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substance **BEAUTY** and value
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or compromise



**Transracial
Adoption as
Continued
Oppression:**
Modern Practice
in Context

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ABSTRACT

Transracial adoption has existed as a mode of forced displacement and oppression throughout the history of the United States. Starting with Italian children, who were once racialized as non-white, non-white children in the United States have undergone systemic oppression resulting in forced separation from their biological parents. The displaced children have typically been placed with white parents who have not been adequately prepared to provide the culturally competent, trauma-informed care that the children need. As a result, transracially adopted children have historically struggled to form a sense of identity and have faced a wide range of physical and mental health vulnerabilities. Part I of this paper will present an overview of how transracial adoption has been implemented throughout U.S. history, discussing both past models (such as the Orphan Train) and contemporary models (such as the foster care system, domestic private adoptions, and the global adoption industry). Part II will draw connections between past and present implementations of transracial adoption, illustrating that the phenomenon is best understood as a continuation of previous forms of oppression. Part III will propose a number of recommendations for social workers to facilitate better outcomes for transracial adoptees.

PART I: HISTORIC OVERVIEW OF TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

PREVIOUS MODELS OF ADOPTION

THE ORPHAN TRAIN

In order to understand the current landscape of transracial adoption, it is important to understand the historical context of the Orphan Train, which provided one of the first examples of regulated, systemic transracial adoption. At the beginning of the 19th century, the United States moved towards institutionalizing children who were without care (Hill, 2006). Children were placed into poor houses, often sharing quarters with adult criminals and intellectually disabled individuals. In 1824, the New York House of Refuge for Juvenile Offenders was created by the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents. As the first supervised living space for children without care, the New York House of Refuge for Juvenile Offenders served as a model for other states looking to improve the wellbeing of children. Institutions similar to orphanages were created specifically for children, although it is worth noting that very few orphanages were created to serve Black children. While Black individuals south of the Mason-Dixon line were enslaved, free Black children in the North often found care in informal kinship networks amongst other Black individuals (McGowan, 2010; Woodward, 2016). As a result, Black children were excluded from this early move towards the institutionalization of children without caregivers.

In 1854, Charles Loring Brace, founder of the New York Children's Aid Society, started what would later become known as the Orphan Train. Brace and his contemporaries sent impoverished white children, some of whom were orphans, to live with families primarily in the Midwest (McGowan, 2010). Over the next seven decades, during which the nation saw the Civil War, Reconstruction, and World War I, almost 200,000 white children journeyed from densely populated eastern cities to rural midwestern towns. Brace's effort to place children into homes was replicated in numerous cities across the U.S.

Although an improvement from previous models, the Orphan Train is not without its criticisms. Many children who journeyed on the Orphan Trains were impoverished Irish and Italian immigrants departing from developing northeastern cities. Through the Orphan Train, children who were mostly Catholic were placed into Protestant homes across the Midwest (McGowan, 2010). Not only were these children displaced from their homes into an environment with different religious beliefs, but many experienced socioeconomic challenges, severe abuse, and overwhelming pressures of assimilation (Graham & Gray, 1995). While some shared fond memories, many described intense isolation and bewilderment (Graham & Gray, 1995). It is also worth noting that Irish and Italian Americans were racialized as non-white until the early 1900s (Luconi, 2021). Irish and Italian children were forced to assimilate to unfamiliar families and culture, and experienced a power imbalance within their adoptive families. Opponents of Brace's efforts contend that sending children on the Orphan Train was similar to forcing youth into indentured servitude (Gray & Graham, 1995). They also note that the families that received the children did not provide the means for the children to grow in their own religious faith, causing further cultural disruption (McGowan, 2010). This criticism continues to be echoed in contemporary accounts of trauma within the private adoption industry (Roberts, 2020).

