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Makiba Foster | Movers & Shakers 2021–Digital Developers

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History Maker

Not only does Makiba Foster run her own library's African American Research Library and Cultural Center, she is also a key convener of such centers across the country. She leads Archiving the Black Web, a project that brings together Black collecting institutions, from public libraries to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to map out the future of digitally curating the Black experience. This first-of-its-kind initiative launched during the pandemic—funded by a $150,000 National Leadership Grant—focuses on how to best archive the plethora of digitally born Black culture and content.

Foster also led the development of Documenting Ferguson, an archive of digital images and video from the aftermath of the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, in 2014 and the subsequent protests.

Nominator Maira Liriano, chief librarian at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, where Foster worked before moving to Broward, says Foster "is willing to test assumptions about what is and isn't possible within libraries. She is focused on leaving her community and the library profession better for those that come after her."

CURRENT POSITION

Regional Library Manager, African-American Research Library and Cultural Center, Fort Lauderdale, FL

DEGREE

MLIS, University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa, 2007

FAST FACT

As a young girl, Makiba Foster didn't like her name. But when she learned about Miriam Makeba, a South African singer and freedom fighter, her perspective changed. She hopes to be able to live up to the name.

Foster believes that information literacy, digital literacy, and historical literacy are all pillars of library work: "As a profession we tend to emphasize information and digital literacy, but with the current state of our world and attacks on efforts that work to better understand and not romanticize the history of our country, places that center marginalized voices, like the African American Research Library and Cultural Center, are now more critical than ever."

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Chronicling the Black Experience

Librarians and archivists collect and tell their own stories

By Mark Lawton | June 1, 2021

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Historical photos of Black men participating in civic life from the Black Male Archives.

In September 2018, Rodney E. Freeman Jr. was at home lying on his couch when he heard about Botham Jean. Jean, a 26-year-old Black accountant in Dallas, had been shot and killed by his neighbor, a white Dallas police officer, when she entered his apartment thinking it was her own. The incident compelled Freeman to consider how Black men are perceived in the US.

“I felt there weren’t enough stories portraying positive Black men,” says Freeman, director of Riviera Beach (Fla.) Public Library. “If people, mainly white people, saw us in a more holistic light, as fathers, husbands, and leaders, they wouldn’t automatically assume we are criminals, monsters, and demons.”

To fill this need, Freeman created the Black Male Archives, an online repository to “capture, curate, and promote positive stories about Black men around the world while inspiring and informing younger generations,” according to its website.

Freeman is one of a number of archivists who have chosen to create their own archives around the Black experience in America rather than participate in an institutional archive, such as those maintained by universities or other large library systems. These archivists cite a variety of concerns about institutional archives, including gaps in what information is included, inconsistency in documenting Black history and events, and not enough community-level content.

Archiving without barriers

Prior to joining Riviera Beach Public Library, Freeman managed the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature at Woodson Regional Library in Chicago. He also helped assemble a

digital archive for the African American History Committee at Indianapolis Public Library and archived and digitized the history of Bethel A.M.E. Church in Indianapolis. This experience prepared Freeman to create his own archive to fill what he says is a glaring void.

“I didn’t find anything in archives that focuses solely on the Black male experience,” Freeman says. The Black Male Archives responds to this gap by collecting articles, photos, podcasts, and YouTube videos specifically detailing the experiences of Black men in the US.

“We’re more of an aggregator,” Freeman says. “There is some content we create, but for the most part we try to amplify what’s already out there.” A sampling includes photos of Black fraternities in America, a map of Negro National League (1920–1931) baseball teams, and information about Black entrepreneurs and Black male writers.

Blackivists members Stacie Williams (left) and Steven Booth scanning Chicago house music ephemera at the first Chicago Black Social Culture Map Community Archiving Day. Photo: M Thrē Photography

This same desire to curate stories not being told elsewhere is what compelled six Black archivists in Chicago to create the Blackivists in 2018. The group provides professional expertise on cultural heritage archiving and preservation practices as they apply to historically underdocumented communities. The group specializes in collection development and care, oral history development, establishing archival collections, community engagement, and digital collections sustainability, with an eye toward the Black experience. They also pay attention to other marginalized communities, including "LGBTQ people [and] folks who are sex workers or criminalized for the work they do," says Erin Glasco, an independent archivist who works with the Blackivists. "We have a pretty broad and radical scope."

