What Is Lost in "Restoring Truth and Sanity": Queer Approaches to Absence, Silence, and Erasure in Archival Description

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ABSTRACT

Since Trump's second inauguration, over a dozen executive orders have been established that aim to terminate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and programs, deter the use of inclusive language, and strip away human rights. These executive orders have impelled memory workers to revise the historical record at vital institutions like the Stonewall National Monument and the Smithsonian Museums and to remove previously public data and history from government sites.

This is far from the first time forces outside of the archival profession have urged the rewriting, simplification, or erasure of complex histories, nor is it the first time archival practitioners have resisted. We combine findings from two projects—qualitative interviews with archival practitioners and an analysis of geographically-specific queer collections—to surface critical acts of resistance performed by archival practitioners that refuse the erasure of LGBTQIA+ history and reject the fallacy of archival neutrality. Further, our findings suggest that, even in an era of active archival erasure that uniquely impacts LGBTQIA+ communities, the roles of archival silence and invisibility are complex and hardly a binary of presence and absence.

Based on these findings, we call for a decentralized and depoliticized archival processing—one that does not bend to partisan whims, but instead prioritizes the voices of those whose materials they are collecting. While our research is specific to LGBTQIA+-related collections, our findings can direct us toward broader, everyday acts of resistance possible within the modern archival profession.

Introduction

Since Trump's second inauguration in January 2025, he has signed over 200 executive orders, touching everything from border security and tariffs to TikTok and paper straws (Trump 2025a, 2025c, 2025e, 2025g). A subset of these orders aims to codify definitions around certain identity- and history-related language, attempting to dictate a hyper-specific set of "truths." These "truths" create the foundation of the political discourses of the second

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Trump administration that state that sex and gender are "immutable" and binary, that race is a "biological reality," and that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs are "dangerous, demeaning, and immoral," among other ideas (Trump 2025b, 2025d, 2025f).

One executive order, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," goes so far as to retroactively apply these Trumpian "truths" to federal memory institutions and the histories they reflect. This order aims to "restore Federal sites dedicated to history," correcting the "historical revision" that describes the United States' legacy as "inherently racist, sexist, oppressive, or otherwise irredeemably flawed" (Trump 2025f).

Following the "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History" executive order, a letter was sent from the White House to Secretary of the Smithsonian Lonnie G. Bunch III, stating that the White House would be performing a review of the Smithsonian's exhibitions and materials in advance of the 250th anniversary of the nation's founding. The White House letter makes clear that it expects the Smithsonian to comply with its requests, namely shifting its narrative across all the museums to align with "Americanism" (The White House 2025). The intended outcome is to have the Smithsonian "celebrate American exceptionalism, remove divisive or partisan narratives, and restore confidence in our shared cultural institutions" by running all its content by the Trump administration first.

Bunch responded with a pair of letters, one to the White House and one to his staff. While the letter to the White House has remained private thus far, it has been reported that the letter to his staff asserts that the Smithsonian's "independence is paramount," confirms his team's authority over the Smithsonian's programming, and shares that they will conduct their own internal review without the assistance of the White House (Pogrebin and Bowley 2025). Bunch's response highlights a critical misconception on the part of Trump and his cabinet: the belief that history can be rewritten by simply removing data, terminology, and collections from federal memory institutions. What surfaces here is a clear misunderstanding on the Trump administration's part of the practical, everyday work that memory institutions undertake.

We found Bunch's refusal to comply with the White House's requests reminiscent of themes that surfaced in a pair of projects we recently undertook—one that engaged with archival practitioners to better understand how they describe LGBTQIA+-related archival materials, and one that qualitatively reviewed LGBTQIA+ collections from the Deep South. By highlighting research from these projects, we argue that we can look to archivists of queer materials for guidance on how to resist this revisionist movement. Our findings show that queer archival resistance has always happened and will continue to happen regardless of government mandates. We will show that there have always been people working to fill in the intentional and unintentional gaps left by institutions, especially when it comes to LGBTQIA+ history, and that they have done so with a careful eye to the tensions between visibility and vulnerability.

