

*morir soñando, pollo guisado* and the  
process of care

Georgina Arroyo

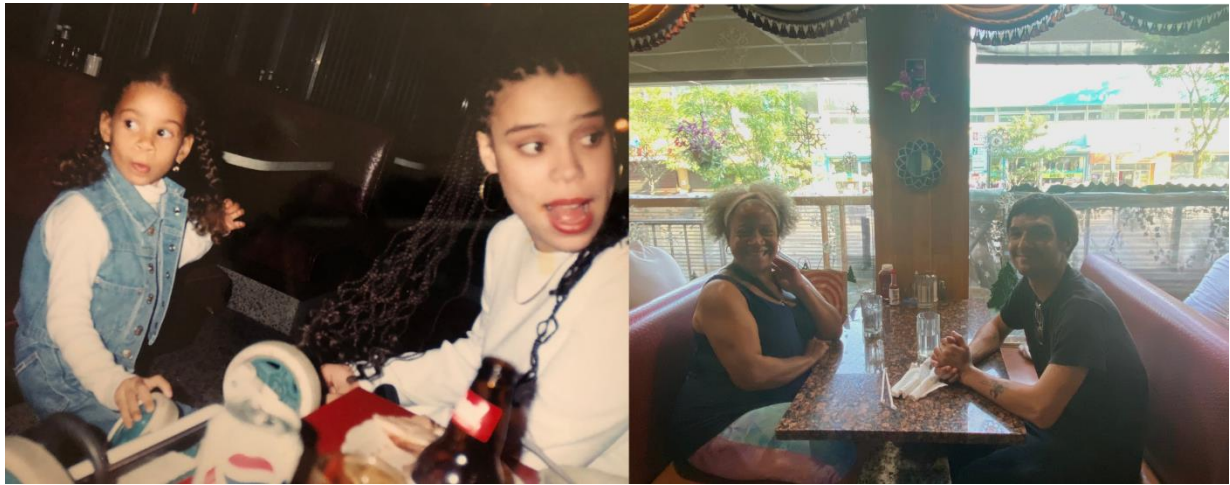
## Introduction

When I am asked about my work in a studio visit, many of the more personal details in this thesis are not the first things I talk about. But this thesis is a way of recognizing and honoring all the people and experiences that make their way into what I make. I've realized that my work is not always about end goals, but about the process of bringing it into the world. And in that process, all of the memories of my family and the experiences I have had make their way in. The act of making is a way to process things, or even just to get them out of me in the moment.

I grew up in a house full of women. I am an only child and I lived with my grandmother and my mother. I was always aware that my family wasn't a "traditional" family, but I felt lucky enough to know other kids similar to me. My greatest friend, Amber, who I've now known for 25 years, was also an only child with a single mom and whose grandmother was also a single mom. I'm reflecting more on my childhood and my family and friendships now more than ever due to big life changes on the horizon: I am graduating with an MFA, after being the first person in my family to graduate with an undergraduate degree. I'm getting married; I'm turning 30.

I am writing this, and I want a *morir soñando*. I'm writing this and I want a *morir soñando* from the Dominican place on Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn, where we had Mother's Day dinner every year, and where my mother and my stepfather had their rehearsal dinner, and where my mom, my fiancé and I all have dinner every once in a while. I am trying to find the picture I took of my mom and fiancé there; I stood up and snapped it because it made my heart feel full, and also achy. To stay in New York when you've grown up here is to feel like the rug can get pulled out from under you at any time. Yeah, the restaurant is still here now, and it's always here for me, but it's got a new name, and maybe it won't be here someday, and we, too, won't be here

someday. They are building a high-rise next door, and it'll tower over the tiny one-story restaurant. It's taking up the little public square that was here, that felt safe when I was young and where I would eat a slice of pizza with my grandmother. I guess now it's blighted and so they're putting a condo there. And I'm wanting the warm sunny feeling of a *morir soñando*, the way you want the warm feeling of a hug.