SLAVERY AND JIM CROW LAWS

While Italians and Irish people were regarded as non-white in the age of the Orphan Train, Black and Indigenous children experienced even greater forms of abuse, isolation, and displacement. For Black people, the history of transracial adoption can be traced to slavery. Since the forced arrival of Black people into this country, Black children have systematically been separated from their parents for the benefit of white enslavers. Black children living amidst the horrors of enslavement were viewed as chattel and often cared for by kinship networks rather than their biological parents (McGowan, 2010). Hundreds of thousands of Black children were separated from their biological parents or orphaned by the practices of slavery. Though the number of free Black people in northeastern cities greatly increased in the late 1800s, Black children

were excluded from the Orphan Train, and very few orphanages existed to explicitly serve Black children. Black children were instead cared for informally by other members of their community. It is important to understand this historical context of forced separation as we continue to discuss transracial adoption and its impact on Black people.

Jim Crow laws and racism prevented the transracial placement of Black children until the late 1960s. After the Jim Crow era, transracial adoption expanded significantly, with Black children making up a major contingent of adoptees in the 1970s. The number of Black children in white homes increased so much that in 1972, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) released a statement warning that transracial adoption would prevent Black children from developing a “total sense of themselves” and “sound projection of their future” (National Association of Black Social Workers, 1972, p.1). As a result, many policies allowing transracial placement of Black children were reversed until 1994, when the Multiethnic Placement Act was passed (Barn, 2013; Quadagno, 1996).

NATIVE AMERICAN BOARDING SCHOOLS AND THE INDIAN ADOPTION PROJECT

Indigenous persons have been victims of genocide, forced displacement, and family disruption since the creation of what is now known as the United States. However, it was not until the 1860s that the Bureau of Indian Affairs formally created its first residential school. Indigenous children were abducted by government workers and forced to attend residential schools whose primary function was to forcibly assimilate the children through “killing the Indian” (Gram, 2016; Bombay et al., 2014, p. 322). Many were taken from their parents and adopted by white families, often without notifying the child’s family or tribe. These atrocities caused lasting, significant harm: residential school attendance has been linked to increased substance use and mental health problems for both survivors and their descendants (Kawamoto, 2001).

From 1959 to 1967, the United States Children’s Bureau worked with the Child Welfare League of America to increase the number of children available to be adopted through the creation of the Indian Adoption

Project (Engel, 2012). Due to an increase in demand by white couples without children and decreased numbers of white infants in need of adoption, the Bureau and the Child Welfare League worked to satisfy the needs of white couples by removing roughly 700 Indigenous children from their homes and placing them into the homes of white parents ready to adopt (Engel, 2012). Though the program officially ended in 1967, the prevalence of placing Indigenous children transracially continued for almost another decade. Unfortunately, records of adoptions during this time period confound the exact number of children, so the total number of children displaced may never be known (Engel, 2012). The Indian Adoption Project aimed to facilitate transracial placements of Indigenous children during a time when same-race placements were considered general practice.

Of the cases documented in 1968 through 1979, the Association on American Indian Affairs found that nearly a third of Indigenous children were separated from their families. Furthermore, 90% of these children were placed in white homes (Crofoot & Harris, 2012). Their findings, coupled with political action from the American Indian Movement, led to the 1978 passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act (Barn, 2013; Engel, 2012). The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) provided an avenue for tribes to actively engage in the cases of Indigenous children to “protect the best interest and promote the stability and security of Indian tribes” (Indian Child Welfare Act, 1978). This legislation ensures the livelihood of Indigenous tribes and traditions by creating protections for Indigenous children and legally obligating caseworkers to notify and involve the child’s parents and tribe in court proceedings.

CURRENT MODELS OF ADOPTION

In some respects, the landscape of transracial adoption in 2022 has changed since the models proposed in the previous section. The Orphan Train, the Indian Boarding Schools, and the Indian Adoption Project have been largely replaced by the foster care system and the private adoption industry. In the 21st century, international adoptions (especially from East Asia) have also become prominent (Budiman & Lopez, 2017). However, the overall dynamic of forced displacement

and assimilation continues to the present day and historic cycles of harm continue to be replicated in the present. The following section will discuss contemporary forms of adoption and draw parallels between the harms committed in both current and past models.

