch of etched movement and experience. Here again, they trace spirals on the mounds at the base of the fingers. The lines come together with the elegance and chaos of a spider web, like a topographical map or palmistry diagram. The embroidery floss mimics the lines of the palm, in sometimes obvious, sometimes obscure ways. Ways that map, or remap, the body’s experience, the hand’s/needle’s performance.



A Woman's Work - Image 3

There are two bodies implicit in the needle’s performance: the body of the person holding the needle, and the body of the person watching the person holding the needle. While embroidery and sewing were most often done by women in private, there is also a cultural and personal

importance to being *seen* sewing. To be seen embroidering or sewing is to perform proper femininity, display status, and dispel idleness. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," we can discuss the male gaze implicit in being seen sewing through historical examples of women sewing in art. *In Love* (1888), by Marcus Stone, depicts the three gazes discussed in Mulvey's essay. A young man gazes adoringly at a woman absorbed in her embroidery. He can look without hesitation as, head bowed, she is presumably unaware of his gaze. The spectator, the implied viewer of the art piece, sits outside: a presumed objective observer, looking at both the woman and the man *In Love*.



In Love (1888)

The spectator's gaze is complicated somewhat with *Young Girl Sewing* (1887) by Vilhelm Hammershøi. Here, the audience takes up the gaze of the young man, staring unabashedly at the young woman sewing. Here,

the spectator's gaze and the male gaze are one in the same.



Young Girl Sewing (1887)

While the body of the woman sewing is seemingly, and sexually, submissive, and available to the male gaze, the needle as embodied knowledge also eludes the gaze. This complicates the performance of the needle and the body using it. It is a performance of visibility and invisibility, a performance of both subjugation and agency. "As an epistemic tool that exceeds the limits of an ocular focus," the needle becomes a powerful tool of secrecy and agency simply because its knowledge is embodied, and thus invisible (Goggin 4). This ability to avoid the gaze changes the embodied experience of the viewer. While watching a woman with a needle is to watch a woman in the position of

submission—head down, silent, and focused—there is something else going on as well:

If a woman sits silently sewing she is silently asking for the silence to be broken. The stereotype denies that there is anything subversive in her silence by asserting that it is maintained for men. Yet the way the intimacies of autonomy are so resolutely quashed by the stereotype suggests that there is something disturbing in the image of the embroiderer deep in her work. (Parker 10)

Parker suggests here that there is something unattainable in the silent woman sewing. There is something secret in the silence that a woman keeps. What is secret about the embodied experience of the needle, and thus disturbing for the viewer, may be the needle itself. In the artistic images of embroiderers above, the needle is invisible by the nature of its size. Not only is there something hidden in the privacy and agency of the embroiderer's silence, and maybe even in the specialized knowledge of stitches and sewing techniques, but there is something literally hidden in the embroidery: the needle.

This visual trend is mirrored in the film of Bennett's piece. In the video of *A Women's Work is Never Done*, we first see Bennett from far away. The camera watches her through the doorway. It cuts closer, so that we are watching over her shoulder, and then closer still, at the embroidering/ed hands. We are first positioned as the voyeur, happening upon a private moment of creation, and coming in for a closer look. Like the paintings described above, we are invited to gaze at a "private" moment intended for public consumption. Yet, as we lean in, we go too far, the camera cuts too close, and we find ourselves witness to the piercing of Bennett's skin. In trying to "see," the viewer is shown too much and cannot look away. In objectifying the female body with the male gaze, that gaze reveals an object of creation and destruction. Scopophilia turns

to terror, as the scripted performance of the female body, of the needle, is flipped, is queered, is rendered visible through the needle's path along the lines of the hand. This reveals, in turn, an ontology of women's work through the hand as sampler. The body as commodity, as-given-to-be-seen, is made literal as we move from doorway to needle, from macro to micro, from black and white to full colour, from idealized femininity to the reality of women's work. What is revealed is not the delicate needlework of the domesticated female, but the piercing pain of invisible labour made visible. Contrary to an embodied experience of sewing, which involves silence, patience, kinesthetic knowledge, and agency, *Women's Work* scrutinizes the performance of femininity.



A Woman's Work... Video: <https://vimeo.com/181998122>

As Ahmed states, “phenomenology shows how objects and others have already left their impressions on skin surface” (54). What impression has the needle left on this body? On Bennett’s hand as sampler? Her needle makes visible the invisible labour of “women’s work,” already ghosted as ontology on Bennett’s “milke white hand.” This ontology speaks both to the historical subjugation of feminine bodies and also the

agency they found through needlework and embroidery. Her needle performs on our bodies, watching, from a doorway; a phantom needle pierces our own palm, as we too are bent over now, reading. The body and the needle perform a phenomenological encounter centuries old—one that may strain our eyes and prick our fingers, but that ultimately allows us to create something individual and private. Following Ahmed's analysis, the way a woman holds her needle is a form of bodily orientation, and thus an expression of gender. While this is "directed by their actions over time," with needle in hand, the action may be scripted, but it will be read in multiple ways (60). Through the needle, we see the multiplicity of the female identity and experience. We see it as something active, dialectic, and contextual. In this way, the needle continues to be an encounter that embodies action, process, and creation. When Bennett picks up the needle, she does so with defiance. She invokes the ghosts of seamstresses, and through this sadomasochistic action, points to the sadomasochisms already at work within the terrain of feminine performance and the labour of embroidery. Bennett uses the needle and historical embroidery to queer the femininity of her body, and the history of embroidery or "women's work." She performs the process or background of embroidery, literalizing the needle not as a "final discovery" but as a performance object and a method of becoming. She maps the scopophilic desire to see, and the female body as given-to-be-seen, and replays that history across a body both subjugated and defiant. *A Woman's Work is Never Done* investigates the boundaries of the female body—pierces the hand as sampler—as a method of queering the history of normative femininity, and its related performances.

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