*Left: Me and my aunt, Christobalina, at the Dominican restaurant on Myrtle Ave in 1997 Right: My Mother, Magaly, and my partner, Ian, at the same restaurant in 2022.*

In many ways, making my work is a search for that feeling, or the feeling of not being alone. The feeling of someone or something existing in the world that knows your experience. The work is a way for me to practice making connections. As a person who grew up with very little family, connecting with others has been a challenge. And this includes connecting with my own identity and history, and what those mean for me today. From 2016 to 2019 I worked on a series of drawings and paintings inspired by the gentrification of my neighborhood, trying to make sense of it. I have been interested for some time now in the ways that the places we are from shape and constrain us. They can be an anchor for us, keeping us close to people and experiences we cherish. But they can also be the kind of anchor that pulls us down when we want to swim elsewhere.

In 2021 I came across a book titled *Making Kin not Population: Reconceiving Generations* (2018). It contains a series of essays by feminist scholars on issues of intimacy, kinship, reproductive justice, and making modern families. At a time when I was already reflecting on my own definition of family, and wanting to possibly explore this in my work, I was very moved by one particular essay, titled “Black Afterlives Matter: Cultivating Kinfulness as Reproductive Justice,” by Ruha Benjamin. The concept I was most struck by in the essay was the idea of the afterlife, and that people in the afterlife are here with us now. Benjamin writes, “In the broadest sense, what is at stake in the idea that Black Afterlives Matter is the practice of making kin, not only *beyond* biological relatives but also *with* the materially dead/spiritually alive ancestors in our midst. Black afterlives are animated by a stubborn refusal to forget and to *be forgotten*.” (Benjamin 48).

I have begun to do more research about the place my own family is from. Like many other members of the African Diaspora, I cannot track my lineage very far back. But I felt a pull to become more connected to a larger ancestry—even if I could not confirm many details. Focusing on human connection helped change the focus of my work—it shifted from being about gentrification to being more about family and interconnectedness. This shift first showed up in my use of found photos, and in making works that I felt could somehow connect me to the



Detail of *You were there and you are here*, 2021



Detail of *Untitled*, 2022

people in the found images, as if to build relationships and histories I couldn't otherwise access. At first, I made works that held these photos almost like an altar, as in *You were there and you are here*, but I also displayed them as

direct elements of the work without framing, as in *Untitled, 2022*. By using these photos, I felt I wanted to reference what Ruha Benjamin said about people in the afterlife being with us now. I had no clue where the people in these photos were, and I assumed they were not alive—but they could be alive in the work.

Maybe one of the most important ideas in Ruha’s writing that has made it into my work is this *refusal to be forgotten*. My piece *Untitled (Fallen leader)* was the first time I used graphite powder on a piece. I mixed it with water to use as a paint, but once it dried I realized it would easily wipe off. I layered it, over and over, until the graphite was so thick that even though the top layer would wipe away, the piece would keep its color. I made multiple pieces using graphite, and I never wanted to use fixative. Whenever I would move the piece, it would leave a trace of itself behind in a ring of graphite wherever it sat previously. It would stain the clothes or hands of anyone who got too close, and it was difficult to wash off. It had to be carried around throughout the day as a reminder of the piece, and of all the spiritual and ancestral references the piece made. The piece itself refused to be forgotten, like the people I know I am connected to, even without a written history.

## **Materiality**

Why do pleated beige slacks still exist? To give the off-white collar workers in my neighborhood a reason to believe—in crossover, in nation, in a home after ruin and a reason for being— no longer undocumented in this expanse of lo-rise highrises.

- Urayoan Noel, “Hidden City,” *Hi-Density Politics* (lines 9-10)

For me, fabric started as a practicality—I could work faster with fabric, and I wouldn't have to make another material fall or move like fabric. But I find myself completely struck with fabric and clothing as material for making. Using clothing that is easily recognizable can bring along its own references, especially depending on the viewer's relationship to the garment. But I am interested in when to transform these garments, and when to embrace their specificity. The first fabrics I started using were from nightgowns I found at the discount stores in my neighborhood. I had memories of visiting them as a child school shopping with my mother and my grandmother, and now I lived just two blocks away from Knickerbocker Avenue and could run all my errands there. I remembered all the night dresses my grandmother wore, and they looked exactly the same as the ones in the store. I bought as many as I could, in pink and blue, in the largest sizes I could find. These sat around in my studio for a long while. They became multiple unsuccessful pieces, but in the end they are the main material for *What Is The Limit Of Care*, and the neckline in *Body Block*.

