

Soft Architecture: Walking as an Affective Practice in Lisa Robertson's "Seven Walks"

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Sandra MacPherson is a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa specializing in Canadian literature. Her SSHRC-funded dissertation proposes urban walking as an affective practice that questions agency, public space, and community in the context of the precarities generated under neoliberalism.

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Abstract

In Lisa Robertson's "Seven Walks" the speaker and guide do not simply amble through Vancouver's material space. Their walks are an affective practice that expresses the city in terms of the fluidity of becoming rather than the fluidity of commodity exchange and suggests that the productivity of sexually differentiated walking is distinct from traditional masculinist discourses of the peripatetic as contemplative or simply transgressive.

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Résumé

Dans le livre *Seven Walks* de Lisa Robertson, la narratrice et la guide ne se contentent pas de déambuler dans l'espace physique de Vancouver. Leurs promenades sont un exercice affectif qui exprime la ville en termes de fluidité du devenir plutôt que de fluidité des échanges commerciaux et suggère que la productivité de la promenade sexuellement différenciée se distingue des discours masculinistes traditionnels du péripatéticien comme contemplatif ou simplement transgressif.

The space of continuing experience is a pure or absolute space of differential heading: an indeterminate vector space infusing each step taken in Euclidean space with a potential for having been otherwise directed. The whole of vector space is compressed, in potential, in every step.

—Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*

While there have been female peripatetic poets, performance artists and critics—Dorothy Wordsworth, Michèle Bernstein, Marina Abramović, and Rebecca Solnit come to mind—their numbers are few, as women have historically been relegated to the private or domestic sphere, making the simple act of strolling in the street a dangerous and indecent activity. The division of private/public space along gender lines has a long history, including a notable discourse on the predominantly male freedom of walking in the context of both country and city (on gendered space see Massey 1994; McDowell 1999; Rose 1993; on walking and the flâneuse or female flâneur see D'Souza and McDonough 2006; Wilson 1992; Wolff 1985). Inarguably, as both an aesthetic and a revolutionary practice, the peripatetic has been traditionally dominated by men: from the nineteenth-century Parisian flâneur, to the early and mid-twentieth-century Surrealist and Situationist International walking experiments, to the more recent Italian Stalker movement and British psychogeography. As a result, as Deirdre Heddon and Cathy Turner (2012) explain, walking is generally conceived within a masculinist narrative as "individualistic, heroic, epic and transgressive" (224). An alternative to this dominant narrative emerges in Lisa Robertson's "Seven Walks" (2003) as the rambles of two ambiguously sexed figures wandering Vancouver shift the emphasis from solitude, transgression, and heroism to interconnectedness and the productivity of relations, thereby reimagining both the urban walker and a city in crisis.

"Seven Walks" is the last text in *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*

(2003), a series of essays commissioned for various art projects and exhibits. As Robertson (2011) remarks, the collection was a personal attempt to understand the global investment-driven change of Vancouver bookended by the provincial sale of the Expo '86 site and the winning of the 2010 Olympic bid (231-232). What Robertson identifies as the city abstracted as real estate under advanced capitalism is undercut in "Seven Walks" by the fluidity of its nomadic walkers. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's work on affect, gender, and space, I argue that these walkers are engaged in a process of sexually differentiated becoming which not only emerges as a positive force but also has repercussions for imagining other futures for Vancouver, of potential change from the objectification and commodification of space in recurring cycles of gentrification. This process of becoming in "Seven Walks" is importantly both positive and ethical because it

is no longer indexed upon a phallogocentric set of standards, based on Law and Lack, but is rather unhinged and therefore affective....It aims at achieving the freedom of understanding, through the awareness of our limits, of our bondage. This results in the freedom to affirm one's essence as joy, through encounters and minglings with other bodies, entities, beings and forces. Ethics means faithfulness to this *potentia*, or the desire to become. (Braidotti 2006, 134)