THE SYSTEM

The child welfare system is responsible for promoting and preserving the wellbeing of children (Roberts, 2020). While each state has its own public agencies, these agencies often partner with private organizations to provide services to children and their families. Central to the system is mandated reporting, which requires specific professionals such as educators, coaches, medical professionals, and others who work with children to report to their state any suspected instances of child abuse or neglect (Harris & Hackett, 2008; Fluke et al., 2003). Reports are then investigated by social service personnel who may develop safety plans for the children. Safety plans may involve minimal interventions, such as the provision of services, or potentially drastic interventions, including the removal of the child (Hill, 2006). While in modern times, a stronger emphasis is placed upon reunification, policies like the Adoption and Safe Families Act make reunification challenging by providing financial bonuses to state agencies for placing children into adoptive homes (Cilia, 2021). Due to its past record of separating families, the child welfare system has been referred to as the “family regulation system” by civil rights activist Dorothy Roberts, who advocates for the abolition of the child welfare system entirely (Roberts, 2020).

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

Of those in foster care, two percent are American Indian/Alaskan Native, one percent are Asian, 21% are Black or African American, and 21% are Hispanic (Children’s Bureau, 2020). These racial ethnic groups make up 1.3%, 5.9%, 13.4% and 18.5% of children in foster care respectively (United States Census Bureau, 2021). These proportions are similarly reflected in the demographics of children waiting to be adopted. Of children who were adopted with public agency involvement in the 2019 fiscal year, 50% were non-white, although white people make up over 75% of the United States population (Children’s Bureau, 2020).

Of children adopted from foster care last year, 28% were transracial adoptions, a 22% increase since 2005 (Assistant Secretary for Planning and Intervention, 2020).

Racially skewed participation rates in the foster care system can at least partially be attributed to biased investigation into accusations of neglect and physical abuse (Harris & Hackett, 2008; Dettlaff et al., 2020). Latinx families, and to an even greater extent Black families, are more likely to be investigated than their white counterparts (Hill, 2006; Fluke et al., 2003). Even when comparing only children who have experienced maltreatment, Black children are still almost 36% more likely to be removed from their homes than their white counterparts (Hill, 2006). Harris and Hackett (2008) discuss how subjectivity in the assessment of cases creates opportunities for racial bias, ultimately impacting case outcomes in nearly every interaction within the family regulation system.

By the early 1990s, the number of African-American and Indigenous children in foster care greatly increased. Ultimately, in 1994, due to the large number of children in need of care and shifting racial ideologies, the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) was passed. After much contested debate from stakeholders in all racial ethnic groups, especially the NABSW, MEPA was passed to facilitate the timely placement of children removed from their homes (Barn, 2013; Quadagno, 1996). The Act prohibits agencies from refusing placements due to the race, nationality and ethnicity of either the child or the prospective parents.

IMPACT OF FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

An unintended consequence of MEPA's colorblind stance is that foster care agencies are unable to assess prospective white parents' cultural and racial responsiveness. While MEPA only applies to foster care agencies, the convention of colorblind adoption spread to other institutions. Private adoption agencies, social workers, and other professionals are hesitant to discuss the implications of forming mixed-race families with white prospective parents because the practice depends on the continued recruitment of prospective parents. As a result, "keeping white parents comfortable becomes a priority" (Raleigh, 2018).

Race matters and the racial-ethnic socialization of Black and Indigenous children of color raised by white families has and continues to be highly contested (Barn, 2013; Quadagno, 1996). Some scholars of adoption argue that “children, whenever possible, should be placed with parents of the same race or ethnicity” (Andujo, 1998, p. 534). When such placements are not possible, bi-culturalism offers an alternative approach to racial-ethnic socialization. Bi-culturalism, in which the culture(s) of adopted children are integrated into the adoptive household, leads to the development of ecological competence both in white and non-white environments for the non-white child. Similarly, Deberry et al. (2003) found that transracial adoptees whose adoptive parents fostered connection to their birth culture had better psychological adjustment and positive experiences regarding the process of developing their racial and ethnic identities.

Though white adoptive parents have begun to shift away from emphasizing assimilation and colorblindness, instead acknowledging the importance of racial identity formation, there is still much to be concerned about (Barn, 2013; Lee, 2003). Adoption is a fundamentally traumatic experience. Verrier (1993) stated that separation has a detrimental impact on adoptees’ relationships throughout their lives. Adoptees are also four times more likely to attempt to take their life than their non-adopted counterparts (Keyes et al., 2013). Possible suicide risk factors impacting adoptees include mental illness, substance use, trauma experienced by biological parents, trauma experienced by the adoptee early in their life, and decreased sense of belonging (Keyes et al., 2013). A decreased sense of belonging contributes to depression and increases the risk of suicide (Fisher et al., 2015).