The Blackivists have worked on projects that include the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials Oral History website, the Oscar Brown Jr. Archive Project, and the Chicago Black Social Change Culture Map (with Afro-diasporic feminist collaborative Honey Pot Performance). They also archived the history of the Black Panther Party of Illinois, interviewing former party members. "For a long time that history was very tainted and inaccurate," says Raquel Flores-Clemons, a Blackivists founder and director of university archives, records management, and special collections at Chicago State University. "What people knew about the Black Panther Party was a negative history gotten from the police and FBI."

The Blackivists aim to document marginalized histories but keep those histories in the community. "There are barriers between established institutions and the community," says Flores-Clemons. A university, for example, might push people out of their neighborhood to expand—and then want to preserve the history of the people it pushed out, Glasco says.

And while archiving always involves selection, Flores-Clemons suggests the selection criteria may sometimes serve the institution more than they serve a fair telling of the history.

“There can be a colonialist mentality in creating archives,” she says. “Items might get into institutions and never see the light of day. Or the collection exists but the unsavory part of the story never gets told. There are collections in many institutions in the Chicago area about somebody of note, and maybe the family doesn’t want part of the story to be told.”

Glasco agrees: “Institutions often play into ‘respectability politics.’ They don’t want to tell certain stories.”

Respectability politics particularly tends to arise from dynamics of gender and class, Glasco says. Archives of the civil rights movement, for example, mostly focus on heterosexual Black men, but other marginalized communities were also vital to the cause and their stories must be told, too. “I’m not saying those collections are not important to keep,” Glasco says, but it should also be recognized that the movement included queer and gender-fluid people, for instance.

“Bayard Rustin, the architect of the 1963 March on Washington, was an openly gay man,” Flores-Clemons says. “Black trans women and Latinx trans women threw the first bottles at the Stonewall riot, and they only got highlighted in recent years.”

There is a slight trend toward improvement among institutions, Flores-Clemons says. Some want to “look into the organization and see where there were missteps and where white supremacy lives,” Flores-Clemons says. “Are they going to direct money from their budget to really do this work so it can be sustainable?”

Using the 1619 Project

In August 1619, a ship carrying 20–30 enslaved Africans landed on the coast of the English colony of Virginia, marking the beginning of the Black experience in America. *The New York Times Magazine’s* 1619 Project “aims to reframe the country’s history

by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States' national narrative."

Nikole-Hannah Jones

Conceived by journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, this year's honorary chair of the American Library Association's Preservation Week (April 25–May 1), the 1619 Project uses research, reporting, and primary sources to relay the history of Black America via a podcast and an interactive web presence.

Material from the 1619 Project is being used as a teaching tool in schools across the US. This includes Brooklyn (N.Y.) College, where the Pulitzer Prize–winning introductory essay by Hannah-Jones is being read and discussed as part of the school's Common Reader project, which aims to build community and foster dialogue.

Brooklyn College Library supported the annual Common Reader project by creating a LibGuide with essays about the 1619 Project, arguments for and against it (some historians have alleged it falsifies history), and a list of online events and ways to register for them.

Brooklyn College Reference Librarian and Professor Helen Georgas has been on the organizing committee for two of those events, one of which was a talk by philosopher, activist, and social critic Cornel West.

“I am always trying to make connections between the library and learning,” Georgas says. “There is an urgency around antiracism…. I want the library to be part of that conversation.”

North of Brooklyn in Chestnut Ridge, New York, librarian Patrick Peltier of Eldorado Elementary School uses the 1619 Project to teach history and social justice issues to 4th-, 5th-, and 6th-grade classes.

“To teach American history only from the point of view of white men seems like a disservice to everyone,” Peltier says.

