BLACK EXPERIMENT: THE COLTRANE EXCEPTION

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ABTSRACT

While anthologies of African American poetry published in the late 1960s and early 1970s cast a wide net in their selection, including many of the most innovative black poets of the era, recent anthologies have tended to omit more experimental poets, seriously distorting the historical record of recent literature. Two recent anthologies illustrate this phenomenon and provide an opportunity to examine the resistance to innovative poetry among contemporary anthologists. Using an analogy to the public reception of the music of John Coltrane, this essay analyzes the ideological biases that account for these omissions.

KEY WORDS: Jazz, bop, "out" jazz, experimentalism, avant garde, post-structuralist African American.

RESUMEN

Mientras que las antologías de poesía afroamericana publicadas a finales de los años sesenta y principios de los setenta del siglo XX incluyeron una amplia selección de modos poéticos, entre ellos los más innovadores de la época, las últimas antologías publicadas tienden a omitir a los poetas más experimentales, distorsionando gravemente el testimonio histórico de la literatura contemporánea. Dos antologías recientes ilustran este fenómeno y suponen una oportunidad para examinar la resistencia a la poesía innovadora entre los editores actuales. Utilizando la analogía con la recepción pública de la música de John Coltrane, este ensayo analiza los prejuicios ideológicos que explican estas omisiones.

PALABRAS CLAVE: jazz, bop, jazz relegado, experimentalismo, vanguardia, afroamericano postestructuralista.

"See, black performance has always been the ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus..." Fred Moten (26)

Following a period of great anticipation, *The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry* appeared in late 2005. The publisher's description of the book, printed on the fly leaf and circulated as a news release, makes the usual Oxford claims to canon-forming authority. Taking its place alongside *The Oxford Anthology*



of English Poetry, The Oxford Anthology of Modern American Poetry and other equally ambitious gatherings, this new volume presents itself, in the publisher's words, as "nothing less than a definitive literary portrait of a people," language that is immediately echoed in the blurb offered by Henry Louis Gates, who declares this a definitive collection and a landmark publication. By now, most readers are alert to the fact that even the most definitive volume from the highest powered press can be expected to contain errors, and Oxford does not disappoint on that score. The introduction, for instance, awards Amiri Baraka a degree from Howard University that, as anyone knows who has ever read his autobiography, published more than two decades ago, Baraka never received. More troubling, because seemingly ideologically motivated, are some of the wildly misleading characterizations made by the editor, including the remarkable statement that during the period of the 1930s, "the Depression saw little poetry, except for the work of Hughes and Sterling Brown" (XXVII). As Rampersad is the biographer of Langston Hughes, one expects him to be partial to Hughes's body of work, but perhaps not to the extent of erasing an entire decade's output of interesting poetry. This, however, proves to be symptomatic of larger elisions still. Apparently, to badly paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, you can portray some of the people some of the time, but you can't portray all the people all the time; so just call your portrait definitive and be done with it.

Just how definitive is a portrait that excludes some of its most intriguing people? The Oxford press release argues that the editor of *The Oxford Anthology of* African-American Poetry has painted "a faithful and yet inspired portrait of black America," but again, how faithful is a partial portrait? The "composite portrait" the editor suggests he has created (XXV) turns out, like those oddly unnerving composite portraits created by police artists debriefing crime victims, to look simultaneously like everybody and nobody. In the end, it appears deliberately designed to have rendered whole swaths of African American poetry "nobodies." The editing selections have had the curious effect of removing some of the most innovative poems from the tradition, making this book look, by the time we've turned the final page, all too much like the other Oxford volumes. Why is this the case? Why is it that some of the poems of Amiri Baraka are included, while many of the poets who have done the most to explore the pathways opened up more than a halfcentury ago by Baraka are missing in action? To make a beginning at answering those questions, I'd like to take a detour through the reception history of jazz artist John Coltrane.