Rosi Braidotti's theorization of a sexually differentiated subject at the intersection of Gilles Deleuze's conception of becoming and Luce Irigaray's non-unified female subject frames this exploration of a new conception of the flâneur: no longer the unified and solitary modern subject defined by lack and melancholy, the different walkers in "Seven Walks" are instead a positive "intensive entity that is activated by eternal returns, constant becomings and flows of transformations in response to external promptings, that is to say sets of encounters with multiple others," namely the city (Braidotti 2002, 100). In leaving the enclosed architectural, private space of the *oikos*—where the female body is enclosed and domesticated (Robertson and McCaffery 2000, 37)—and striding outside into the streets, the embodied and embedded walkers in "Seven Walks" challenge the phallogocentric binary logic that constitutes the female subject in

relation to the universalized masculine centre as a disempowered and denigrated Other, what Irigaray calls the "Other of the Same," an Other, like the Self, that is universal and immutable. These walkers suggest instead a subject as "other of the Other," one that enables *different* differences to emerge and multiply in a process of becoming, a Deleuzian idea that Braidotti refigures for a sexually differentiated subject.

In "Seven Walks," the walker is not one but two, speaker and guide, doubled in an intimate relation with each other as they wander Vancouver, which not only reminds the reader that, unlike men, women are not coded the same and therefore do not possess the same freedom to walk alone, but also expresses the non-unitarity of the female sexed subject. Rather than the solitary, unified subject typical of modern flânerie, the doubled walker of "Seven Walks" embodies "the non-coincidence of the subject" (Braidotti 2002, 99), "the self and not-self" as "one arises from and returns to the other" (Robertson 2011, 194; Massumi 2002, 35). As not-one, they are what Braidotti (2002) termed in reference to Irigaray as "the virtual feminine" (6). And as female(s) no longer opposed to the dominant male subject, "she, in fact, may no longer be a she, but the subject of quite another story: a subject-in-process, a mutant, the other of the Other, a post-Woman embodied subject cast in a female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis" (Braidotti 2002, 12). While Braidotti's work grounds this essay, Robertson's own readings of the theories of Manuel De Landa, Rem Koolhaas, and Elizabeth Grosz on intensive space, difference, and change also critically inform my interpretation of "Seven Walks" as an exploration of the codependence of walkers and city in the process of becoming.

Potestas and Potentia: Walks Two to Six

Largely narrated in a first person, plural voice, "Seven Walks" reads like an ironic guidebook that cannot be followed or replicated in real space-time because its walks are not simply ambles through the extensive space of the city, in which space is conceived as only an empty container filled with discrete inanimate objects and architecture. Several walks resist such narrations of static place in communicating experiences of affect or intensity that hinge perception and hallucination in the city's streets and parks: they animate Brian

Massumi's (2002) idea of "a *lived* topological event" (206) by expressing the self and city in dynamic and productive relations. I argue that these two experiences of the city—as static and fluid—trace the process of a becoming, which, as Braidotti (2002) explains in reference to Deleuze, "force[s] a re-alignment of the basic parameters of subjectivity: the power of *potestas* (constraint, negativity, denial) would have to confront the equally powerful power of *potentia* (plenitude, intensity, expression)" (113). Walks two to six explore the struggle between *potestas* and *potentia*, the negative and affirmative aspects of power: one decreases while the other increases one's "capacity to act in the world" (30); *potestas* is coercive, restrictive, and "majority-bound" unlike *potentia*, which is creative, minoritarian, and non-linear; the former concerns the "management of civil society and its institutions" and the latter "the transformative experimentation with new arts of existence and ethical relations" (Braidotti 2011b, 269). *Potestas* is defined in "Seven Walks" by the walkers' experience of the city as objectified and commodified, a space solely of hard architecture and fixed forms, in which they are immobile and alienated from one another and the city ("Third Walk" and "Fifth Walk"), while *potentia* is conveyed in the walkers' experience of the city as a space of intensity and potential, in which they wander the streets, empowered by affective interconnections with each other and Vancouver ("Fourth Walk" and "Sixth Walk").