At first these fabrics were ones I bought intentionally, when I was planning each piece meticulously. But many times the best use of the materials came after they had failed a few times and been relegated to a bag in the corner of my studio. When I realized this and realized that I wanted to continue to work in fabric, I asked friends to give me any old clothing they had that they were ready to part with. Most women I know have a bag of old clothes sitting around in their house, ready to be sold to a vintage store or, when rejected, donated to Goodwill. I currently have a bag like that in my own living room that I'm not quite ready to turn into art materials yet. Many friends offered their clothes to me, and I went and picked up bags of clothing, shoes and accessories. These garments all carry with them the history of the person who gave them to me. The bag Andrea donated is mostly professional wear and includes fun prints of horses and

flowers. The bag Alex gave me is full of lace bralettes, men's clothes, and leather scraps. Lacey gave me some khaki pieces and a gingham frilly dress. These garments intermingle with the fabrics I bought earlier, and I respond to the different pairings I see when just rummaging through the pile in my studio.

Used clothing is charged; something of the person who wore it before stays with it. I enjoy responding to that energy, and thinking about the life the owner of these garments has. And I find it a challenge to assign characteristics from the personas I'm creating to each of these garments. I think that is why, even with other fabrics and garments introduced, the floral nightgown remains. This particular nightgown acts for me in a way similar to how the du-rag functions in painter Anthony Akinbola's work. The nightgown can be seen as just a pattern, or color. It can also be seen as a generic nightgown. But for some people, it will also be a cultural signifier—a particular kind of nightgown, worn by a particular person, bought from a particular store. As Akinbola says about his work "I think there's an audience I have that can appreciate the work, and then there's the audience that can *feel* it."

The nightgowns I use are bought from a particular store in my neighborhood. I buy them at Shopper's World but a variation of them could probably be found at various discount stores. There are multiple stores in my area – A.B.C., Shopper's World, Mini Max, Liberty and more. I love these stores not just because of the nostalgia I feel in them, but also because they are like strange safe places in my neighborhood. The area I live in has become very hip, filled with very hip people, but in Shopper's World there are no hip people. It is just me and the tias and abuelas of the neighborhood, browsing the aisles. I go to these stores often, not just for these nightgowns,

but also to get any number of basic necessities. I sometimes wonder where the “cool” people in my neighborhood get these things. Where are they buying their cleaning supplies, bathroom rugs, socks, body lotion?

These discount stores, and the experience I have of shopping in them makes me think of what kind of person shops at these stores. I see myself in all stages of life so far, shopping at these stores. As a kid, going in with my mom and grandmother, asking for a toy; as a pre-teen, getting a funny tee shirt or telling my grandmother what PJ’s I liked; as a young adult in my first apartment, buying cute earrings and Tupperware for my first apartment. And now, going whenever I need something, and also finding things I can put into my work – finding the beauty in these items that might be totally overlooked by others. Recently I’ve bought a set of dishwashing gloves with polka dots and bows, plus a completely rhinestone-embellished denim hat. I think about who the woman is washing dishes in these gloves. Who is the woman getting ready for a night out and throwing on this denim hat? And I feel close to all of them – like I can see them now so vividly, and maybe they are all actually just the same woman.



## Care + Kin

*Untitled (Fallen Leader)* is about four feet wide and two feet tall. It looks like a mountain, or a rock, or a bust without a head. You may not guess the material at first glance. There is a star carved into the sculpture, with a half ring of holes, and in those holes are mirrors. When you get



closer to the sculpture, you notice that it has a mark running from back to front, following the outline of the star. It looks as if the work has been patched together along this groove. The rough surface texture of the piece retains a record of its making. It has a gray/slate finish that is

slightly iridescent when seen from a certain angle. As I mentioned earlier, if you were to touch the sculpture, your hands would be stained with graphite. The pigment rubs off even with the slightest touch.

The form is made of two large ceramic pieces that slot together at the outline of the star. But one side of the form collapsed during the firing process. I meticulously mended and repaired it over the course of months. Each day I readjusted pieces of it like a puzzle, and attached them back together, until finally sealing the piece along the seam of the star. Though most of the repairs are hidden in the final piece, the seam stands out like a large scar.