The education portion of the 1619 Project includes lesson plans, an archive of stories and photos, and podcasts. Peltier has incorporated the material into an assignment for 6th-graders where they document their lives during the pandemic and protests.

“I want the library to be a place where students feel included and can find their own history,” Peltier says. “The 1619 Project will definitely inform how I do things.”

Listen to the April bonus episode of our *Call Number* podcast for a conversation with Nikole Hannah-Jones.

Creating joy

Glasco thinks the stories of Black people are getting more attention since the uprisings of summer 2020, but wonders why those stories—Black Lives Matter, health disparities for people of color, police violence against Black people—were largely not being collected before 2020.

Makiba Foster, regional manager of the African American Research Library and Cultural Center at Broward County (Fla.) Library, shares this thought. With archivist and scholar Bergis Jules, she formed Archiving the Black Web, a project that aims to organize efforts to collect and contextualize social media and other internet content that focuses on the Black experience.

Foster describes the unique ways in which Black people use the internet: “Creating joy from pain,” she says. “And from pain, figuring out ways of celebration.” She adds that “social media has allowed us to memorialize lives when normal structures and systems deny us that kind of formal recognition and acknowledgement,” citing the online remembrances of Trayvon Martin and Breonna Taylor as examples. More broadly, social media helps communities chronicle “the fatigue of being Black in America.”

“Archiving this is important for future research,” Foster says. “Our project is to evaluate the landscape and create some kind of infrastructure to move forward. There is so much content.”

Prior to her work at Broward County Library, Foster worked at New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. There she created collections focused on content related to Harlem, including materials on businesses and organizations in the neighborhood. Before that, while at Washington University in St. Louis, Foster led a team documenting the protest movement in Ferguson, Missouri, after Michael Brown was fatally shot by a white police officer in August 2014.

Like the Blackivists, Foster sees a problem in leaving archiving exclusively to well-funded universities and institutions, which do not focus on those who aren’t “white and moneyed.” She says that race and socioeconomic factors come into play when those institutions decide whose stories to collect. “We are trying to create space for Black content creators to be part of a digital archive,” Foster says.

Passion projects

The archivists, curators, and librarians collecting Black stories have encountered shared challenges doing their work: There are more stories than archivists to collect them. Building an archive and sustaining it can be expensive. People often don’t see themselves as important enough to document.

“[The Blackivists] is a passion project for the most part,” Flores-Clemons says. “We’re not making gobs of money.”

The Black Male Archives is essentially a one-person operation, and Freeman says he spends at least $500 a month maintaining its website and security certificate. He uses his weekends and weeknights searching for content and promoting the archive on social media.

His work is paying off. The archive’s podcast, which features Freeman telling the stories of Black men from across the world, attracts listeners from as far away as France, Jamaica, Kenya, Lesotho, and South Africa. The archive is also finding use as a teaching tool: Freeman reports that a former librarian friend who is now an educator uses the Black Male Archives in his classroom; a doctoral student at University of California, Berkeley, is incorporating some of the stories from the archive into his dissertation; and in summer 2019, the Black Male Archives was selected for inclusion in the Library of Congress’s Web Archive.

Archiving the Black Web received a $150,000 grant in 2020 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program to help facilitate its work, and has partnered with several entities including the Schomburg Center, the African American Museum and Library at Oakland in California, and the Spelman College Archives and Auburn Avenue Research Library in Atlanta. Archiving the Black Web also held a national forum in April that focused on strategies for collecting and preserving Black history and culture online as well as developing a community of practice for Black cultural memory organizations and practitioners interested in web archiving.

There is an urgency to archiving the Black experience, says Foster. “The average lifespan of something online is 90 days,” she explains. It can disappear, for example, “if someone didn’t pay a domain fee or declined to upgrade their web page.”

The ephemeral nature of this content makes capturing it both difficult and important. And ensuring it is documented correctly is crucial.