Yet before I examine these two aspects of power in the process of becoming of the speaker, the guide, and Vancouver, I want to outline how they take their cue from Robertson's understanding of extensive and intensive conceptions of space, specifically cityspace, in the work of Manuel De Landa and Rem Koolhaas. Importantly, for Robertson, the fluidity of ongoing transformation of the walkers is bound up with "soft architecture" or the intensity of the city. In correspondence with fellow writer Steve McCaffery in 2000, before the publication of *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, Robertson refers to theories of intensive space and its relation to change in De Landa's (1999) "Deleuze, Diagrams and the Open-Ended Becoming of the World." As De Landa explains, intensive space affirms a non-essentialist approach to life that focuses on production and process rather than the produced object. Indivisible, intensity transforms

through a process of differentiation always in a relation and context. It is not opposed to but includes extension as a temporary materialization; however, when space is conceived only in Euclidean terms, extension becomes opposed to intensity. Largely through representation, extensive space has eclipsed intensive space, eliding its dynamism and spontaneity. Basically, a Euclidean conception of space as exclusively extensive reduces movement to a change in position rather than the ongoing change of the "difference-driven process" of intensive space (31). While extensivity implicates form and structure, that which is fundamental to binary distinctions and static identities, the intensive suggests event, movement, and the new of the unexpected. In the same email to McCaffery, Robertson links De Landa with architect Rem Koolhaas, whose Office for Metropolitan Architecture was the inspiration for Robertson's own Office for Soft Architecture. She writes: "De Landa talks about thermodynamics, flows and intensities as opposed to extensities and equilibrium. Intensive difference as opposed to form. I think that's where Koolhaas is heading to, in his different vocabulary" (Robertson and McCaffery 2000, 32). Specifically, Robertson refers to Koolhaas' "What Ever Happened to Urbanism?" (1995) in which he considers the potentialities of a new urbanism that is opposed to the "parasitic security" of architecture's permanence. This new urbanism can imagine the future of the city precisely because "it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential" (1995, 29).

Like De Landa and Koolhaas, Robertson rejects the idea of extensive space that precedes movement importantly because it enables the quantification and commodification of cityspace. Instead, she suggests an "architecture of flows" that orients the reader to the topology of intensive space or the "soft architecture" of the city. Robertson (2011) explains in "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto," in *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, that the city is "persistently soft," a place not of "identity but incident"; it is "a flux of experiences produced through relations and flows, a space of potential" (20, 19). While hard architecture encloses space and arrests forms, soft architecture signifies affective relations, both actual

and virtual. As Robertson writes: “There are traces of unbuildable and unbuilt architectures folded into the texture of the city and our bodies are already moving among them” (Robertson and McCaffery 2000, 38). Instead of the steel and glass arcades where the modern flâneur strolled, she proposes the “soft arcade” where the sexually differentiated walker becomes an architect of the passage of ongoing change (Robertson 2011, 18). Yet such positive transformation through *potentia* inevitably encounters *potestas* in “Seven Walks” as the walkers struggle with the constraining and enabling powers that thwart or empower their transformative interconnection with each other and Vancouver.

In the “Third Walk” and “Fifth Walk,” *potestas* is associated with the control and order of capitalist production that constrains them and alienates them from each other and the city while in the “Fourth Walk” and the “Sixth Walk,” *potentia* is associated with an affirmative force that “aims at fulfilling the subject’s capacity for interaction and freedom” (Braidotti 2011b, 314). The “Second Walk” straddles the two as it introduces this tension. In this walk, as they stroll through a local park, a conflict emerges between the fixed forms of extensive space and the fluidity of intensity. At first, their dawdling is described in terms of a diorama, a reference to a nineteenth-century three-dimensional replica of a scene often encased in glass. They feel trapped inside this diorama, gazing out with an agency that requires little of them, as if in a “listlessness of scripted consumption” that, while “innocuous and pleasant,” “did not move” (Robertson 2011, 199). Here affects are pre-formed in their capture, reduced to decoration: hope, for example, is a “spectacle” (196). Later in the rain, the open, scaffold-like architecture of the foliage of the park contrasts the diorama. The walk now becomes a resonant idleness, a “temporal sink” of intensity in which the speaker and guide are “persuade[d] towards disassembly. For such a disassembly is what the park performed upon [them]” (Massumi 2002, 26; Robertson 2011, 199). In this borderline space where nature and the urban overlap, affects become fugitive: “affects took on an independence. It was we who belonged to them. They hovered above the surfaces, disguised as clouds or mists, awaiting the porousness of a passing ego” (Robertson 2011, 200). Affects now “alight” upon the speaker and her guide, their “agitations” easing “beneath [the] skin”: an intensity registered in the “autonomic reaction” of the