At our present remove, so much history has settled into our ears that we can no longer register these sounds as we once might have. Too near and at the same time separated irrevocably from us by the intervention of years and other musics, they strike a note that is at once too much and too much with us, an unbearably strange mode of familiarity. So much having been decided so long ago, it is nearly impossible to reopen the case without prejudice, to see the what that this was trying to get at. We can no longer hear this, as it were, without precedent; hearing it at all now brings us to ask, paraphrasing Les McCann, Les as always being more, "compared to what?" Listen:

John Coltrane, long one of my favorite musicians, has recently gone where I cannot follow, and his latest album is another footfall in that land... After the *Ascension* disk, and now this, I cannot be scoured or scraped any more... In this *Meditations* album, I feel only that I am being wildly assaulted, and must defend myself by not listening. (Goldberg 235)

One might well begin by noting the rhetorical oddity of that last phrase. How is it that someone set the task of reviewing a recording comes to the self defense of not listening? Isn't it already, always already too late for that? But more immediately, the fact is that this defensive review, contributed to Hi Fi/Stereo Review in 1967 by Joe Goldberg, sounds a far more dissonant note to us now, from the retrospect of our unsteady grip on the twenty-first century, than does anything on the disk that reproduces *Meditations*. Goldberg's was, though, far from being a solitary note of disquiet. He was, it happens, part of a large and vociferous chorus. Another critic, as Lewis Porter reminds readers of his Coltrane biography, described the artist's work as "epileptic fits of passion" (qtd. in Porter 139). As early as 1959, John Tynan complained in the pages of Downbeat that Trane's ping was a case of 'pathetic self-seeking" (qtd. in Porter 139). Only a year later, Tynan was to speak of Coltrane's "onrush of surrealism and disconnected musical thought best appreciated within the dark corridors of his personal psyche." Lest any listener feel tempted to follow Coltrane down those, please note, "dark" corridors, Tynan cautioned that those seemingly solipsistic solos connoted "neurotic compulsion and contempt for audience" (qtd. in Porter 139). Just as it is jarring now to think of a late album of Meditations as an assault on a scoured and soured listener, it seems strikingly discordant to suggest that Coltrane's late Fifties work was both neurotic and contemptuous. Tynan, too, had company in his contempt for early Trane. In an evaluation of the Miles Davis Sextet's playing at Newport in 1958, Don Gold complained that Coltrane brought ruin to "group's solidarity." By Gold's estimation, "Backing himself into rhythmic corners in flurries of notes, Coltrane sounded like the personification of motion-without-progress" (qtd. in Porter 139). Even such masterpieces of early work as "Chasin' the Trane" were the subject of similar calumny. As Ira Gitler auditioned the piece, he averred that:

Coltrane may be searching for new avenues of expression, but if it is going to take this form of yawps, squawks, and countless repetitive runs, then it should be confined to the woodshed. Whether or not it is "far out" is not the question. Whatever it is, it is monotonous, a treadmill to the Kingdom of Boredom. There are places when his horn actually sounds as if it is in need of repair. In fact, the solo could be described as one big air-leak. (qtd. in Nissensen 131)

There is always a temptation when rehearsing these notorious moments from the early reception history to argue, in an only half-self-congratulatory fashion, that we have learned over time to listen differently, and that it was Coltrane who played the greatest role in turning our heads, tuning our ears, in this direction. Were that true, however, at least true to any significant degree, we might rightly expect a much broader public appreciation of and support for the many musicians

who have fruitfully followed Coltrane along his exploratory pathways. And while it may be gratifying to witness the enthusiastic audiences that sometimes turn out for even the most "out" jazz in some few cities, none of us, I venture, operates under any illusion that what was once called the New Thing In Jazz consolidated in the Sixties around Coltrane's example has become a sufficiently old hat as to have entered the realm of the readily taken for granted.

