

# The Paradox of Inter/Disciplinarity: A Rethinking of the Politics of Inter/Disciplinarity and 'Women's and Gender Studies' for the Current Moment

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## Abstract

In this paper, we argue that Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) should be embraced and acknowledged as a discipline. This is premised on two contentions: that disciplines are arbitrarily differentiated and that couching WGS in the mystique of interdisciplinarity serves to marginalize the study of issues pertinent to gender, women, and feminisms in comparison to other topics. We maintain that WGS is disciplinary, but we also highlight the importance of multi- and interdisciplinary partnerships and research.  
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## Résumé

Dans cet article, nous faisons valoir que les études des

femmes et du genre doivent être acceptées et reconnues comme une discipline. Cet argument est basé sur deux assertions : que les disciplines font l'objet d'une distinction arbitraire et que la présentation des études des femmes et du genre dans la mystique de l'interdisciplinarité ne fait que marginaliser l'étude des enjeux pertinents au genre, aux femmes et au féminisme, comparativement à d'autres disciplines. Nous soutenons que les études des femmes et du genre sont disciplinaires, mais nous mettons aussi en évidence l'importance des partenariats et des recherches multidisciplinaires et interdisciplinaires.

## Introduction

Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) should be embraced and acknowledged as a discipline. This argument is premised on two contentions. The first is that disciplines are arbitrarily differentiated and that the dichotomy between disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity is a false one. The latter term in particular is commonly used but rarely defined. For the purposes of this paper, we adhere to the definition of 'interdisciplinarity' first set out by William H. Newell and William J. Green (1982): an "inquiry 'which critically draw[s] upon two or more disciplines and which lead[s] to an integration of disciplinary insights'"(24).<sup>1</sup> The second contention is that couching WGS in the mystique of interdisciplinarity serves to marginalize the study of issues pertinent to gender, women, and feminisms in comparison to other topics. As such, we maintain that WGS is disciplinary, but highlight the importance of cross-, multi-, and interdisciplinary partnerships and research.

To illustrate these points, we explore the definition and practice of interdisciplinarity in WGS programs as well as elsewhere in the humanities and the sciences. In our estimation, such discussions about, and debates over, inter/disciplinarity are of particular relevance when considering the efficacy, purpose, and value of a WGS doctoral degree. We thus offer a hypothetical Joint WGS PhD program which takes into account some of the intellectual tensions we outline in the first section of the paper. In advocating for a doctoral degree that is delivered as a Joint PhD program, we consider questions related to disciplinary boundaries, the importance of disciplinary subjectivity, and the need for cross-disciplinary knowledge production and career training (Boxer 1998).

## Interdisciplinarity vs. Disciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity is...one of the founding and key defining elements of feminist knowledge projects—it can probably be found in virtually every mission statement or program description of any Women's Studies program anywhere in the world. (Hark 2005, 10)

Since the first National Women's Studies Association conference in 1979, Women's Studies and feminist scholars have debated the interdisciplinary or disciplinary nature of the field and have examined

the efficacy, and even the possibility, of interdisciplinarity as an idea, an ideal, and a practice (Boxer 1998). In the latter case, this gave rise to new understandings of the intent and normative directions of Women's and Gender Studies as an area of inquiry. As early as the mid-2000s, Sabine Hark (2005) indicated that most WGS scholars regarded interdisciplinarity as a fundamental characteristic of the field (see also Maynard and Purvis 1998; Bostic 1998; DeVault 1999). A quarter of a century earlier, in the early 1980s, Sandra Coyner (1983) encouraged scholars to embrace and claim WGS as a discipline, and to refer to it as a discipline among other disciplines. While we, like Coyner (1983) and Ann Braithwaite (2012), recognize and are critical of the false boundaries produced when disciplines are delineated, WGS is a discipline both in aim and in practice and is one that embraces and benefits from exposure to and collaboration with a multiplicity of disciplinary objectives, methodologies, theories, and epistemologies.