Findings from these projects will provide context to the ways practitioners, archival objects, and even queer folks themselves participate in framing a version of American history that is counterinstitutional and thus more participatory and democratic. Through these findings, we offer theoretical and practical methods for extending and sustaining LGBTQIA+ history and its archival elements beyond a given administrative call and towards non-neutral and, perhaps more importantly, non-ambivalent forms of preservation. To do this, we must first situate the Trump administration's actions in archival contexts.

Literature Review

Archival Neutrality

Historians and archivists have come to reject the imagined neutrality of archives and archival work and instead contend that the impulse to archive is itself rooted in an urge to define truth and to enact (and combat) political ideology (Zinn 1977; Derrida 1995; Caswell 2021). While such ideological underpinnings destabilize notions of neutrality from a political vantage point, the work of enacting identity onto archives furthers tension around neutrality. The project of naming and identifying queerness within state records was, as Melissa Adler (2017) shows, an act of taxonomic oppression, used to demarcate the perverse as a means to control and institutionalize non-normative and non-productive bodies. In the context of the current discourses of the Trump administration, Adler's history of queerness as collocational to the paraphilic emerges through reimaginings of transgender identity as a psychological disorder whose threat to society warrants legal means to prevent transgender individuals from legal care (Mulvihill 2025).

Verne Harris (2002) further reveals, in his analysis of South Africa's own records of apartheid, both state-sanctioned erasure and the everyday routines of document removal produced profound absences in the records of the country's racialized violence. Within the contexts of the Trump administration's explicit anti-queer endeavors, we can understand how erasure is explicitly happening through the removal of entire records and data sets from government archives, queer or otherwise (Stobbe and Schneider 2025). Further, like Harris's own observations that not all archival erasure is enacted by the state, queerness itself often gets overlooked due to factors including but not limited to non-queer positionalities within appraising and describing queer archival materials (Cifor 2015), the shifting nature of queerness as a category of identity not explicit within a historical document (Lee 2020), and the way that systems of labeling and categorization flatten rather than nuance queerness (Christensen 2008).

Harrison Apple (2021) further notes the non-neutrality of archives by observing their capitalist underpinnings. Recalling the specific ways that other archivists negated the ethics of Apple's Pittsburgh Queer History Project and noting their intent to eventually access deaccessioned materials upon Apple's death, Apple suggests an often underconsidered value in archival refusal: the choice for archives not to produce material evidence. Pushing this concept further reminds archivists and scholars alike that even notions of collaboration elide the embodied realities of those who will eventually become the subjects of archival representation. Specifically, Apple states, "While a number of contemporary community archives scholars have advocated for a participatory ethos as a way to preclude alienation and refusal, it is also true that few donors wish to spend their time reminiscing, especially as it concerns heartbreak, loss, and personal violence" (130). Neutrality, when it comes to queer archival work, fails to acknowledge the persistent ways that historical discourses push queerness to the shadows and to spaces outside of normative gazes. Neutrality reifies an impetus to bring those stories and those materials into the visible lens of an archive, regardless of their cost to queer populations.

Archival Silence and Absence

Historically, calling upon ideas of archival silence served as a means to make visible and name institutional failures (Gilliland 2011). Archives as sites of discourse production work as a technology to enact and normalize particular identities and voices (Carter 2006). As noted, this silence can come from both state-sanctioned erasure and the everyday activities of archi-

val appraisal and curation, which toss aside materials that appear mundane, yet are potentially evidence-rich (Harris 2002). At an infrastructural level, both intentional and accidental erasure produce what Michelle Caswell (2014) defines as symbolic annihilation. Borrowing from feminist media scholarship, Caswell contends that institutional archives manifest descriptive, representational, and mediated absences that, when repeated, imply an absence of marginalized voices from archives. Caswell offers community archives as an inversion of this annihilation, as they provide evidentiary alternatives while giving communities agency in how they represent themselves. However, as Apple warns, even community archives cannot serve as a singular alternative, given that silence can, at times, be an intentional choice to exist outside of the cache-building drives of archives.