Adoption has a long history of shame and secrecy, and transracial adoption is the most visible form of adoption (Lee, 2003). Transracial adoptees face many challenges in regards to racial identity formation, and many struggle to find belonging. Andujo (1998) found a direct correlation between the adoptee's positive sense of self and the efforts their adoptive parents took to facilitate socialization with individuals from the adoptee's own racial or ethnic group. Deberry et al. (1996) found a positive correlation between connection to birth culture and

psychological wellbeing when studying African-American transracial adoptees. Similarly, Yoon (2000) found that in Korean-born adoptees, parental support of the adoptee's racial ethnic identity development predicted more positive psychological adjustment of the adoptee. Recent studies validate these findings, as Montgomery and Jordan (2018) found in their systematic research synthesis. Ultimately, racial-ethnic socialization practices that celebrate differences, prepare children to navigate racial discrimination, and encourage building relationships with one's birth culture are linked to healthy adoptee outcomes (Montgomery & Jordan, 2018). It is this understanding of the nature of adoption that underscores the importance of the third mandate of MEPA.

The third and final mandate of MEPA requires agencies to recruit racially diverse prospective parents, reflecting the demographics of children in care (Barn, 2013; Quadagno, 1996). In order to become licensed care providers, prospective parents must have strong references and must meet standards regarding income, health status, and legal history (Raleigh, 2018). As the NABSW pointed out several decades ago, systemic racial barriers like socio-economic inequality and mass incarceration, coupled with fears of surveillance and outright racial discrimination from agencies, continue to deter or prevent Black and Indigenous Persons of Color (BIPOC) from becoming formal foster or adoptive parents (National Association of Black Social Workers, 1972; Woodward, 2016). Despite this, informal kinship networks within communities, as an alternative to transracial adoption, continue to offer transracially adopted children a means to mature and be cared for within their own cultural contexts (McGowen, 2010).

PT II: PARALLELS BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT MODELS

Despite changes to the way transracial adoption is implemented, the historic harms of the adoption process continue to be perpetuated. Transracial adoption today serves as an institution that continues the forced assimilation and cultural genocide of marginalized groups, as it severs all legal and cultural ties children may have to their birth families and culture. The following section will draw connections between the traumas inflicted in historic and current modes of adoption.

MEETING PARENTS' INTERESTS

The core purpose of adoption should be to provide displaced children with safe and loving homes. Yet, adoption historically and currently has been publicized as a way for potential parents to benefit. For example, during Midwest labor shortages in the 1860s, adoption was advertised as a way for families to acquire additional assistance on their farms (Graham & Gray, 1995). Adoption has always been advertised as a way for parents to have children, without always encouraging understanding of the traumatic circumstances that led to children experiencing separation from their birth families.

One modern development in this regard is the Evangelical Orphan Care Movement, which started in 2000. This movement is rooted in the New Testament passage James 1:7, which advocates for adoption as the divinely mandated solution to the global "Orphan Crisis." Yet ironically, out of the eight million children currently living in orphanages, it is estimated that 90% have at least one living parent (Van Doore, 2016). There are considerable theological critiques of this view, perhaps most significantly that in contrast to the legal adoption system in the United States, in Biblical narratives of adoption, the adoptee's biological connection to their lineage is maintained (Smolin, 2012). Regardless, the evangelical movement's impact has been undeniable and the Christian Alliance for Orphans, which partners with over two hundred organizations, reported facilitating and impacting the formation of "foster, adoption and orphan care ministries" at over 800 churches in 2020 (Christian Alliance for Orphans, 2021). Unfortunately, the movement as a whole has failed to critique the coercion and commodification present within the foster and adoption industry, instead clinging to a narrative that purports the legal and cultural separation of children from their biological families to be "God's plan" for the creation of their own families (Smolin, 2012). This mindset betrays the fundamental purpose of adoption: to provide displaced children with safe, permanent homes.