surface of the body, “its interface with things” (Massumi 2002, 25). Here, the speaker and guide temporarily experience a profound interconnection with the world: as they discuss arborists, one appears; when they slice a rich cheese, the clouds and lilies tremble and a small child flees. The speaker admits that they are not static, separate identities but rather events of movement, “mixtures of unclassifiable actions” which conjure a sense of vitality in transformation (Robertson 2011, 197).

The shift between alienation and separation from each other and the city and the interconnection of walkers and city unfolds over the subsequent four walks. In the “Third Walk” and part of the “Fifth Walk,” the speaker and guide are not outside but are contained within an enclosed space of consumption (a restaurant and a shop). A negative sense of disconnection from each other and the environment is immediately apparent in the “Third Walk” as they sit together passive and silent. Inside the restaurant, the speaker and guide are efficiently “courted, seated, appeased” in a “monochrome corner,” where “placating foods” with “ruthlessly bland textures” magically appear (205-206). The speaker’s physical immobility in the restaurant corresponds to fixed identities and static positions, which not only capture but also reduce diverse experiences to a repetitively pleasurable outcome, recalling Nigel Thrift’s (2004) argument that affect is increasingly “actively engineered” in urban space for political ends (58). The speaker of Robertson’s text, who is feeling manipulated by a commodity fetishism that appeals most often to pleasure, experiences a shock akin to the punctuality of affective escape “localized in a specific event” as a sense of disconnection between herself, the guide, and the world (Massumi 2002, 36). Overwhelmed, the speaker flees outside and stops to observe the inside through the veiled windows, re-creating the diorama-effect from the “Second Walk” and underscoring the vacuity of a manufactured life in which “pleasure is a figured vacuum that does not recognize us as persons” (Robertson 2011, 207). The window becomes a reflective surface onto which is projected the mirage of the bourgeois self, a static subjectivity that mirrors a static world of isolated forms. Similarly, in the “Fifth Walk,” the speaker struggles against the seductive illusion of static forms and identities as she succumbs to a desire for certainty, manifest in a need to purchase a

mysterious object in the enclosed space of a shop. Once purchased, the speaker is giddy with happiness, an ego-consolidating emotional experience that diminishes her feeling of joyful connectedness with her guide and the world around her.

Reactive affects such as alienation associated with advanced capitalism and localized in interior spaces that render the speaker and guide immobile and silent are transformed into liberation and joy in the “Fourth Walk” and “Sixth Walk” as the speaker and guide walk through Vancouver’s streets, their physical mobility signifying their nomadic subjectivities. In the “Fourth Walk,” they wander in a “light-industrial district” at sunset, a liminal time when day and night overlap, what the speaker calls “the unprofitable time of the city, the pools of slowness, the lost parts” (210). Here liminality suggests the passage or transition of multiple and shifting identities of the walker and the city, which is liberating: as they walk, affects circulate, their virtuality like an “anxious pause” that is paradoxically “pressing forward” giving them a sense of freedom (211). This sense of liberation returns in the “Sixth Walk” as the speaker wakes to find herself already walking in the middle of a bridge at an unspecified time in a flow of the multitude of animals and humans from which she cannot differentiate herself or her guide. The bridge, which seems to have no beginning (that she can recall) or an end, is comprised of organic, forgotten, and useless refuse woven together to form a complex structure that will not reveal itself to the speaker because it is a constant state of flux: “we can approach the structures but not the substance, which is really more like a moving current” (219). As she walks, the bridge changes, responding “like dendrites of nerves” as if it were a living organism. Here the dynamic intensity of the experience registers through her skin: “you must absorb this artifact through your skin...you must absorb its insecurity” (220), recalling what Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (2001) term the “fleshy interface” between body and world (1). Swept up in the flux of her surroundings, the speaker describes the autonomy of affect as an undifferentiated flow between self and city: “It was not necessary to differentiate the sensations of particular organs or leaves since this rippling unknit the proprieties and zones of affect—the entire body became an instrument played by weather and chance” (Robertson 2011, 219). In the topology of the experience of the folding of walkers and

city, the speaker observes that “Like new cells speak us. We call itself a name. We call it change” (221).