Archival silence also echoes broader questions of epistemicide within the library and information sciences, wherein the erasure and devaluing of knowledge, especially in digital settings, explain the systemic ways absence persists within the cultural record (Youngman and Patin 2024). As Youngman and Patin note, epistemicide exists across the cultural heritage produced on behalf of libraries, archives, and museums as the custodians of knowledge, and one such result of this is "documentary injustice" or the use of digital tools to reify and exploit marginalized populations (18). As persistent anti-queer acts flow down from the Trump administration, we can see documentary injustices unfolding through acts of explicit erasure from historical monuments under the banner of anti-trans ideologies (Kim 2025).

Remembering that visibility remains as much a threat as a possibility (Foucault 1978), rethinking archival silence and absence from a site of queerness reveals its own set of epistemicides. For example, in health-care settings, queer individuals often use a variety of protective and defensive information practices that ensure that individuals and their communities receive contextually relevant information while avoiding outing a person to anti-queer parents or making such knowledge known to employers who could leverage laws to fire a person based on their sexuality or gender identity (Kitzie et al. 2022). In digital spaces, this can mean the use of closed social media groups or anonymous message boards, allowing for one to obtain information without allowing outsiders to access that information (Kitzie 2018; Bowman 2025). While there are examples of technologies vital to queer information exchange becoming silent due to content moderation and the decay of digital infrastructure (Brewster and Ruberg 2020; Haimson et al. 2019), far less acknowledged are the ways that material histories of queerness purposefully remain non-archivable. While the political stakes of such visibility are becoming all too relevant, queer collections exist in institutional and community archives, and the increasingly digital nature of those access points produces concerns for how even the terms of queerness place materials, institutions, and, most importantly, queer individuals themselves into the crosshairs of erasure.

Methods

We combine two research projects that work to understand the ways US LGBTQIA+-related archival materials are described. While these projects diverge in methodology and specific focus population, we pair them to gain a fuller picture of the practices and products of knowledge workers who engage with LGBTQIA+ materials.

Allgood is a white, nonbinary, transmasculine, queer, doctoral student in information science at an R1 Midwestern university. Their experience in GLAMs has primarily been within a community-led, LGBTQIA+-focused library and through archival internships with community and institutional archives.

Wagner is a white, genderqueer, queer assistant professor in an information science school at an R1 Midwestern university. They have both studied and worked in archives and have engaged in queer-focused archival work within both community and institutional archives.

Project 1

The first project utilized findings from interviews with 29 US-based archival practitioners concerning their approaches to archival description for LGBTQIA+-related materials. Archives for this project included a broad range across academic, community-led, private, public, and digital institutions. Further, participants included both institutions with queer-specific collection mandates and archives that included queer collections as part of broader archival endeavors. Queer collection sizes ranged from a single collection to hundreds of unique collections.

Interviews occurred between October 2024 and January 2025. With participant permission, interviews were audio recorded, transcribed via manual and machine transcription, and anonymized. Interviews were qualitatively coded by the research team, and transcripts and initial findings were shared with participants for member checking. For more information on methods, see Wagner et al. 2025.

The identities of the participants, pulled from a voluntary demographic form, included practitioners' gender identities, which included men, women, trans men, trans, nonbinary, genderqueer, and agender. Sexualities disclosed by participants include heterosexual, straight, queer, bisexual, pansexual, gay, lesbian, androsexual, asexual, and questioning. In terms of race and ethnicity, participants identified as white, mixed race, Latinx, and Hispanic. For further details and specific percentages of demographics, see Wagner et al. 2025.

Project 2

The second project was a qualitative review of 312 archival finding aids related to Deep Southern LGBTQIA+ individuals and organizations. This work was done in partnership with Invisible Histories, a community-based archive that preserves queer history in the Deep South—then defined as Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and the Florida Panhandle. Invisible Histories had preselected a list of 42 institutions for review (see Allgood 2025, Appendix A). From this list, we created a database of relevant collections to provide a springboard for inexperienced researchers.

Collections met our inclusion metrics as long as the Southern regionality that surfaced in the finding aid was related to queerness in some capacity and the combination of queer and Southern identity came up with sufficient frequency. Only collections with online finding aids were reviewed.

Allgood performed light inductive coding on the abstracts, biographical/historical notes, and the subject terms and classified each institution based on its location, institutional style, and collecting focus. For further information, see Allgood 2025.