The star design is based on a dancer's costume in a traditional religious parade that happens in Dominican Republic and Haiti, called GaGa. The wearers of the star symbol are *mayores* or baton majors, and the mirrors and colors they wear are said to attract the gods, so that God may choose them to be his vessel and lead the rest of the people to him. When I read this, and saw the

image of this leader, I thought, “Who is this leader in my life?” or, “Who has been this kind of leader?” Who has been the vessel, if not for God, maybe for life? And it made me think of *fallen* leaders, matriarchs, female heads of home who bear the burden of leading the rest of a family. Women with the weight of the world on shoulders that finally reach a breaking point. Women who leave such an impact on the people they care for that they cannot be forgotten.

If this piece was some kind of leader, mother, matriarch, or major then I would have to mend it. I don't think I am much of a fixer in my day-to-day life. I'm much more of a walk away-er kind of person. But in the studio, I am dedicated to my works. They are pieces of me and everyone I love, maybe some people I hate, but I care for them. I labor for them. I fix them. Each day returning to the sculpture to tend to it for hours at a time is my version of hard work. It is not my grandmother's version of work, churning chocolate daily at a factory off Morgan Avenue until the day she died. But it is my work, and maybe, in some way, it is not just working with my hands, but also working through complicated relationships, with complicated people in my life, like my grandmother herself. In making myself work hard, on a piece I thought she might understand and whose references she would know, I was working hard on keeping her memory alive. Which is all to say, the leader in this piece may be fallen, but they have been cared for. The graphite is unfixed and can be carried as a mark on you, like a cross on Ash Wednesday, or as a tender memory, like ashes in a locket.

There's a limit to your love  
Like a waterfall in slow motion  
Like a map with no ocean  
There's a limit to your love  
Your love, your love, your love  
  
There's a limit to your care  
...  
Is it truth or dare?  
There's a limit to your care

- James Blake, "Limit to Your Love"

As a child I remember wanting to learn how to cook *pollo guisado*, which is a chicken stew, sometimes with potatoes in it, and usually served over rice. When I asked my mother to teach me to cook, I remember her saying, "You should never cook for a man. One day you'll be so rich, you'll have a personal chef! You don't need to learn to cook." I still don't know how to make *pollo guisado*.

And I wonder, what is the limit of care? What is the cost? To reckon with these words, "You should never cook for a man," as I attempt to make a home, in my own way.

The same women who wouldn't teach me to cook taught me to sew. Nothing fancy, just basic sewing techniques. Enough to make a crude outfit for a Barbie or to fix a hem. In creating the body for the stuffed sculpture *What Is the Limit of Care?* I push my own sewing skills to the limit. Putting the fabric on the form, making adjustments, pulling it off to sew it together, and

hoping that it fits well once I attach it back. Now I use my basic sewing skills to offer to mend clothing for a man. What does it mean to mend this? What does it mean to take such care with an inanimate object? The sewing process becomes meditative—time and space to think about what care means in my life and in my work. I'm thinking a lot about gender and the ways that “traditional” gender roles can rob us of the joy in caring for others. What does it mean to position making a warm meal, or mending a garment for someone you love as negative?



I made *What is the cost of care?* after seeing the exhibition *Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield*, a show at the Met last fall. Some responses by contemporary artists to these unearthed pots really struck me, like *Large Jug* by Simone Leigh, who so seamlessly referenced the history of the black potters in her own ceramic piece included in the show. But I was also very inspired by the large pots created by David Drake – aka Dave the Potter. His pots included poems scratched into the clay and were made at a time when it was illegal for slaves to be literate. I was moved by this very bold refusal to be forgotten, an act of resistance that went hand in hand with the labor of making the ceramics.

With this piece I wanted to make an object denoting comfort—something soft, like a mother or a grandmother you snuggle up with, or like a stuffed animal you tuck under your arm at night. And I wanted to make it in the shape of a vessel, something that usually exists to hold things: water, flowers, trinkets, remains. What would this soft squishy vessel hold? When approaching the sculpture, and looking over to peer into the vessel, the viewer sees that this vessel holds nothing.

At the opening, mirrors reflect the light up and out of the vessel, and there is the viewer, looking back at themselves.

The work has many possible interpretations—the viewer should see themselves forced out of the piece, and also confront their own self within the piece. You are in this soft, feminine, caring, vessel. You are soft, feminine, caring. We are all women.