Under the Pavement, Futures Yet Unthought: Walks One and Seven

Rethinking walking in Vancouver in terms of intensity and affectivity in “Seven Walks” enables an approach to change that must reconceive of the future for the walkers and their gentrifying city. The becoming of the speaker, guide, and Vancouver suggests a *new* newness, of difference, echoing Koolhaas’ new urbanism in opening up a space for uncertainty and potential. In this section, I examine the “First Walk” and the “Seventh Walk,” which frame the text, in terms of change and potential futures, making specific reference to Elizabeth Grosz’ (1999) “Thinking of the New: Of Futures Yet Unthought,” an essay that Robertson cites in her correspondence with Steve McCaffery alongside the work of De Landa and Koolhaas. As Grosz (1999) explains in the essay, the future can only admit the new when it is indeterminate: futurity cannot be conceived in terms of predictable or stable progress (17). In other words, the future new lies “beyond the control” of any political discourse of progress, both neoliberalism and its opponents—in the virtual (17). The virtual opens the future to the new based on differentiation and productive forces rather than resemblance and negative or restrictive movements of the possible. That is because the relation of virtuality to actuality is positive or productive. To understand the new of the open future, one must think the unthought; instead of the expectation inherent in the possible/real relation, we must think in terms of the unpredictability of an event, where the virtual is a divergence from, not a replication of, the actual. As Grosz explains, “The virtual never resembles the real that it actualizes. It is this sense that actualization is a process of creation that resists both the logic of identity and a logic of resemblance to substitute differentiation, divergence, and innovation. While the concept of the possible doubles that of the real, the virtual is the real of genuine production, innovation, creativity” (51). Simply put, the relation of the virtual to the actual is characterized by differentiation, that which creates the heterogeneous, a differentiation that, in “Seven Walks,” importantly begins with the sexually differentiated walkers. In contrast, the possible and the real are conceived as

self-identical: the possible only distinguishes itself from the real in quantity not quality, crossing over into the real, culled from a larger series of options in a retrospective narrativization of continuously emerging events. Consequently, the movement from possibility to reality is retroductive (Massumi 2002, 10). And just as extensive space (position, form) is retrospectively conceived from movement, a unified subject is back-formed from the becoming-subject (9).

Robertson (2011) rejects the idea of the new that, defined in terms of the capitalist narrative of progress, asserts only one possible future for the sexually differentiated walkers and Vancouver. This conflict between the new-as-the-same and the new-as-different plays out in the “First Walk” as the walkers begin their exploration of the city. Immediately, the tension is established between the open-ended future of emergence, which produces the new, and the predetermined future in which the new is pre-formed, recognizable, and contained. Before beginning the walk, the speaker laments “the way the day would proceed with its humiliating diligence” (190): “already it contained everything, even those elaborately balanced sentences that would not reveal themselves until noon” (194). As the day threatens to reveal nothing more than self-identity with its own past, the new is shut out in a process of resemblance and limitation. Yet as the speaker soon after observes, “it is unhelpful to read a day backwards” (190): to narrativize is to retrospectively fabricate a history of people and places as static objects. Such narratives are epitomized by a commemorative plaque mounted where the speaker and guide first meet. While the event of commemoration is unspecified, importantly, the plaque has been smashed. Official history as the linear, master narrative of the universal (male) subject is now destroyed. All that is left are the walkers and the city: alternative feminist histories now recounted in the living document of their embodied and embedded walks through Vancouver. As they set out, they “feel the sensation of unaccountability like a phantom limb” so that soon they “began to resist the logic of [their] identity, in order to feel free” (190). The shared, spectral sensation resonates with the temporary and permeable architecture that surrounds them, such as scaffolds and bombed windows (191). At the end of this walk, the speaker declares, “we wanted knowledge” (194), recalling a key question in Grosz