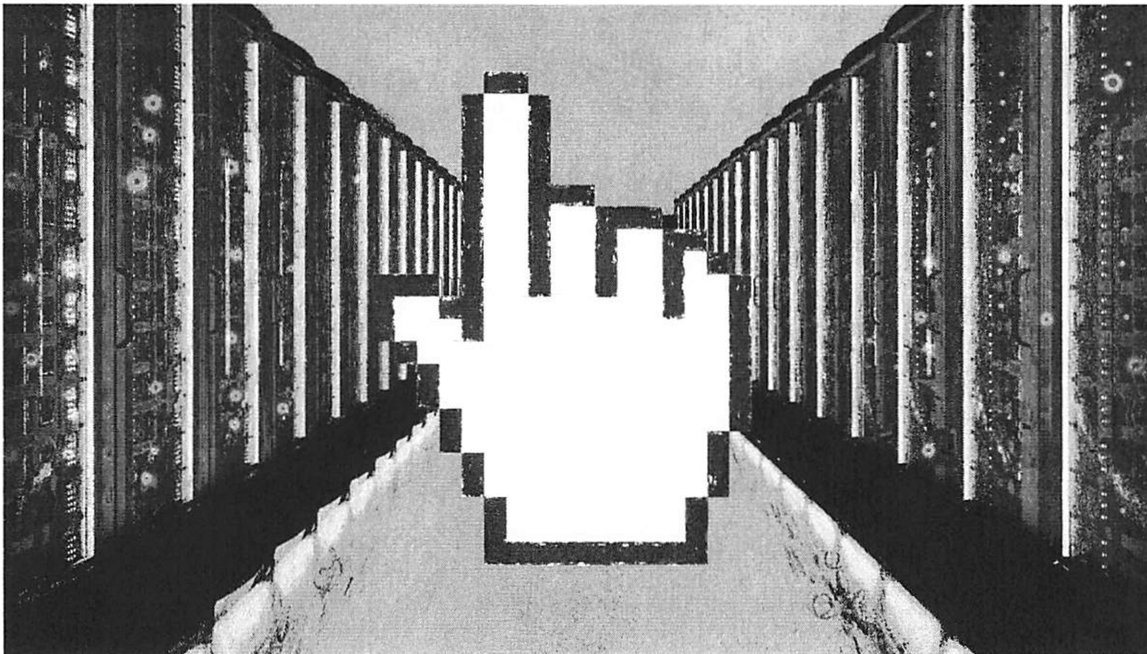
“I don’t want to see stories bastardized and diluted,” Glasco says. “I want to see ourselves in the historical record—not as an afterthought.”

MARK LAWTON is a writer in Chicago.

The digital archives of Black life are transforming how we document our history

Who gets to preserve Black joy is not solely up to the academy anymore – and that's a good thing

BY LYNNÉE DENISE
May 20, 2021



The Undefeated turned 5 this week and is marking the occasion with a series of essays looking at the last five years in Black America.

For the last five years or so, there's been an uptick in professional and grassroots digital archiving rooted in the tradition of subversive and alternative history preservation. Centuries ago, millions of Black people kept their family history alive by collecting personal belongings, important papers and journal entries between Bible pages during slavery. Using the Bible as a private family archive was a form of technology, and Black people relied on ingenuity to maintain their dignity, and to catalog and document their existence with limited resources. Imagine now, Black people using Instagram and Twitter like they once did the Bible.

The increase in this practice parallels the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. And while the 1992 Rodney King beating was the first of many attacks by the police to be captured on video by community witnesses, police violence filmed on smartphones 25 years later has become a righteous process for the people's justice system. So, yes, there is an archive of Black death videos available on the smartphones of too many of us, and many of those videos create land mines for folk scrolling for something light. But capturing Black joy and the everyday experiences of Black people and their aliveness has become equally powerful in its ability to inspire a new cultural movement.

In 2014, Makiba Foster was on the front line of the Ferguson, Missouri, protests over the death of Michael Brown. She approached local organizers about the importance of documenting their actions as a counternarrative to corporate media reports on the protests that tended to demonize grassroots strategies. Her work with organizers, libraries and larger archival institutions helped set the stage for Black Lives Matter to become a national movement. This movement mobilized millions with the use of hashtags on social media. "There is a kind of

auto-archiving practice for folks who are not trained as archivists but want to see themselves reflected in spaces where billions of people gather to stake their claim in world history," she said.