And another interpretation: this vessel simply can't hold anything. All it can do is reflect the world we see. It can bounce light back, as if the inside of the vessel is expansive and never-ending. But in reality the mirror is not a portal: it is a barrier, or a stop sign. The sculpture says, "There is a limit to care—this isn't a place for holding something."

“Why Are You Running Around Like A Chicken Without A Head?”

When I was little my mom told me a story about how, once, her grandmother and her mother went to the vivero

And there were no more dead chickens, only live ones

So they bought a live chicken and brought it home and chopped off its head

And it was running all over the counter squirting blood on everything and finally my great-grandmother grabbed it by the neck and stuck it in a pot of boiling water, feathers and all

They ate Pollo Guisado for dinner

When Father's Day came around at school, we always did a card-making activity. We were supposed to decorate these coloring sheets of a dress shirt with a tie and give them to our dads.

My friend Amber and I were allowed to make the cards for our mothers, since we didn't have fathers. And I remember putting beads and sequins on them and making a super feminine dress-shirt father's day card. Amber and I always celebrated our moms on Father's Day. Now I think it's sort of silly that we had to make a card with a dress shirt, as if the fathers were the only ones working. Amber and I had working moms, wearing heels and skirt suits, rushing us to school before getting on the



*Bad photo of a work in progress*

subway and working all day in the city. I saw Amber and her mother at my engagement party and Amber's mom had a fabulous Yves Saint Laurent purse. Amber bought it for her for Father's Day. I'm glad she can do that.

I'm working on a piece called *Happy Father's Day*. It's two pink dress shirts buttoned up to make a new shirt, with beading and pearls sewn onto the collar and draped on a ceramic body. The shape could be a big chest, or just a round belly. There are no feet; it's not going anywhere. The arms are limp, and it's really an embodiment of these Father's Day cards. Is the figure that's absent from this a man or a woman? A mother or a father, or a caretaker at all? I can't exactly tell yet.

Every piece is turning into a kind of mother or woman in my life. The *fallen leader* feels like my grandmother. And then there are a few versions of a working woman. She has her blazer and skirt on, but her foot is much too small, a little ceramic leg and foot with a patent leather shoe and—oh, maybe it's a child in her mother's jacket, playing working woman? And there's the

piece with the blazer and the black sequin bra and the men's dress shoes. She's young, she's working, but the shoes don't quite fit. She's put together, but maybe not all the way just yet. She is figuring out which roles to play.

Sometimes I wonder if the sculptures are referencing people, or more *performing* personhood. I'm not opposed to them performing; I feel like most people are performing a version of themselves daily. The choices we make in getting dressed, or how we carry ourselves, are how we cultivate a persona for ourselves. And maybe these pieces, particularly the newer ones of mostly just fabric or resin, are just personified bits of a character. If I think about growing up in an all-woman household, I begin to think about these sculptures as parts of maternal personas. The working woman, as mentioned, and a teenager wanting so desperately to escape and be their own person. Or a grandmother guarding the door, stopping them from leaving. I think I don't always need the viewer to have the entire backstory, but my goal is to get them to feel surrounded by these women, too. I want them to question the roles of each character, and maybe find people in their own lives who could play these roles. Maybe some they can't put their finger on yet.

*Happy Father's Day* is also a piece that represents a shift in my working process. Previously I was laboring intensively on each piece, spending hours on each one and settling into the labor of each work. There was a sort of wrestling between me and the piece, a long back and forth until I could let it go. My thinking about process is changing a lot right now, and I am trying to move quicker in the studio. The speed is not just about finishing work faster, but about shifting the meaning of labor and care in my own practice.



I am asking questions like, What kind of care goes into speed? Can these still hold everything if they are made quickly? This new way of working has also afforded me the chance to be freer in the studio. To be more confident, to make faster work, to make fewer moves. To trust that all the things I know and want to say will make their way into the work without so much force. I am not second guessing as much, and the process is not as meditative, but instead it is a swift release of the moment. Sometimes these pieces are made using an armature I built for one sculpture and kept. Or sometimes they are just a response to a garment in the moment. A garment and a thought pair up in my mind, and I follow them.