Findings

Enacting Queer Archival Description in Response to Threats of Erasure

The erasure of LGBTQIA+ histories, people, and materials is familiar to archivists. As Brak, a nonbinary, androsexual, white archival practitioner, succinctly noted in their interview, while "LGBTQ peoples are in every single walk of life . . . Unfortunately, because of

privilege, access, resources, and available time . . . [archival materials] have been predominantly, kind of, created or chosen or interpreted by cisgendered white men."

The reality that LGBTQIA+ materials have either not been collected or were collected but not made available pervaded the interviews. For example, Serena, a white, questioning female, shared that her institution's sole LGBTQIA+ collection was originally "just in a box labeled 'gay' with no finding aid, no nothing—it was just kind of in the back somewhere." The materials had been collected, but the lack of a finding aid made it impossible for researchers to encounter them, let alone engage with their contents.

Luckily, archival practitioners have been taking steps to make LGBTQIA+ collections like this one more visible and accessible. In Serena's case, her institution is revisiting the collection and practicing reparative description. She asserted that this allows them to "actually represent the full spectrum of LGBTQ individuals represented in the collection, and then also talk about it and publicly publish the finding aid." Similarly, Jennika, a white, heterosexual, cisgender female, noted that her institution is embracing their handful of "queer collections that would be considered artificial," and stated that she knew "there are archival purists who would disagree with them, but I think there are some realities we have to accept." She went on to say that "we can't let [institutional disinterest] stand in the way of creating visibility." Rather than feeling bound by traditional archival practice, practitioners like Serena and Jennika deploy artificial collections to highlight and make LGBTQIA+ history more accessible.

Even LGBTQIA+-specific institutions necessitated reparative work. For example, JD, a white, queer male, noted that, in his organization, "a concern that we have a lot is, like, who is not being represented, and how do we elevate that representation? Bi erasure is just like a constant problem, and trans erasure is a problem." JD further stated that "sometimes, in subjects, I will put 'bisexual' when I wouldn't put 'gay' or 'lesbian,' just because, for some reason, I feel like elevating bisexual collections seems like a course correction." JD's note shows how archivists of LGBTQIA+ materials may take care to adequately describe and make accessible individual identities alongside their umbrella identities.

Disentangling specific identities from an indelicate amalgamation like "LGBTQIA+" encourages us to also investigate what styles of erasure may appear when considering intersectional identities. For example, literature shows that the myth of the "impossible queer South"—the belief that there are no queer people in the South, whether intrinsically or because they inevitably migrate north and/or to urban centers—is both pervasive and false (Halberstam 2005; Gray 2009; Schweighofer 2016; Johansen 2021). In fact, many queer Southerners feel that their "Southernness" is inextricable from their queerness and vice versa (Johansen 2021).

Despite this literature, our review of LGBTQIA+ Southern collections shows that these identities are rarely discussed in conjunction. Throughout the 312 collections, only two finding aids referred to this intersection of identity explicitly: the Suzanne Pharr papers, which describe Pharr as "a Southern queer feminist," and the Southern Lesbian-Feminist Activist Herstory Project collection (Pharr 1958–2021; Southern Lesbian-Feminist Activist Herstory Project 2001–2020). The other collections treated the intersection of queerness and Southernness as happenstance, not as inextricably bound, which surfaces two points of interest: first, a reminder to emphasize intersectional identity when relevant; and second, a nod to the possibility of intentional obfuscation for the purposes of safety, which will be discussed shortly.

Reframing Donors, Community Knowledge, and Archival Practice

Participants also described a unique relationship between donors and archivists that arose around LGBTQIA+ materials. According to JD, the usual archival process is as follows: "Traditional archiving, the archiving that I was taught at library school, right . . . was, 'Hey, you have donors, and the donors come to you, and then you teach them how archives work, and then they go away.'" Nearly every interviewee, including JD, shared that they do not follow this process with LGBTQIA+ collections; instead, they invite donors to participate further.

In JD's case, he thinks of their donors as "part of the staff, like an extended part of the staff." He described the archival process as collaborative and his organization as "caretakers of community history" rather than "owners." For him, this included engaging with donors at "every step of the process," from early conversations through collection description.