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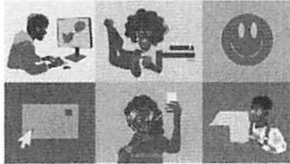

A blessing and a curse: The rich history behind 'Black Twitter'

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(https://theundefeated.com/features/a-blessing-and-a-curse-the-rich-history-behind-black-twitter/?source=single-recirc)

While working at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, New York, Foster created the infrastructure for the institution's digitized content through syllabi based on Beyoncé's *Lemonade,* Solange's *A Seat At The Table* and the Charlottesville, Virginia, white nationalist rally. Now she is the library regional manager for the African American Research Library and Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and leads an effort to archive Black web-based movements.

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Other institutions have begun to take note. The African American Library and Museum in Oakland, California, and the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History in Atlanta began to digitize their collections in the mid-2010s. Visitation to their websites was boosted by Black social media users who started building pages and profiles around aspects of Black history and culture featured in specialized collections. A quick Google search for digital archives of Black life and history produces many results from the past couple of years. Out of this has grown a beautiful tension – a dance between digitizing existing collections and improvisational, yet intentional, online archival practices.

Steven Fullwood, co-founder of the Nomadic Archivists Project and past assistant curator of the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division at the Schomburg Center, spoke to the differences between social media archiving and archival institutions: "These platforms allow for instant posts on issues affecting Black folks globally. Regular archival institutions might have blogs or programming about Black folk, but these public platforms are usually vetted by layers of management, which hampers their ability to respond in the moment. I understand this approach by institutions because, for them, it's all about liability and culpability. Social media archiving is less about archiving to me than it is about a collective conversation about the history and culture of Black people, and this conversation transcends boundaries, for the most part."

Between 2016 and 2021, content creators such as the Black Archives, (https://www.instagram.com/blackarchives.co/?hl=en) Darol Olu Kae, (https://www.instagram.com/darolkae/?hl=en) Milik Kashad and Karis Beaumont have seen their platforms double in size, partly because they

add flavor and texture to that missing social context. These Instagram pages offer curated content with an eye for exhibiting the range of Black excellence and underexplored histories.

With more than 425,000 followers, the Black Archives was founded by Renata Cherlise in 2015 as a "multimedia platform that spotlights the Black experience." The Black Archives expanded when Cherlise started to pull the visual aspect of those stories from the website onto the Instagram platform. The growth coincided with the Black Lives Matter's hypervisible presence and the collective hunger to see Black life beyond hashtags associated with police violence.

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The growing number of followers highlight, for her, why it was "essential for us to be in community with one another, to collectively take part in this process of remembering and imagining Black life. To

see ourselves, to inspire new works, new worlds, and sometimes to even depart and imagine new ones." What platforms such as the Black Archives show is the potential for digital archival storytelling beyond preservation and documentation.

Olu Kae focuses his storytelling and curation on rare interview excerpts with Black scholars and jazz musicians. Over the last three years, he built a loyal audience of jazz heads, students, creators of Pan-African cinema and curious newcomers who noticed his range of knowledge and influence on independent film culture.

"The digital space was the one place where I could not only search and explore but also begin to play around and edit ideas," he said. "I don't think of myself as an archivist in the traditional sense. By that, I mean I haven't really engaged with any institutional archives in a sustained way. I relentlessly study, preserve and share found footage and archival materials in an attempt to continue and extend the conversation around Black visual language and culture globally."

Olu Kae's deep engagement of jazz musicians, both world famous and unknown, illustrates the rich legacy of Black music and how social media provides the opportunity for Black users to reframe stories from white-produced documentaries and biographies that don't get at the essence of Black musicians, or the experiences that shape their sonic signatures.