Thereby hangs more than a tale. Clearly the cavils of Gold, Tynan, Gitler et al were recorded prior to the apotheosis of John Coltrane. Though it may be saying too much to claim that Coltrane has been beatified, he does have his own church in the San Francisco Bay area. He has been honored with a commemorative Postal stamp by a grateful United States Postal Service, and there are enough published poems singing his praises to constitute a genre unto themselves, witness the entire chapter devoted to the cataloguing and explicating of "the Coltrane Poem" in Sascha Feinstein's study of jazz poetry. No other figure of American avant garde music has even approached the cultural cachet now accorded Coltrane even among many who do not particularly attend to jazz. Ly has Coltrane attained iconic status, but, in much the way that the equation E=MC² has come to signify science as such for millions who might be hard pressed to gloss its variables, Coltrane's image operates as a token of comprehension, political assertion, spirituality and a hipness unto death among not only the cognoscenti but among those as well for whom a flatted fifth is an empty bottle. But if no other musician was afforded the close posthumous embrace offered to Coltrane's music, neither have many other musicians truly made from his mold found an appreciable audience, let alone a witness. The few so favored, such as the incomparable David Murray and Anthony Braxton, enjoy reputations none-the-less that simply cannot compare to the "market penetration" of Coltrane. These musicians, rather, are all too often dismissed as mere, and indeed misguided, acolytes. We seldom now hear the level of vituperation directed at Coltrane's music repeated today (our contemporary Tynans being far more likely to argue quietly and discerningly that Trane simply wasn't at his best on one or another of the sessions they once regarded as nearly criminal assaults), an even harsher dismissal is often pointed in the direction of any so bold, or inspired, as to attempt the exploratory in his wake.

This I have come to term the Coltrane Exception. On the one hand, Coltrane's revolution has become such an intergenerational sign of insiderness, such a cynosure of hip, that the Grammy Award for best record of 2004 could go to a collection that included a hip hop rechanneling of Coltrane's "My Favorite Things," a recording that, by bringing Coltrane, Rogers and Hammerstein, Outkast and Norah Jones together in one sonic space is so overdetermined as to bring the entire concept of the crossover recording shuddering into self-deconstruction. At the same time, the jazz category at the Grammy ceremony proceeded very nearly as though Coltrane had never played. Watching the televised proceedings, one might have been forgiven for concluding that Chick Corea and Arturo Sandoval were garage rockers and that Bop had never, well, bopped. What can it mean that Coltrane's genius and invention are so nearly universally celebrated in an era when the NAACP Image Award for jazz can go to Kenny G (who, at least, if we're desperate for small

favors, followed Coltrane in the reclaiming of the soprano saxophone)? And what might any of this have to do with the anthologizing of contemporary innovative writing?

Case in point: Yusef Komunyakaa's "Introduction" to The Best American Poetry 2003, the volume he edited in a series overseen by David Lehman. (And before anybody rises to nominate Amiri Baraka as poetry's equivalent to the Coltrane Exception, as I was about to do prior to reading this volume, let me rush to point to Lehman's "Foreward," in which he argues that in America's entire history of Laureates and Library of Congress Poetry Consultants, none had ever "done harm or caused a furor" before Baraka, briefly Poet Laureate of New Jersey, mounted the stage at the Geraldine Dodge Festival to read "Somebody Blew Up America," a claim so devastatingly ahistorical as to cause one to wonder whether Lehman has actually ever read the collected works of our various Laureates, let alone informed himself regarding the mysterious appearance of the name of William Carlos Williams on the list of those who held the honored position at the Library of Congress, despite the fact that he was never permitted to serve in the office).

I could not help recalling Tynan's evacuation of Coltrane as I read the first page of Komunyakaa's introduction, in which he remarks the existence of "a poetry that borders on cultural solecism" (11). We would do well to remind ourselves of the Greek origins of "solecism" in the word soloikos, meaning "speaking incorrectly," rather like Gitler's description of Coltrane's playing as one long air leak. It turns out that the poets Komunyakaa has trained in his sights, unnamed, though accused of something called literary deception, are members of hat Komunyakaa characterizes as the "so-called exploratory movement" (12), a "folly" perpetrated, as he puts it, by a "so-called new avant garde" (15). Not only is it surpassingly difficult to know who he is describing here, not only is it impossible to tell, other than Komunyakaa himself, who is doing all this so-calling, it is beyond knowing why Komunyakaa, Pulitzer Prize winner with an enviable university appointment that carries a teaching load every bit as light as my own, believes that these solecistic, exploratory poets are "writing from a privileged position" (11). Perhaps they are, for all I can tell from this Introduction, though it is patently not gaining them the privileges that come with broad recognition as poets in this context, not even the privilege of having their names appear in this broad round of denunciations. For Komunyakaa, this "exploratory" so-called movement is of a piece with bankrupt claims about "reverse discrimination" (13) and a return to the political apathy purported to have marked the 1950s in the United States. And maybe he is on to something, for just as critics in the Fifties were already deriding Coltrane for his supposed contempt towards any possible audience, for his solipsistic exploratory movement through the changes and corridors of his own darkening psyche, for his seemingly irrational rejection of the very stuff of musicality, for his anti-jazz, so does Komunyakaa now declare open war on his so-called exploratory poets for their "scrambled, amorphous texture" (15); for their deliberate confusions and blurring of meaning (13); indeed, for their suggestion that "language shouldn't mean" (14); for their "over-experimentation" (he repeats this charge twice [14. 17]); for their (and Coltrane would surely sympathize here) "anti-poetry" (14). Komunyakaa's discourse of un-listening self defense