COERCION

During the Orphan Train era, biological mothers were pressured or

forced into giving up their children (McGowan, 2010). Today, similar experiences of coercion can be found in the stories of birth mothers considering the private adoption industry. Coercion can take the form of withholding information or resources, as well as subtle or explicit pressure to make a certain choice. This coercion can come from individuals within the pregnant person's personal life, or from service providers such as social workers (Castle, 2014). In recent years, there has been a growing number of claims and sensational headlines asserting that birth mothers in the United States who received financial support during their pregnancies from prospective adoptive parents felt they had to go through with relinquishment against their wishes (Root, 2021). Some mothers in closed adoptions also express regret that they only learned the full legal ramifications of relinquishment after the procedure had been finalized (Weller & Hosek, 2020). Similar stories can be found around the globe, where medical bills or fraud may be used to coerce mothers into giving up their children (Graff, 2008). This coercion, similar to that experienced by impoverished parents whose children were sent on Orphan Trains, is all too common.

COMMODIFICATION

To this day, Black children remain the cheapest children to adopt, as well as the most abundant in the foster care system (Quiroz, 2008; Woodward, 2016). Surveys of white parents indicate hesitation to adopt Black children, as some view the divide between Black and white too vast. In response, white parents have opted to domestically adopt “multicultural” children or to adopt non-white children from Asia or South and Central America (Sweeney, 2013; Woodward, 2016). Kubo (2010) suggested that adoptive parents may view adoption of foreign children as “baggage free,” and that their foreignness allows adoptive parents to incorrectly perceive them as raceless and thus closer to whiteness (p. 269). White adoptive parents desiring children who are proximal to whiteness is both a perpetuation and a consequence of a racial hierarchy that posits Blackness at the bottom (Sweeney, 2013). Numerous adoption agencies even list percentages of the child's racial and ethnic makeup to pander to a growing preference for multiracial children, in the process clearly distinguishing multiracial from Black (Sweeney, 2013; Woodward, 2016). Such listings and financial incentives

not only commodify children in a manner eerily similar to the auction block, but they also provide a concrete visualization of continued racial disparities disregarding that all men are created equal, and illustrate how the domestic and international adoption system caters to white interests (Raleigh, 2012).

International transracial adoptive placements grew in popularity after the Vietnam War, during which U.S imperialism led not only to widespread destabilization but also the orphaning of numerous children who were to eventually become international transracial adoptees (Barn, 2013). Widespread adoption of Asian-born children, alongside the civil rights movement, shifted societal views of what families could look like. Concurrently, domestic adoptions involving Indigenous and African-American Black children began to become more commonplace (Lee, 2003). Despite mixed-race families becoming more common, there remains a strong demand among prospective adoptive parents for white infants (Woodward, 2016). Since unmarried motherhood has become more socially acceptable in the United States, the amount of adoptable white babies has dramatically decreased and prospective parents seeking infants continue to turn abroad to adopt (International Adoption Rate in U.S. Doubled in the 1990s, 2003). However, international adoptions have been declining in the last ten years, due in part to concerns about the ethics of the practice, including the creation of “paper orphans,” children forcibly taken and sold to orphanages in order to satisfy demand for babies (Van Doore, 2016).

PT. III RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

As families are formed and are constantly changing, so too must our rhetoric and practices regarding transracial adoption change. To start, within social work education there must be explicit recognition of the field's historic and continued complicity in and perpetuation of the oppression of children and families of color through surveillance, commodification, forced displacement and removal, and failure to consider the socio-emotional ramifications of transracial placement (Dettlaff et al., 2020). For far too long, the subjective biases of service providers have impacted the experiences of families of color coming into contact with the family regulation system, leading to

disproportionate removals and devaluing the importance of biological human relationships, thus disregarding social work core values (Harris & Hackett, 2008). Social workers must work to unlearn and unpack their biases as well as to critically interrogate their role in the adoption process, from the removal of children to placement.

