

# ICWA LETTERS

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## Institute of Current World Affairs

The Crane-Rogers Foundation  
Four West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

KAD-8  
FRANCE

*Kay Dilday is an Institute Fellow studying relationships of the French and North African immigrants in France – and North Africa.*

## Rap Gets Political

By K.A. Dilday

DECEMBER 8, 2006

PARIS—In 1984 a series called “Hip-Hop” began to air on TF1, the major non-state funded general channel in France.

The presenter, Sidney, was a DJ who had just returned from an exhilarating few years exploring an alternative musical culture emerging in New York’s urban underground. He wanted to bring a taste of that vibrant subversive life-style—break dancing, graffiti, rap—to France. “Hip-Hop” easily found a spot on mainstream television; for decades, the chattering classes in France had been fascinated by black American culture and were particularly satisfied by complaints about American racism. But the show didn’t just titillate France’s middle class. It found a hungry audience in immigrant youth and black youth from France’s Caribbean islands. Everyone over a certain age in the music industry remembers that show because it changed their lives and it changed the business. “It was the first time kids in the cités had seen anyone who looked like them on television,” said Christophe “Tex” Lacroix, a businessman who started France’s first hip-hop magazine, *Get Busy*.

Rap grabbed hold of French youth in part because it was accessible. Anyone who can talk thinks they can rap, which is both true and not true. At its most basic definition, rap is simply someone talking over music. Thus every adolescent boy in the cités (housing complexes in France’s poor suburbs) could set his patter to radio and call himself a rapper. The first rap music videos were subtitled so French people could understand the lyrics, which led to a moment of confusion in the early ’80s when they couldn’t decide whether to rap in French or English, since the lyrics weren’t as punchy when translated. But in the end the decision was fairly simple. They didn’t speak English.

The best rappers are also poets and sociologists, documenting a moment in time with the day’s pop culture references layered on top of social commentary, mixed with boasts about all manner of prowess. But as with great singers, the rappers who become truly successful have a distinct voice. In 1987 a graffiti artist calling himself Joey Starr set his husky growl to music as part of the group NTM.

A French man of Antillan origin, Joey Starr was born Didier Morville in a rough Parisian suburb in 1967. Scarcely out of his teens and fresh out of the army, he wasn’t quite a criminal in 1987 nor was he quite homeless. He frequently found himself on the wrong side of the law or sleeping in metro stations, since his father had kicked him out of their home. Explosive, angry and with a name that was an abbreviation for a vulgar insult, the group NTM became emblematic of French street culture. In the intervening 20 years, Joey Starr has been in and out of legal trouble, married one of France’s famous actresses and, in 2006, nearly 20 years since his group burst on the scene, he has successfully reinvented himself as a rapper cum political activist. Given his dubious past—just this winter, he was in court for using a false identity in 2005—it’s not clear whether his acceptance as a political leader derives from his dedication to the cause, his fame or the lack of clear alternatives. When it comes to black and brown political leaders, the field in France is remarkably clear.