In 1998, Judith A. Allen and Sally L. Kitch, in their article, "Disciplined by Disciplines?," argued that WGS constituted a new interdiscipline. They maintained that, through the process of transcending boundaries and borrowing from other disciplines, WGS had created a new and different arrangement of knowledges, epistemologies, and methodologies (Allen and Kitch 1998, 278). Braithwaite (2012) has further suggested that all disciplines are inherently interdisciplinary, in that no traditional discipline has ever operated in isolation, but has been built through cross-disciplinary interactions (see also Boxer 1998). While university and other funding models encourage disciplinary "bodies" to strictly define their own boundaries, such boundaries can be considered quite arbitrary.

Braithwaite (2012) has further pointed out that disciplinarity is usually taken to refer to the coherence of "a set of otherwise disparate elements: objects of study, methods of analysis, scholars, students, journals, and grants...disciplinarity is the means by which ensembles of diverse parts are brought into particular types of knowledge relations with each other" (211). Disciplinarity is less a reflection of "any naturally occurring or necessary divisions between types of knowledge," (211) than it is "a creation of historical moments and institutional and locational necessity" (212). As Coyner (1983) noted, disciplines often seem "more uniform, more

structured, more methodical, more 'disciplined' than areas closer at hand" (47). One of the most powerful myths about disciplines is that they are "unified bodies of knowledges, methods, approaches, and practitioners that make them different from each other" (Braithwaite 2012, 212). We suggest that this myth of the unified discipline, as opposed to the unbounded interdiscipline, is ultimately damaging to traditionally interdisciplinary subjects like WGS.

The notion of uni-disciplinary competence, as Julie Thompson Klein (1993) has asserted, ignores the reality that "the degree of specialization and the volume of information that fall within the boundaries of a named academic discipline are larger than any single individual can master" (188). It renders invisible the "differences between sub-disciplines in any field; connections between sub-specialties across different fields, and the frequency of cross disciplinary influences in the modern university" (Braithwaite 2012, 212). Most importantly, the positing of disciplines as 'unified', as contrasted to interdisciplinarity, ignores the fluidity—the "constant negotiation and struggle [in] redrawing boundaries and redistributing areas of investigation"—within disciplines (213). This definition of disciplinarity, which is understood as being about "overlaps, intersections, blurred boundaries, and new and shifting configurations of knowledge... seems to also describe how interdisciplinarity is largely understood" (213).

We argue that to be a new interdiscipline is to (rightly) claim disciplinary title and space and that the particular ways that WGS accepts, takes up, rejects, contends with, and celebrates certain histories, epistemologies, subjects of study, and methodologies can be described as a collective project of constructing WGS (Allen and Kitch 1998). As such, we reject Wendy Brown's (2008) claim, in "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," that women's studies should be dismantled and absorbed into other disciplines. In our view, her dismissive analysis does not do justice to the scholars who are doing WGS. There is also a risk associated with consistently denying disciplinarity in the act of creating WGS, as the acts of working, constructing, and doing "in the field" does create a something "there" that was not "there" before (McCaughy 2012, 138-139). Functionally, identifying the "there" as always interdisciplinary is to deny opportunities for cri-

tiquing the phenomenological roots of the process of discipline formation.

### **Interdisciplinarity Elsewhere**

Interdisciplinarity is not a new concept. As Irwin Feller has pointed out, "it is the way that many disciplines, particularly the life sciences, naturally evolve" (Feller quoted in Pray 2002, par. 3) and hence, interdisciplinarity has considerable currency in the natural sciences. In conducting a cursory review of Canadian universities, we found that the University of Toronto offers some of the most robust interdisciplinary programs in the country. Despite this, the University of Toronto's WGS program is somewhat uniquely considered its own discipline. By focusing on the University of Toronto as a case study and by referring to a number of other North American programs, we explore concepts of inter/disciplinarity and its tensions and challenges in relation to WGS.

At the University of Toronto, the disciplinary field of History covers an "inexhaustible range of topics" (Department of History 2013, par. 1), including the subfields of "aboriginal societies, labour, psychiatry, patterns of settlement and migration, politics, the Renaissance, revolution, rock 'n' roll, slavery, superstition, trade unions, women studies, and more" (Department of History 2013, par.1). The discipline of Political Science also encourages "creative research...in an array of interdisciplinary areas of inquiry" (Department of Political Science 2013, par. 1). Similarly, the Women and Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto has claimed WGS as a discipline, while encouraging "an engagement with an interdisciplinary range of theories and methods that grapple with how gender and sexuality is tangled with questions of race, citizenship, embodiment, colonialism, nation, global capitalism, violence, and aesthetics" (Women and Gender Studies Institute 2013b, par. 2).