These pieces— and the trust I must have in myself to make them—have me thinking of all the other professions I once imagined myself adopting. I wanted to be a pop star, a musical theatre performer, a commercial actor, a model, a song writer, fashion designer. All are things I gave up



on because they required too much vulnerability. These fast pieces somehow make me feel both more and less vulnerable. More, in the sense that if I trust my moves and they fail, I can't fall back on skill, or labor, on how many hours it took to create – it feels as if there's nothing to justify the piece. Even in knowing that with each work I am tapping into all the hours of skill building I've done – I still feel a great self-consciousness in showing these faster works. And sometimes they make me feel less vulnerable, in that I am somehow more detached from them.

In general, I think I have stuck with being a maker because it is a way that I can be vulnerable while also relinquishing the onus of meaning-making to the viewer. These pieces are actually absent of the figure in a way the larger works weren't; here you can see directly through the piece, through the collar and into the ground. The pieces ask you to fill in the blanks—to fill the space with your own idea of the person who would inhabit it. Or you look into the collar for more information and are met with a mirror, again pushing you out.

But maybe these pieces also express a greater vulnerability in that they are frozen in a moment: the moment I made them, but it could also be a moment in time, an action that's not mine, but that of the spirit inhabiting the garment. Their disembodied nature asserts that “no *body* ever comes back...but spirits and ancestors might” (Benjamin, 52). Like the pair of pants, held down by the ceramic gate, as if they were just about to walk away from this place. These sculptures become familiar strangers—I see them every day, but I don't know just quite who they are. Maybe they are siblings, or cousins, a family growing around me every day. As time goes on, I grow fond of them, connected, the way you might with a neighbor or shopkeeper you see every day. There is a sense of uncertainty in them, but the way they are positioned lets you know that they are certainly a family. A family comprising people from the past, refusing to be forgotten, and people from the future. They are my reflection on the alternative family I knew, and new ways of kin-building I am still discovering.

“I only have one girl

But the only girl is like the having thousands of girls

Because look at how many times she reproduce herself in each bunch of you”

Empress Of's Mom in “I'm Your Empress Of”

As mentioned at the start of this thesis, the work is not possible without all of the people in my life, but especially the women. They make their way through me in memories and out into the world again in these sculptures. I want to thank a few of them here. Thank you and rest in peace, Alfida, Cristobalina, and Tomiris. You taught me to work hard, be an individual, and make a perfect fried egg. Te extraño mucho. Thank you also to Magaly, Angie, Amber, Marisol, Mercedes, Little Mercedes, Mimi, Abby and Julie. You are the girls and women that built up the walls of my life, in small ways and big ways. *One eye bigger den de otha*. And thank you to everyone who trusted me with their garments: Alexandria, Alessandra, Andrea, Anna, Lacey, and Jessica.

## Bibliography

Aly-us. "Follow Me – Club Mix" on *Follow Me Single*. Spotify

<https://open.spotify.com/track/547iG5F16pTdim4XIMlGEU?si=e188184f99cf4a6e>

Benjamin, Ruha. "Black Afterlives Matter: Cultivating Kinfulness as Reproductive Justice." In *Making Kin Not Population: Reconceiving Generations*. Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018.

Blake, James. "Limit to Your Love" on *James Blake*. Spotify

<https://open.spotify.com/track/33BnSMHgX0AsbKSibkuMwh?si=ba540efdb27d4525>

Chu, Andrea Long. *Females*. Verso, 2019.

Empress Of. "I'm Your Empress Of" on *I'm Your Empress of*. Spotify

<https://open.spotify.com/track/5QBDPkDWZBznCBLqzxUObG?si=3f0713b914b14fa7>

Hill, Kacy. "Everybody's Mother" on *Is It Selfish If We Talk About Me Again*. Spotify

<https://open.spotify.com/track/7eGrELUEaTCTGIX9p0RuvI?si=5af78524b1974e11>

Noel, Urayoan. "Hidden City" *Hi-Density Politics*. Blazevox books, 2010, pp 25-27

Ologundudu, Folasade. "Anthony Akinbola's Durag Paintings Ponder How Objects Become Status Symbols—Or Can Be Easily Fetishized." *ARTNews*, 13 Dec. 2022.

<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/anthony-akinbola-durag-paintings-interview-1234649721/>

Shi, Tei. "Keep Running" on *Crawl Space*. Spotify

<https://open.spotify.com/track/1iEW4IleD5IuGDo9zP9IHW?si=b506ab2600db44a9>