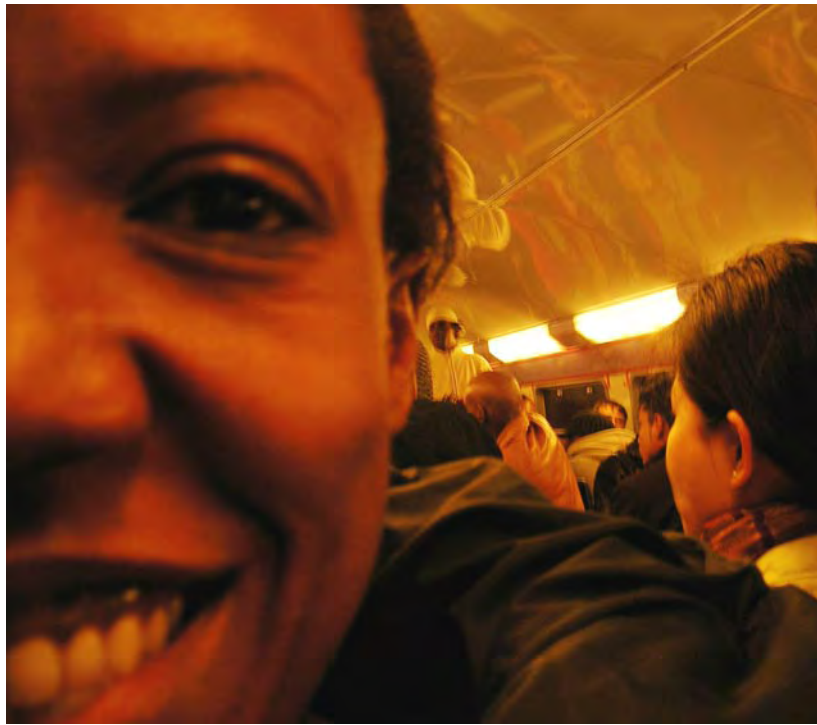
The banelieus just outside of major cities are home to much of France’s black and brown population. Tex is a white Frenchman married to a woman of Congo-

lese descent; he still lives in the neuf-cinq, where he grew up. That shorthand refers to the first two numbers of his geographical department, nine-five. Tex's department places him in the French social hierarchy. As in most parts of the world, geography has a direct correlation to social standing. Power and wealth is concentrated in central Paris. Most of the immediate suburbs are characterized by clusters of densely populated concrete towers and a heavy concentration of workers (*ouvriers*). In a country where it is illegal to gather statistics by race and ethnicity, *ouvriers* is a shorthand demographers often use for poor dark people.

Rap music is aimed at peripheral culture, those who live on the outskirts of city life. Alain Touraine, a sociologist, has proposed that because class in France is affiliated with measures other than wealth, such as education or position, social movement is not vertical but centripetal. The peripheralization of a segment of French society is such that at tense moments, police wait at the RER (France's commuter rail) stations in the suburbs to prevent the outsiders from boarding Paris-bound trains and breaching Parisian borders.

The neuf-cinq wasn't so bad, Tex tells me. It wasn't as bleak as the neuf-trois, which includes Clichy Sous Bois, Saint Denis, L'Aubervilliers, La Courneuve and other notoriously poor immigrant neighborhoods. I've traveled to all of these neighborhoods; as you ride the RER or metro further from Paris, the faces get darker, the trains are dirtier, and the ride more boisterous as public transportation is often a warm gathering place for poor youth with nowhere to go. The RER, in particular, is distinct for the loud volume of the ride. A fatigued commuter isn't likely to get much rest with rap songs emanating from mobile phones and aspiring rap groups using the train as a practice studio while they beat an accompanying rhythm on the ceiling of the car. For a rapper, coming from the neuf-trois is a mark of authenticity, a badge of pride that's constantly referenced in songs. But the "neuf-trois" at the beginning of a postal code is a resumé-killer when applying for jobs, according to the Montaigne Institute, which has studied the response to similar c.v.'s that differ only in geographic identifiers.

Now 39, Tex is old enough to have seen the advent of rap in France and the changes in the social fabric of his neighborhood. In his early grade school years, Tex says, there were only three or four non-white kids; two years later it was half and half. By the time he graduated, there were only three or four white faces left. The early years were in the mid-1970s. By the early 1980s when he was in middle school, it was clear that the "*trentes glorieuse*," the 30 years of economic growth post World War II, were not just in a temporary slowdown. They were over. The



*Riding the local commuter rail (RER) to Villiers le Bel, the 9-5.  
A train-car rapper is visible in the background in a white cap.*

immigrants who had come in the 1960s and 1970s to fill the menial positions during the three decades of growth and prosperity had been in France long enough to be protected from unemployment by iron work contracts and union membership. It was their children and the immigrants who came in later years who were jobless when positions became scarce and the long-time residents closed ranks.