While other interviewees did not necessarily engage with donors at every step, multiple practitioners said they asked donors to review their work whenever possible. For example, Jet, a nonbinary, queer, Hispanic person, said, "I usually explain it that way, like, 'This is still your collection. I'm the steward—or we're the stewards—of your materials, but this will be your collection. This is your legacy. It should be represented in the way that you want this to be represented.'" Instead of positioning archivists as the experts, Jet defers to donors as the "experts" of their own lives, asking them to read the finding aid and provide feedback. Similarly, Nebula, a straight, white female, described her process as "less hierarchical, more lateral," and said that there tends to be "a greater willingness to bring more people into the mix" at her institution, including both donors and other subject experts.

One unique practice undertaken by JD's institution is to provide donors with a biographical form so they can describe themselves in their own terms. The completed form, he noted, is not made available to the public. Instead, it is used so the archivists can refer to it when generating finding aids and use it to ask questions of the donors. He described the process as "working on [the finding aid] together." As Tenoh, a white, agender lesbian, said when describing her small team, "There's so many subgroups within the LGBTQ umbrella. . . . There's no way for us to, with only two people, have all of those represented."

Archivists tend to take these steps in private. In our review of Deep Southern LGBTQIA+ collections, it is not clear from any of the finding aids whether they have been reviewed by their donors or creators; it's not built into the visible metadata. Although their work exclusively engages with web archives, we nod here to the suggestions of Maemura et al. (2018) regarding the inclusion of process metadata in finding aids. Including a note, for example, that the creator of the materials has reviewed and approved a finding aid's biographical note helps contextualize institutional relationships and the ethical validity of the data as represented.

Grounding Archival Description in Embodied Knowledge

Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the importance of having creators, as the "experts," review their work. The idea of expertise and embodied knowledge also extended to practitioners themselves, particularly those who identified as queer. JD said that, as a queer man, when he goes "into the work with other queer and trans people, we already share a connectivity that we wouldn't otherwise." He went on to explain that he leveraged this "connectivity" in the way he described materials, noting his connection to the shifting language within the community. He then aims to use the terms individuals self-select rather than lumping people together or using outdated terms. "Who says 'homosexual' anymore?" he asked when

he encountered the term. "Is the person gay, lesbian, bi, trans, queer? We got all these words; no one's a fucking homosexual anymore." Similarly, Tenoh stated, "I've identified as a lesbian for a long, long time. It's always been, since as long as I can remember, something that has been a part of my identity and how I see materials. So it's been pretty inextricable from how I process materials, how I describe them."

Practitioners' lived experiences of queerness also primed them to see the tensions between visibility and vulnerability when describing LGBTQIA+ materials. Nicky, a white, ace woman, summed this up nicely:

> I think some archivists are just like . . . "Well, this is queer history. Just put it out there. Make it easy to find." Without necessarily being like, "Okay, but why did this person not out themselves in their lifetime? How do we respect that need for people to get to the collection without erasing it, but also respecting silence and where that silence might be intentional?" That's where I think having an archivist who is of the queer community helps inform those decisions and those practices is really important.

JD found himself weighing similar concerns, but adding on the fear that easy-to-find collections are easier to remove. He shared, "We're going to go through all of our [REGIONAL] states and look for existing queer collections. Once we find them, can we make those lists visible, or do we make targets?"

Practitioners also highlighted the embodied experience of having processed archival materials. We return here to JD's note that practitioners are taught the ideal processing procedure in school, but live that procedure very differently. Many practitioners noted that they were expected to create a perfect finding aid the first time. In reality, Joanna, a heterosexual, white female, said following the one-and-done processing style has caused her to end up "with a find aid that met DACS requirements, but was utterly useless to researchers." Similarly, Nebula noted that "a bad finding aid is one that's never been revisited. Like, if you are not somehow consistently looking back at older descriptions to say, 'Does this still suit the needs of how researchers would work now?' then I think that's no good." Many practitioners, like Jet, noted that finding aids "should not be considered as written in stone"—the work is never perfect and never truly "done," something that those who have never processed materials would rarely anticipate.

Implications

Archival Authority Built on Cultural Humility

We return now to Secretary of the Smithsonian Lonnie G. Bunch III's letter to his staff. We assert that Bunch and his staff align themselves strongly with the archival practitioners interviewed and the findings surfaced in our collections review.