Kashad, founder of the @iLoveArethaFranklin (https://www.instagram.com/ilovearethafranklin/?hl=en) fan page, understands how scholarship and practice of care offer Franklin the roses she deserves. The Instagram page, with more than 25,000 followers, is like an online museum dedicated to the Queen of Soul and her soul music affiliates. The page is a community space for Black music

fans looking for a break from trauma-informed movies and images about Black female musical giants (Billie Holiday, Whitney Houston and Nina Simone).

The page is described as "an educational archive dedicated to preserving the rich and unending legacy of Aretha Franklin and countless popular and unsung pioneers of Black music, through a variety of original content such as video essays, vocal analyses, documentaries and carefully curated rare, remastered performances of music legends."

"My process for research," Kashad said, "is really just going through many archives – university archives, French archives and media archives. I do a lot of archival research online. Sometimes I go to archival libraries and search through the materials. Also, it is not as common today, but there are fan groups that trade archival material. Or you can buy the archival material, which I do on occasion."

There's no denying that when people refer to "Black Twitter," they are doing so with Black Americans in mind, but social media is a powerful way to think with a diasporic frame. Beaumont, who runs the Bumpkin Files (https://www.instagram.com/bumpkin.files/?hl=en) , an Instagram and Twitter account that explores Black life in Britain and beyond, said, "During my photography practice, I started to understand the magnitude of owning a powerful tool like the camera and using that same tool to document our communities. We've seen and experienced throughout history how our stories get erased and whitewashed, so why allow that to happen again, especially during this social media age?"

Jack Dorsey, a founder of Twitter, once described it as a place for "a short burst of inconsequential information" and "chirps from birds."

Inconsequential information has a unique meaning in Black communities whose histories were typically not found in textbooks. Gathering information about one's past was, for centuries, punishable by law. Many Black members of Twitter and Instagram have actively moved away from posting "inconsequential information." They are, instead, offering "short bursts" of social commentary, comedic critique and independent archival practices to fill the gap in the representation of Black history. Having the tools to resist erasure opened up a plethora of renegade archiving. Nowadays, people use creative technology to craft instant stories around their own collections – collections built from personal records and underused public records – to redefine how history gets taught and told.

Using social media to build an underground digital archiving practice has created a repository of Black history, aesthetics and music while also opening up the space to create community connections. Black people have been influencers for American culture since the 17th century, and social media amplifies that influence today. But what are the ways that Black users and content creators can be compensated or recognized for their labor?

There are other questions to contend with as we contemplate the future of the curation of Blackness and the vulnerability that comes with not owning a competitive social media platform. In 2017, cultural critic Lauren Michele Jackson gave us some useful language to dig through the ways in which digital blackface (https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs) , which she describes as "various types of minstrel performance that become available in cyberspace," is a new way to understand the thin line between passive spectatorship and profitable appropriation. This trend has prompted many conversations about the vulnerability that

occurs alongside a viral moment where a simple dance you did in your home for a small group of followers becomes the latest craze for Hollywood celebrities.

Other examples include the use of Black queer language, such as "spilling the tea" or "shade," that are now used widely without an understanding of how that language developed out of the most vulnerable folk in Black communities – transgender and other gender non-conforming folk.

Will intellectual property and copyright issues hinder future digital archiving? And what will happen to the millions of videos, memes and photographs of Black life should the social media platforms collapse or drastically change form?

The assumption is that Instagram and Twitter will be around forever. The good news is that creators have been able to use their social media presence to garner opportunities in the live realm – museum exhibitions, films and other cultural products now have a place in the world beyond social media. Still, social media is a breeding ground for creating and preserving history. All that means is the future of Black cultural excellence is still being tucked between the pages of a now-digital Bible.

DJ Lynnée Denise is an Amsterdam-based artist, scholar, and writer whose work reflects on underground cultural movements, the 1980s, migration studies, theories of escape, and electronic music of the African Diaspora. She is a 2020-2021 Artist-in-Residence at Stanford University and a lecturer for African American Studies at UCLA. Her current book project, Why Big Mama Matters will be published in 2022 by the University of Texas Press. www.djlynneedenise.com

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