I met Tex just after my arrival in Paris. A friend in the music industry in the U.S. recommended him as a conduit to the French rap-music scene. I wrote to Tex and he invited me to his office in Montreuil, a suburb on the outskirts of Paris. His office was difficult to find, he said, so he gave me directions to a café and said he would walk out to meet me there. I wondered if I would recognize him, but when I saw the small fellow with the shaved head, oversized basketball jersey, gold chain and baggy jeans, I knew he was the man I was looking for. He looked like a transplant from Brooklyn.

Tex gave me a brief rundown of the history of France's most prominent rap groups: which ones had been partners before going solo, the changes in style and fashion that they and their audience had undergone over the years. Then he handed me a few CD's, told me to buy "The History of Rap," a DVD, and armed with his recommendations, I went off to FNAC, the large electronics and music store in central France, outside of which I've several times seen police frisking young North African kids. I began looking at albums and asked a 20-ish man near me whether he knew anything about them. He figured out that I was American and said that in truth, he really preferred American rap. I showed him one by a fellow named Sinik, who I had seen on televi-

sion. Although the lyrics are almost unintelligible, the images are easy to understand: anger, a lot of anger. One of Sinik's videos particularly struck me with his pale shaved head against a black background and mouth open delivering an angry jeremiad—like an animation of Munch's "The Scream." "What do you think of this one?" I asked the fellow next to me at FNAC. He nodded his head affirmatively, "*C'est la rap de la rue.*"

The "Big Bang Gang," a loose association of party promoters has an irregularly occurring event in Belleville (the neighborhood described in KAD-2). Theirs was the first hip-hop party I went to. Tex invited me because he was DJ'ing the first hour at their modest basement space underneath a café. I arrived at 11p.m. with a friend who was visiting from New York. We stood around nursing drinks while everyone clustered on the sides of the dance floor. We decided to start the dancing and it was infectious. Once the dance floor filled, at first glance the scene looked like any club in any major city. The more I watched I realized that French dancing culture is something unto itself. They've borrowed so much from American culture yet the subtleties elude them. By and large, French people are simply awful freestyle dancers. They have no sense for the feel of the music and even the most lauded French DJ's don't seem to know how to make songs flow together. A good DJ mixes songs so one barely notices when one song ends and the next begins. He juxtaposes obscure songs to better-known hits with similar qualities and creates a stream, a rhythm that evokes a mood. French DJ's string hit after hit together with transitions so abrupt one could get whiplash. The people on the dance floor jump up and down like children as they recognize the tune. At the first Big Bang Gang party when Tex came down from the DJ booth, my friend and I joined him dancing with a circle of men. As we began to dance with them, gradually, with the exception of Tex, all of the other men moved away. My friend and I laughed about it later, but as I attended more parties I realized something strange: men and women don't



*A young man on the subway with his boom box, putting on a show to hip-hop music with a friend.*

often dance together.

Although the age group at these parties range from 20s to early 40s, people cluster on the dance floor in same-sex groups like adolescents at a junior high school dance. Their reticence may stem from the influence of Islam. The community of mainly blacks and browns that cleave to hip-hop tend to be influenced by Islam, either because they or many in their surrounding communities are nominal or practicing Muslims, a culture dictating that men and women separate before shedding inhibitions.

Yet the restrained quality of movements I see at clubs is very French. French behavior prizes control: from the small perfectly arranged portions of food and the restrained contained private piety, to the sleek, precise grooming, mastery of appearance and person are extremely important. I once watched as a man careened around the dance floor at a club in Paris dancing with abandon. He was chubby and sloppily dressed, both verboten in Parisian society. Someone told him I was American and, perspiring heavily, he bellowed to me, "I'm not like most French people," "They're too up tight. But I don't give a f—k." As I stand on sides marveling at the strange scene it always strikes me as unbelievably poignant, the attempts to emulate this particular black American way of being, which they sense is far freer than anything they have ever known. Yet the dueling cultures in their background work together to lead them to spectacular failure.