Nearly all the interviewees' recommendations emphasize cultural humility and the embodied knowledge of creators and archival practitioners. Just as Bunch and his staff recognize that the White House cannot have the archival experience or cultural competence necessary to accurately review the Smithsonian's holdings in such a way that the multiplicity of US histories is reflected, practitioners like Tenoh, Jet, and Nebula recognize that they cannot

have the expertise to describe LGBTQIA+ experiences or identities that they do not share. These practitioners, Bunch and his staff included, reject the oversimplification of history and identity through these acts of cultural humility.

Broadly, these practitioners are practicing critical refusal on multiple levels: They reject the imposition of top-down, simplistic narratives; they reject the idea that there is one "correct" way to provide access to archival materials; they reject the notion that visibility is inherently desired by all parties; and they reject the idea that outsiders should dictate the stories materials tell. They provide memory workers with models of refusing to kowtow to the ever-changing political whims of whomever desires control—whether the government or other authorities—and, instead, choosing to prioritize the embodied knowledge of those whose stories the materials reflect.

Refusing Archival Neutrality and Reframing Absence

In most discussions of queer archives, the work of making visible documents and stories is to correct the false perception that queerness is a new phenomenon (Kunzel 2018). The machinations of political and social discourses bled into archives and often validated these misperceptions (Stoler 2002). Both malevolent and ambivalent sentiments meant that seeing and naming queerness proved difficult. In many cases, when such identities emerged, removing or recontextualizing their presence proved easier than nuancing and naming such complexity. In other instances, queerness existed in implicit ways or was obfuscated entirely. When looking at datasets that involve queerness or queer digital performances, acts of obfuscation and null values reveal how queerness is often absent or silent because the tools for marking queerness either refuse to see it or seek to destroy its presence upon discovery (Gaboury 2018; Kornstein 2019; Ungless et al. 2025). If contemporary uses of technology serve as insights into broader uses of materials to disclose one's queerness and that disclosure is always moving against its erasure, it is necessary to take realities of absence as suggestive of possibility and, perhaps more importantly, that queer data circulates differently. Archives need not approach these questions in a neutral way; instead of imagining their work as gathering for the sake of collecting, a non-neutral and still profoundly valuable approach to queer preservation would be to serve as a non-public repository, a place where materials can be held, but not made available. Closed collections are hardly a new phenomenon to archives, and in a moment when archiving queerness does stop actual erasure, *access* and *use* become contested terms. Taking in earnest Caswell's reminder of the realities of symbolic annihilation, archives can still serve a protective purpose: one that suggests the absence of materials to an uncritical eye but, through methods of description and implied collecting, can hold onto evidence of queerness's long and visible presence throughout history. As the individuals interviewed attested, and as the collections revealed, queerness is one component of larger community connections and not all forms of queer embodiment experience erasure the same way and to the same degree. Archivists, archives, and even the users of these materials can more actively engage in these stakes and choose not to make materials available or learn, as many queer historians already know to do (Wagner 2024), to ask different questions of data. In other words, while archives may have been trained to "wait for folks to die" to begin collecting, by looking to both the material and datafied ways queer folks make their presence known, yet not able to be regulated and controlled, could shift the politics of archiving radically and invite work that is hopeful of access in the future, while emphatic about the inaccessibility of such data in the present. Fortunately, such a shift emphasizes rather than delegitimizes the importance of archives in this historical moment.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the second Trump administration, there have been near-constant moves to sanitize US history, from legally dehistoricizing transgender identity to compelling the Smithsonian Museums to reflect the myth of American exceptionalism. In this paper, we reflect on the actions of archival practitioners who write finding aids for LGBTQIA+-related collections, the presence of Deep Southern LGBTQIA+-related collections themselves, and the letter written by Secretary of the Smithsonian Lonnie G. Bunch III to his staff to show small but significant acts of resistance to the simplification and homogenization of history. Our findings show that both archival practitioners and creators have crucial embodied knowledge that plays a consequential role in the creation of finding aids, which help shape the stories we are able to tell about history. This research also shows that simply making materials accessible and visible may not always be the answer. Instead, the resounding recommendation is to honor the creators by using the language they chose to describe themselves and their experiences and not to bend recklessly in the wind to whomever deems themselves in charge.

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