Many North American universities claim to formalize "the long-standing interdisciplinary commitments of a diverse faculty" (Interdisciplinary Graduate Program in Neuroscience 2013, par. 2) and "are changing to meet contemporary demands," as "disciplinary boundaries are shifting" (Laursen, Thiry, and Loshbaugh 2009, 1). Examples of interdisciplinary engagement can be found in disciplines as diverse as Atlantic Canadian Studies, Policy Studies, History, Forestry,

Neuroscience, Comparative Literature, Environmental Studies, and Chemistry. For example, much like WGS, Chemistry PhD programs across the United States are “developing research interests with faculty and graduate students in different fields, and enjoying the intellectual challenges and discoveries in new areas of study,” as “strong interdisciplinary relationships and maximum flexibility within research options allow...universities outside the top ten to attract outstanding faculty and students” (Laursen, Thiry, and Loshbaugh 2009, 1). In the field of Engineering, “research institutions are experiencing a surge of innovative interdisciplinary initiatives aimed at bringing together students, postdocs, and faculty from different departments to solve complex problems in ways that they have never tried before” (Pray 2002, par. 1). What all of these programs showcase is that applying the label of ‘discipline’ has not served to diminish the transcendence of disciplinary boundaries.

Interdisciplinarity, however, is not the only term used to describe the processes associated with transcending disciplinary boundaries. In 2006, the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies, for example, defined trans-, inter-, and multidisciplinary as follows:

Multidisciplinarity involves a variety of disciplines but without integration of concepts, epistemologies or methodologies. In interdisciplinarity, concepts, methodologies and epistemologies are explicitly exchanged and integrated. Transdisciplinarity is a specific form of interdisciplinarity in which boundaries between and beyond disciplines are transcended and knowledge and perspectives from different scientific disciplines as well as non-scientific sources are integrated. (Bertrand et al. 2006, 2)

Presumably, exposure to a wide array of disciplinary backgrounds would enable graduate students to work at the crossroads of or to draw on a multiplicity of disciplines to enhance understanding of whatever topic is under study. Many programs use interdisciplinarity as a ‘buzzword,’ but there is a difference between engaging meaningfully in interdisciplinary research and marketing one’s program as such because of its current popularity.

We observe that interdisciplinarity is often used to stand in for multidisciplinary, as defined above, and that this application goes unproblematized both in traditional disciplines as well as in WGS because of the popular appeal of the term. For example, the Univer-

sity of Nevada in Las Vegas houses a multidisciplinary studies degree program *within* their interdisciplinary studies programs, which begs the question of what they mean by either. They describe their *multidisciplinary* program as one that “combines specialized knowledge from individual disciplines as a means of approaching and analyzing problems from divergent and multidisciplinary perspectives” (Interdisciplinary Degree Programs 2015, par. 1). However, the combination and integration of concepts from separate disciplines can be either interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary: the difference lies in the extent to which integration is structured. Interdisciplines are a meaningful combination, or synergy, of two or more disciplines to create something new. Multidisciplinarity is any combination of one or more discipline. It is unclear in the above example if there is clear understanding of the differences.

Similarly, Northwestern University’s *Multidisciplinary Program in Education Sciences* is described as:

...An innovative interdisciplinary doctoral training program to develop a cadre of scholars trained to conduct relevant and reliable research on pressing policy and practice issues in education. This Multidisciplinary Program in Education Sciences (MPES) is intended for students who want to pursue a research agenda that focuses on practical questions in U.S. education from a rigorous interdisciplinary perspective. The program seamlessly integrates training in statistics, evaluation, cognition and learning, and education policy. (School of Education and Social Policy 2013, par. 1-2)

This second example again demonstrates that it is not clear what the difference is between an inter- or a multidisciplinary program. In this case, the two are used interchangeably, one in the title of the program and the other in describing it. Without consistently using the correct definitions, it is impossible to know how meaningfully the disciplines interact.