"Everything you see is just directly borrowed from the United States. Nothing is original," Antoine "Wave" Garnier, a historian of hip-hop told me. A Frenchman of Antillan descent, Mr. Garnier lived for a time in the New York area, where he fell in love with rap culture. During the 1980s and 1990s he traveled between New York and Paris, and has since written several books documenting the role and transfer of rap culture between the United States and France. For example, even the habit of referring to the "*neuf-trois*" is directly borrowed from the tendency of American rappers to identify themselves by their area code, the 312 (Chicago), the 213 (Los Angeles) and the 818 (Detroit), for example.

A few weeks after I met Mr. Garnier we went together to see a film about Senegalese soldiers who had served in World War II. At the time, a different film, *Indigenes* (the English-language title is *Days of Glory*), about the experience of North African regiments that fought for France in World War II, had just been released with much fanfare and acclaim. Sub-Saharan African troops had had similar WW II experiences and the makers of the documentary were taking advantage of the attention generated by *Indigenes*. I pointed out that the information sheet they distributed claimed the film was supported by Joey Starr. Upon seeing his name on the program, Mr. Garnier sniffed in disgust. He was similarly skeptical when I mentioned that among rappers,



Joey Starr guest edits an edition of Liberation, one of France's three major newspapers on the anniversary of the 2005 riots and around the same time as his album release.

Joey Starr was not alone in his recent interest in political and social issues. Mr. Garnier scoffed, "It's all an act."

But even Mr. Garnier acknowledges that it is a time of crisis for black and beur youth and because of this, some spirit of civic involvement is animating the rap community. When I started writing this newsletter, one of the most popular songs in France was the rap song *Brule* (burned) by the group Sniper. The video offers a different perspective of the riots of 2005. The residents of a banlieue, dark-skinned boys and girls and men and women, stalk down a street holding aloft lighters and carrying signs that say "Burn Babylon burn." This chorus accompanies a narrative that shows a young black woman eagerly presenting her c.v. at a job interview. After she leaves, the white interviewer closes the door behind her, sighs, rips her resume in half and throws it in the trash. The next moment, the woman is shown sitting on a park bench, dejected. Her pupils are represented by flames. The lyrics are a threnody about ostracism and retaliation: "Young man born of immigration, it's been 30 years that you speak to me of integration and I still don't feel French." The video finishes with the residents marching down the same street. Instead of lighters they hold voter registration cards. It fades to black and then the message crawls across the screen: "Vote in 2007."

*Devoir des memoires* (Obligation of Memories) is a

collective formed just after the 2005 riots. The collective's objective is to encourage the youth of the banlieue to take an interest in politics. Joey Starr and Jamel Debbouze (France's highest-paid actor, a 31-year-old of Moroccan origin) are the titular heads of the organization that is behind a push to register youth in the cites to vote. Mr. Garnier insists that this newfound political activism is just a new way of marketing. This fall Joey Starr's co-written biography and first solo album were released. "Joey Starr was a member of the group NTM. He came out with a solo album and he needed a way to sell it," Mr. Garnier says

Soon after this discussion about Mr. Starr, I went to a small private concert. A young rapper of Congolese heritage, Abd Al Malik, was filming a concert for Europe 2, a cable music channel. Mr. Malik was originally a member of the rap group New African Poets. His family emigrated from Congo-Brazzaville, but Mr. Malik was born in Paris with the name Régis Fayette-Mikano. He changed it to a 7<sup>th</sup>-century Muslim caliph's name when he converted to Islam at age 14. Mr. Malik is touted as an intellectual and socially conscious rapper. I'd noted references to Derrida, Deleuze and even "The Corrections" by Jonathan Franzen in his music. His raps nonetheless focus on street life and difficulties for people of color in France. I went to his concert just days after the rash of bus burnings. Malik had a set patter and not once did he make reference to current events.