Much has been written about the lack of culturally competent services available to parents of color struggling with substance use or mental health problems. Many scholars have touted family preservation services as a means to decrease the amount of children in need of out of home care (Harris & Hackett, 2008). Unfortunately, service providers have failed to empower and equip BIPOC folks to care for members of their own communities in need. In fact, many have done the opposite, causing harm and adverse effects to these communities (Roberts, 2008). One must be cognizant of the fact that the carceral surveillant nature of the family regulation system poses a real threat to the safety of all BIPOC folks who come in contact with it, even prospective foster or adoptive parents. The fact of the matter is that there remains a significant number of BIPOC children in need of care (Dettlaff et al., 2020). Social workers and other service providers should then work not only to fulfill the third mandate of MEPA, but also to work to eliminate the previously named racial barriers through abolition of the prison industrial system and major economic overhaul through the expansion of safety nets (Dettlaff et al., 2020).

In regards to placement, social workers must reject colorblindness and attitudes of racial ambivalence which act as a form of violent erasure (American Psychological Association, 2017). Instead, social workers should acknowledge the adverse effects of transracial placement on racial ethnic identity formation. When transracial placements do occur, social workers have a duty to equip white parents to more effectively adopt attitudes of biculturalism and underscore the importance of active anti-racist and trauma-informed parenting. Social workers, as current brokers of placements and adoptions, are uniquely positioned to help white parents deconstruct attitudes of white saviorism and unlearn racist behaviors (Raleigh, 2018). Transracially placed and adopted children are not responsible for their white parents' education. Transracially placed adopted children, like all children, are deserving of safety and security.

Social workers are often held as “experts” in the child welfare and adoption field by the general public. However, the profession's reliance on academia can lead to discounting the true experts of adoption: adoptees. This is not to ignore the vital impact of abolitionist scholars such as Roberts in the discourse regarding child-welfare and transracial placements, nor to ignore the outcomes of advocacy from organizations like the upEND Movement that seek to abolish the family regulation system, but rather to say that the common narrative around transracial adoption must be shaped first and foremost by those who have experienced transracial adoption (Dettlaff et al., 2020; Roberts, 2008). Social workers must actively look outside the ivory tower, and elevate the voices and wisdom of transracial adoptees themselves.

The lived experiences of adoptees have long served as sources of entertainment; however these popular narratives tend to focus on the good-feeling parts of adoption and seldom is critique given to the circumstances leading to initial separations (McKee, 2019). Similarly, adoptees themselves must constantly mitigate and negotiate their own understanding of their lived experiences and origins, due to a lack of information regarding their own histories (McKee, 2019; Wills, 2015). However, through the creation of self-narratives, such as life-writings—that is, the recordings of memories and experiences—adoptees can “de-essentialize truth claims,” which is necessary for negotiating their understanding of self in the absence of factual knowledge of their origins (Wills, 2015). The creation of Zines, a form of participatory media, can also facilitate development of personal and collective agency and deepen identity formation. A recent example is *You Are Holding This*, an “abolitionist zine for and by adopted and fostered people” (Martin, 2020; Artes et al., 2021).

In addition to reclaiming narratives for themselves through the written word and artistic expression, adoptees also have taken to social media platforms to express their feelings and seek belonging and community. Adoptees can be found speaking out under hashtags such as #adopteevoices and #adopteevisibility. Suh (2021) found Korean adoptees used Instagram to refocus adoption narratives on their own agency, as well as to reclaim that agency for themselves. The same can

be said for transracial adoptees of other races, especially after years of intense racial justice movements in response to anti-Black police violence and anti-immigrant rhetoric, as evidenced in viral articles in leading U.S. newspapers (Hatzipanagos, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Children of color end up in white families in numerous ways: placement through a private domestic adoption agency, adoption out of foster care, or adoption internationally. In each case, adoption is trauma (Verrier, 1993). Understanding the impact of adoption trauma and focusing on the survivors of this trauma—adoptees—is crucial to reshaping and decolonizing the narratives of transracial adoption. As long as adoption remains a multimillion dollar industry driven by predominantly white couples of higher socioeconomic status and impacted by foreign and domestic policies, the practice of transracial adoption is impossible to separate from cultural genocide, forced assimilation, and imperialism (Raleigh, 2018; Lee, 2003). Transracial adoption must be understood as a continuation of historical modes of oppression.

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