Within WGS, definitions such as multi- and interdisciplinarity still fail to capture the ways that WGS scholars use diverse disciplines relationally in research and teaching. What we have achieved in WGS meets the definition of interdisciplinarity, in that we have created something new. In WGS, the integration, transcendence, and even the involvement of multiple disciplines takes place in a deeply meaningful way, and the ways that feminists have theorized knowledge in WGS has

given rise to unique methods and epistemologies. An example of this is the characteristically feminist practice of reflexivity in academic study, wherein nothing exists in a vacuum and all points of connection can also be points of transmission, influence, and change.

While it is possible to argue that WGS is inherently liminal, we do not support the view that more traditional disciplines are less liminal or more fixed. We suggest that all disciplines exist on the boundary lines of other disciplines, and yet other disciplines are seen as more legitimate place holders in terms of disciplinary status. Susan Stanford Friedman (1998) points out that many disciplines were considered interdisciplinary in their formative years before attaining recognized disciplinary status (319; see also Pryse 2000, 107). Like disciplines, such as Sociology, History, or Political Science that are no doubt influenced by connections to other disciplines, WGS is similarly constituted. In other words, it would appear that, in practice, disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity cannot easily be distinguished from each other (Braithwaite 2012).

### **Interdisciplinarity in Practice**

In the 2006 work, *Practicing Interdisciplinarity in Gender Studies*, Enikő Demény et al. examined European understandings and applications of interdisciplinarity in the context of collaboratively planning the “ideal” interdisciplinary WGS Master’s course. In their view, what scholars and students in the field referred to as interdisciplinary work could better be described as multidisciplinary (Demény et al. 2006, 8). They also maintained that the use of the term interdisciplinarity sometimes masks the problems and inconsistencies associated with making hasty connections or applying discipline-specific terminology ahistorically and out of context (5-10). Despite these concerns with interdisciplinarity, the six WGS scholars involved in the collaborative course development project—Enikő Demény (Babes-Bolyai University, Romania), Clare Hemmings (London School of Economics, UK), Ulla Holm (Göteborg University, Sweden), Päivi Korvajärvi (University of Tampere, Finland), Theodossia-Soula Pavlidou (University of Thessaloniki, Greece), and Veronica Vasterling (Radboud University, The Netherlands)—were not prepared to abandon the concept. However, they were not in agreement about how to construct a feasible model of interdisciplinary practice.

One of the reasons for this lack of consensus was that the members of the group were generationally, geographically, politically, and disciplinarily diverse. While grounded in feminist studies to varying degrees, their disciplinary backgrounds included Linguistics, Philosophy, Literary Theory, and Psychology, all “mixed” with feminist studies (Demény et al. 2006, 11). This diversity also contributed to some of the difficulties they encountered in designing the syllabus, both in terms of structure and content, for this ideal Master’s-level course. While the six scholars shared a common project vision, when the group came together, each bringing their own proposed syllabi, they were surprised at what each of them had produced. Each project member had avoided clustering disciplines or introducing themes and concepts in an arbitrary manner; however, each of them had also been hesitant to overstep their own disciplinary boundaries when determining the topics and concepts best taught under the auspices of a different discipline. Namely, each scholar had described what the other scholar ought to teach based on their own limited knowledge of the other scholars’ fields.

This raises a key question about interdisciplinarity: are practitioners required to have expert-level knowledge in multiple fields in order to work interdisciplinarily? Is this possible or feasible? Our knowledges are only ever partial, and our specific situated experiences and academic training limit, and expand, our understandings of the world in particular ways (Haraway 1988, 13-24). The above case study demonstrates the need to engage in interdisciplinary training with attention to potential blind spots and with a commitment to strong partnerships across disciplines. We aim to address this dilemma in our PhD program. As described below, our program is a joint degree with two disciplinary ‘homes’ and is designed to address the need for strong interdisciplinarity.