I had been skeptical when Mr. Garnier emphatically insisted that the political pose of rappers was all an act, but faced with a rapper who presented himself as a chronicler of urban angst and a public intellectual yet who failed to respond to the issues of the moment, I began to wonder if Mr. Garnier was correct. Abd Al Malik's *cris des rues* seemed little more than a pose. Not everyone felt the way I did. Francoise Nottrelet, the representative for Channel 2 who had invited me to the concert, turned to me and asked if I was getting it all, "because this is very deep" she said. I wasn't sure I agreed. When given a platform, a real political commentator wouldn't stick to a set patter in the midst of bus burnings by people who are part of his community. I told Mr. Garnier about the concert and he said, "I'm not surprised, Abd al Malik is marketing. He's found a pleasant way of presenting Islam in France to middle-class French people." Like several others rappers, Mr. Malik has written a book telling about his life, his conversion to Islam and his philosophy.

It's hard for me to tell if Mr. Garnier's cynicism is warranted, but regardless of Mr. Starr's motivation, the more interesting question is why politics has become the best way of marketing to youth in today's France. In KAD-7 I mentioned a man who told me that he preferred France to the United States because he felt that the constant reminders of racial difference in the U.S. was limiting. When I told him that he was one of the first to say that to me, that I usually hear complaints

about an illusion of equality hindering the ability to address the reality of racism in France, he qualified what he had said. "It was different for my generation," he said implying that they had accepted an unsatisfactory situation in France, "but this next generation is going to change things."

For the first time it seems that blacks and browns might be a political force, one to be wooed by politicians who want their votes. France is in the midst of a heated election season that culminates in a presidential election this spring and parliamentary elections in June. In previous years the Socialist party was nearly assured of most of the votes by blacks and browns, but eight years of a concerted effort to place browns and blacks in prominent positions on the part of the right has had a seductive effect on these communities. What remains to be seen is how these communities use the new power or whether they even perceive of it as something to be marshaled. The most prominent rappers have all voiced support for different presidential candidates, from fringe parties to the main candidates on the right and left.

Mr. Garnier pointed this out in saying that blacks and browns won't be a force anytime soon. "No one is organized enough," he says.

There may be something to what he says. After the 2005 riots a group called ACLEFEU (an acronym that sounds like "enough fire" in French) formed in Clichy Sous Bois, the banlieues where the two youths whose

death sparked the riots lived. I've met with a lot of people from ACLEFEU yet I still can't quite grasp what it is other than a loose collective of concerned people. It has the seeds of a political action group but political action groups are not an accepted part of French politics. To act as one would earn the epithet of communitarianism (discussed in KAD-7).

It's hard to tell how successful the Joey Starr and Jamel Debbouze-led coalition, *Devoir des Memoires*, is. After trying in vain to get a response through calls and e-mail, I met a member, Michael Trajan Lopes, by happenstance at a press conference to announce nominees for the French hip-hop awards. After perhaps six calls and half as many e-mail to him, I finally got him to schedule a meeting. He canceled shortly before it. (I met a journalist from the Associated Press in France who had attempted to write about the same coalition. She said they never returned her many e-mail and calls.) But in our conversation when we met, Mr. Lopes claimed they had helped grow the registration roles in the cites by 35 percent. The media has published statistics that support an aggrandizement of 7 to 20 percent in the quarters they've targeted. *Devoir des Memoires* does not advocate support for a particular candidate, Mr. Lopes said, but simply involvement in the political process. This is significantly different from the situation in the United States, where leaders of particular groups demand concessions from politicians by promising to deliver votes. But in France, even among those who the Republic has failed, the jobless youth of the banlieue, there is a lingering belief in



ACLEFEU holds a march in Paris. It was the least well attended of any march I have been to thus far.

the Republic's stated principles. Political action groups based on anything other than common ideals have no place in the Republic.

It's too early to tell whether hip-hop music stars will really have an impact on the political process in France. Political activity could prove to be a fad and their interest, and that of their 18 to 20-something audience, might pass. Tex mentioned that in the early 1990s, when American groups like Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions began to add social and political activism to their rhymes and actions, French rappers did the same yet "a couple of years later everyone was back to money and gold."