(1999): “Is knowledge opposed to the future” (21)? For Grosz (and Robertson), the answer is no: “If dominant modes of knowledge (causal, statistical) are incapable of envisioning the absolutely new, maybe other modes of knowing, other forms of thinking, need to be proposed” (Grosz 1999, 21). “Seven Walks” suggests other modes of knowing in the walkers’ experiences of intensity or affect. Unlike the modern subject, encapsulated in the nineteenth-century male flâneur who, in order to succeed in the emerging metropolis, domesticates and rationalizes the city through his gaze, the “outward-directed and forward-looking” (Braidotti 2002, 99) desires of the walkers in “Seven Walks” challenge the idea of mind or consciousness (the interior) as the location of knowledge.

The last walk, which frames the text like the “First Walk,” similarly explores the open futures of intensity. After the competing *potestas* and *potentia* that unfolds in the previous five walks, this final walk offers resolution, if temporary, in “the positivity of the intensive subject—its joyful affirmation as *potentia*” (Braidotti 2011b, 314). Here, the speaker and guide seem to fold into the city, indistinguishable from it, as if expressing a lived moment of emergence of a new, potential Vancouver that includes them. The walk opens with the speaker and guide using the “utopian perspective” as a lens through which to view the world. Not surprisingly, this lens fails them because utopia, as Grosz (2001) explains, “seeks a future that itself has no future, a future in which time will cease to be a relevant factor, and movement, change, and becoming remain impossible” (139, 143). Then as the speaker and guide begin to “imagine that [they] were several, even many,” identities morph into others: “women—what were they? Arrows or luncheons, a defenestration, a burning frame, a great stiff coat with its glossy folds, limbs, inner Spains” (Robertson 2011, 223, 222). Unlike the modern flâneur, these nomadic subjects subvert the binary structure of Self/Other in positing a flow and flux of multiplicities and differences in fluid identities that correspond with the city. As they “lean into the transition to night,” the walkers merge with each other and their surroundings as their chests “burst hugely upward to alight in the branches” and they fall back “gasping” (225, 226). They are now indistinguishable from the city in an openness that ends in a sentence without a period, a word left hanging, the next mark on

the page a potential, still unthought. Here, as human and non-human bodies come together and come undone together in a porous meshwork, they affirm the multiplicity and heterogeneity that enables the affective, intensive production of the walkers and city. Yet these embodied and embedded walkers stop short of proposing a definitive future. Instead, they open up space from which an alternative future can emerge.

Conclusion

Reimagining subjectivity in the sexually differentiated walkers in “Seven Walks” also means reimagining the urban environment. Whereas the modern flâneur is a universal, centralized subject whose panoptic scopophilia reinscribes binaries (male/female, public/private, etc.) in tandem with the capitalist objectification and commodification of cityspace as Other, the walkers in Robertson’s “Seven Walks” are coextensive with Vancouver, creatively and positively participating in the production of a different city in the positive and ethical terms of becoming. In “Seven Walks,” this interconnection of the walkers and the city in a transformative multiplicity of differences critically begins with the first steps of the sexually differentiated walkers because “sexual difference is... an embodied and embedded point of departure that signals simultaneously the ontological priority of difference and its self-organizing and self-transforming force” (Braidotti 2011b, 147). Yet these walkers are not only “figurations of alternative feminist subjectivity” (Braidotti 2002, 12) by repossessing women walking in public space from the nineteenth-century female walker coded as prostitute or shopper (Other of the Same) and locating her in the twenty-first century sexually differentiated nomadic subject (other of the Other). Importantly, these nomadic subjects, in undoing the power differentials of binary structure, are also integral to the figuration of a cityspace of differences, one that enables futures yet unthought in the “intensive interconnectedness” (Braidotti 2011a, 27), which enhances and empowers, between walkers and city, an interconnection absent in the rambles of the nineteenth-century modern flâneur whose gaze separates and objectifies. As Robertson confesses to McCaffery: “My outlook is not liberatory except by the most minor means” (Robertson and McCaffery 2000, 38). What could be more minor, in a Deleuzian sense,

for Robertson’s sexually differentiated subjects, than the everyday act of putting one foot in front of the other on the streets of Vancouver.

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