### **WGS as a Discipline**

Given that disciplines are increasingly recognizing and expanding the scope of their inherent interdisciplinarity in research focus as well as methodologies, the distinction between interdisciplinarity and disciplinarity is an arbitrary one. From our perspective, WGS should not be couched in the mystique of interdisciplinarity, but rather should be recognized as a discipline with some agreement on its foundational texts, shared

affiliations through conferences, associations, and journals, engagement in specific debates, a common (if ever fluid) language, and other features signalling discipline-ness. In other words, we imagine WGS as a discipline that was founded in the margins of an array of disciplines and one that has successfully eked out for itself a defined and refined institutional and intellectual position. The WGS programs that are operating now as well as the ones we envision for the future are an iteration of disciplinarity with a strong emphasis on engaging and being in relationship with/belonging in a multiplicity of disciplines.

In discussions about contemporary WGS, there appears to be a lack of consideration of the past to account for the ways in which all disciplines come to be as well as how the multiplicity of subject matters and research methods associated with many disciplinary fields constitute, validate, and improve each other (Boxer 1998, 388-389). Perhaps one difference between WGS and traditional disciplines is that, while the latter might consider interdisciplinarity to be useful for expanding the breadth and capacity of researchers to produce cutting edge scholarship, WGS has thus far existed at the crux of multiple areas of inquiry and is seldom seen as standing 'alone.' This particularly applies to the presence or absence of stand-alone WGS PhD programs. While we acknowledge that various WGS units have established Ph.D. programs, in our view, a Joint PhD program would best serve WGS graduate students.

### **Our Program: 'Gender, Feminisms, and Women's Research'**

In developing our program, it became apparent that we had to decide on the purview of an ideal WGS doctoral training program. We propose 'Gender, Feminist, and Women's Research (GFWR):' this is meant to reflect the breadth of research topics that faculty and students engage with, many of which are not adequately represented by the name Women's and Gender Studies. Our choice to center 'gender research' signifies a rejection of dualistic gender theorizing and an explicit adoption of gender frameworks that are inclusive of the study of all facets of gender expression. Within gender research, there is space, albeit a potentially problematic one, for sexuality studies. Guided by Gayle Salamon's (2008) and Bobby Noble's (2012) work on the easy, but misguided, alienating, and even dangerous conflation

of gender and sexuality, we recognize that by naming gender and not sexuality and by housing the latter within the former, we are complicit in privileging the study of gender over sexuality. As Salamon (2008) argues, it is impossible to consider gender and sexuality as wholly separate, and yet to consider them as the same is inaccurate and can lead to faulty analyses of issues related to gender and sexuality (115-136; see also Noble 2012, 277-292). In naming the program, GFWR, we acknowledge that we are privileging the area of studies named in the title, but we have chosen these pillars to reflect the larger, more established base of research and scholarship in the studies of gender, feminist, and women's studies than in some related areas. While gender, feminist, and women's studies constitute our envisioned three main pillars of research, we would house sexuality, queer, trans, and critical masculinity studies within and around gender research; these latter fields would work in the spaces between the three main pillars as well as in and through them. In encouraging work done by, for, and with multiple subjects, we would aim to house multiple fields within our GFWR program.

The decision to highlight 'feminist research' functions to signal the important political work done in WGS departments and programs. Catherine Orr (2012) has rightly problematized the notion that WGS academic scholarship must be 'activist' in conventional terms (85-101) and we resist the loss narrative that idealizes Women's Studies' more 'activist' past (Hemmings 2011, 59-94). At the same time, it is important to emphasize, as does Orr, that the act of engaging in feminist academic work is a form of activism. We agree with Wendy Brown's assertion that "privileging the political over the intellectual...[effectively] concedes that these operate on separate planes" and contributes to a lack of vibrancy within the field (Orr 2012, 85-101). We envision that the work done in a GFWR program would not rely on the false distinction between academic and activist, but rather would embrace a broader definition of activism that includes politically relevant academic work.

Despite, and perhaps because of, the ways in which feminist and WGS scholars have troubled the field, we insist that this line of research remains ever contemporary and relevant, while remaining in conversation with other research areas to forward comprehensive and rigorous analyses in WGS (Braithwaite et al. 2005). Feminist research has made significant con-

tributions to, and drawn critical insights from, critical race studies, law and public policy, history, ethnic studies, and critical disability studies. Feminisms have also changed and developed because of the acknowledgement that truth is only ever partial (Braithwaite et al. 2005). We see the frameworks of multiple feminisms acting as a hinge between peoples' academic and activist work and as a mechanism to recognize the political work that happens in WGS departments and programs.