*Devoir des Memoires* is already suffering from attrition and infighting. The mercurial Joey Starr has difficulty working with others, a journalist who has covered his career for more than a decade told me. When I contacted Mr. Lopes again, he said that he had left the coalition for "personal reasons," which he did not want to disclose. Yet others with whom I've spoken suggest that while political activity may be a style for the rappers, they are responding to a period of crisis and a deep void in the lives of their listening community, one that is unlikely to be filled in a year or even two.

It is evident that the banlieues have become an important group to be wooed this election season. All of the candidates for president in France have made dutiful calls in the banlieues, conducted question and answer sessions with people from the cites, and acknowledged that the Republic has not delivered the equality it promises. Even Jean Marie Le Pen, candidate of the anti-immigration party, National Front, has been attempting to

woo young blacks and browns with targeted ads featuring people of color. Patrick Weil, France's foremost immigration specialist and advisor to the government, told me that all of the presidential candidates have backed a plan that would channel the top graduates from every school in France to the "*grand ecoles*." Graduation from these schools is the traditional route to success in France and it is a given in French discourse that unless those schools diversify, opportunity will remain available to only a few.

But perhaps involvement in the process is also acknowledgement by first, second and third generation immigrants that despite ancestral ties to another land, they're here to stay. People from France's Caribbean departments and those of African origin have told me that to understand the sometimes apathetic investment by people of color in this country's political process, I have to understand that traditionally, most of them have regarded their time here as temporary. If French life ceases to please them, they think they will go home to Morocco or Martinique or Senegal, even if it is a home they've never known.

The rap group "113" relays this strongly in their videos. Three men, one of Malian origin, one whose family is from Guadeloupe, and a third of Algerian descent, comprise the group. The group has been around for more than a decade. One of their latest songs mixes Maghrebian rai with rap. The refrain trumpets a "Maghreb United" and ends with a crest that combines elements of the three Maghrebian countries' flags. In recent years several videos have featured the group walking on African beaches or taking gifts back to the "bled" (the neighborhood) in Algeria. But at the end, they always come back to France. □



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# INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

## Current Fellows

**Richard D. Connerney • INDIA • January 2005 - 2007**

A Phillips Talbot Fellow, Rick is studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture, and politics in India. Rick is a former lecturer in philosophy and Asian religions at Rutgers University and Iona College. He holds a bachelor's degree from Wheaton College and a master's degree from the University of Hawaii, both in religion.

**Kay Dilday • FRANCE/MOROCCO • October 2005 - 2007**

Kay is studying the relationships of the French and North African immigrants in France and in North Africa. A former editor for *The New York Times* Op-Ed page, Kay holds a master's degree in comparative international politics and theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a bachelor's degree in English literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*.

**Suzy Hansen • TURKEY • April 2007 - 2009**

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer*, her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times* Book Review, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

**Nicholas Schmidle • PAKISTAN • February 2006 - 2008**

Nick is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion, and politics in Asia. He's in Pakistan as an ICWA fellow, examining issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he reported from Central Asia and Iran. His work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and elsewhere. He holds a master's degree in International Affairs from American University.

**Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL • April 2007-2009**

An actor, director, playwright, musician, and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

**Andrew J. Tabler • SYRIA/LEBANON • February 2005-2007**

Andrew's ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he reports on Lebanese and Syrian affairs. He has lived, studied, and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. He was an editor with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria, where he worked as a senior editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. In 2004, Andrew co-founded *Syria Today* – Syria's first independent English language magazine. He has contributed op-ed pieces on Syria over the last year to the *New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*

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Phone: (603) 643-5548  
Fax: (603) 643-9599  
E-Mail: [icwa@icwa.org](mailto:icwa@icwa.org)  
Web site: [www.icwa.org](http://www.icwa.org)

**Executive Director:**  
Steven Butler

**Program Assistant/  
Publications Manager:**  
Ellen Kozak

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