The inclusion of 'women's research' reflects our desire to build on historical Women's Studies. Like the word feminist, the term 'woman' has been used to implicitly define the subject as white and middle class and has resulted in the privileging of their narrowly-defined and exclusive concerns and issues. However, Judith Butler (2004) has argued that contested terms "are never finally and fully tethered to a single use" (179); they are also "not to be seen as merely tainted goods" (180) due to their changeability. She further maintains that the reappropriation of such terms has progressive possibilities. Hence, the continued use of the word women indicates an attempt at reappropriation and re-interpretation to include women's multiple and partial narratives and experiences in the definition of women.

### **Joint PhD Program**

In keeping with Boxer's (1998) assertion that the most common administrative unit for a discipline is a department and that the introduction of a PhD program constitutes the highest level of disciplinary achievement, we encourage the development of a capstone, joint PhD. When the PhD program in Women's Studies was launched in the Pacific Northwest in the late 1990s, faculty and students expressed concern that, even though this move would institutionally validate this area of study, a Women's Studies doctoral degree would not be competitive in a job market still unsympathetic to interdisciplinary degrees (Yee 1993, 368-369). This move is a response to the recognition that, while WGS is a discipline, it does not offer the same opportunities for career advancement that other disciplines potentially do.<sup>2</sup>

In advocating for a Joint PhD program, we are not suggesting that WGS should not be considered to be or continue to operate as a stand-alone discipline. The Joint PhD program we have in mind recognizes WGS or GFWR as a full-fledged discipline and addresses the

real-world job market, inside and outside of academe, where having skills and background knowledge in other disciplines is highly advantageous for new graduates. We believe that, through a joint degree, scholars from across disciplines could pursue their WGS interests and, through this engagement, more scholars would institutionally validate GFWR by taking and rigorously applying the rich education obtained in the program into a variety of academic settings. Recognized disciplines receive more formal institutional recognition, have easier access to space and funding, and are more attractive to PhD students. Our PhD program would provide an intellectual and physical space for intersectional research production and benefit scholars through shared equipment and funding, while lending credibility to intersectional research that is typically inhibited when physical space is denied. The shared funding and resources allocated for intersectional research would minimize competition between disciplines for capital and reduce redundant spending. In our estimation, rather than being threatened by the pairing of two disciplines, WGS or GFWR would be strengthened and made more applicable in today's job market through multidisciplinary partnerships. We envision the GFWR program as a potential site of cutting edge intersectional research that blurs disciplinary boundaries and creates spaces for strengthened bonds between knowledge production and scholars alike.

### **Conclusion**

We remain confident about the importance and applicability of a WGS education at the graduate level. We insist on the importance of explicitly centering research pertaining to, or about, women, gender, and feminisms in the traditional university environment. Further, we remain committed to engaging dynamically with the needs of WGS academics and students with a view to the long-term future of the field. In regard to our Joint PhD program, we are optimistic about the potential for graduate-level WGS programs to travel and be constitutive of other disciplinary fields and, in so doing, further institutionally validate WGS as a discipline. The paradox of our argument for WGS' disciplinarity is that every discipline may be considered to be to some degree interdisciplinary. However, this constructive tension enables critical inquiry into the institutionalization of epistemological praxis. As we have explored, many

other disciplines in both the humanities and sciences have already reaped the benefits of 'interdisciplinary discipline' status. Defining oneself as a discipline does not serve to eliminate inter- and multidisciplinary inquiries, methodologies, and research. We have argued that the dichotomy between 'disciplinary' and 'interdisciplinary', which has so entrapped the field of WGS over the past decades, is a false one. To continue to couch WGS in the mystique of interdisciplinarity as opposed to taking up the position of discipline-hood has had, and will continue to have, detrimental consequences for both the intellectual work and scholars in WGS.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion on definitional struggles, see Grace 1996, 59-61.

<sup>2</sup> While jobs in WGS in some contexts are on the rise, in many academic institutions, as well as in non-academic sectors, an education in WGS may be considered a poor preparatory degree, or even a hindrance, to finding work.

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