is characterized by the clichés and contradictions with which we have become tiresomely familiar over the past three decades or so. In one passage of surpassing illogic he erects a rather sorrowful straw man doubly-veiled by the illusory *post-hoc*:

It is interesting to consider this: when voices that were based on experience began to rise from the fringes of our society, the new avant garde, armored with critical theory, began to make "pre-emptive strikes" at those who saw content as a reflection of their lives and visions. (16)

In this formulation a determined know-nothingism is aggressively conjoined to ad hominem attacks. Not only is the "new" avant garde seen as already on the scene and awaiting its opportunity to crush the still newer emergence of voices based on experience (and just what is the so-called exploratory writing based on?), not only is this avant garde, a military term after all, rhetorically associated with Bush era inanities of pre-emption, but it is supposed in advance that none of the avant garde had themselves written from positions on the fringes of society. If I might risk a resort to my own reading history, I did not first learn of critical opposition to traditional views of agency and subjectivity from Derrida (who, it should be remembered, is a Francophone, North African Jew whose writings surely proceed from his own long-time post on the fringes of French society). My first encounter with a critique of the Cartesian cogito and Western conceptions of the individual came in the pages of Amiri Baraka texts such as Raise and The System of Dante's Hell, and I doubt that I am the only contemporary critic armored with critical theories derived in large part from those "fiery" voices of the 1960s and 1970s that Komunyakaa sees as having been pre-empted by theory. There is, after all, a mappable itinerary from the anticolonial liberation struggles to the events of May 1968 in Paris and the simultaneous rise of French poststructuralist theory, but it is a relationship of inspiration and instigation, not one of pre-emption. But Komunyakaa's is itself a style of pre-emptory logic. He appears to take no notice of the contradictions between his assertion that these "new" avant gardes write as if language should not mean (and wasn't it the voice of the old, mid-century New Criticism that told us a poem should not mean, but be?), and his belief that they write a poetry that "begs theorists to decipher it" (12). Just what would be the point of attempting to decipher the undecipherable, of an effort to find meaning in the meaningless? Why is it that charges of irrationality and meaninglessness, now as in Coltrane's day, are so frequently accompanied by the abandonment of meaningful argumentation? Komunyakaa's rhetorical questions, like my own here, are not so much meant to be answered as they are designed to move us in one direction rather than another; his are, unlike mine, meant to close off one possible direction readers of his anthology might have been able to take. The problem with Komunyakaa's exploratory writers is not at all that theirs is a poetics, as Komunyakaa would have it, "privileged above content (11) [and, if I might pose yet another rhetorical question, what could it possibly mean to view oneself as "privileged above content?" Where would one have to stand to make such a judgment?] It is not that there is no meaning to be found in these works of "over-experimentation," but that there is a



radical surplus of meaning, as signified aptly by that overdetermining "over-" of Komunyakaa's damning and faint phrase. This is what Fred Moten is getting at in the quotation that stands as the epigraph to this essay, when he speaks of a lyricism of the surplus (26), and the truth value, perhaps even the surplus value of that observation is on full display in the major works of John Coltrane. Many of us are still working through the overage on offer in such moments as the Vedic choral chants at the opening of *Om*. While critics in the past sought to armor themselves not with theory but in the self defense of not listening, few today would feel especially scoured or assaulted even by such excess as *Om*, which, like Baraka's "Allah Mean Everything," is just too, too much, too encompassing to be reduced to "content as reflection" (Komunyakaa 16). *Om* is reflection, but it is not a mirror.

The phrases advanced by Tynan, Gold, Gitler and others of their ilk were intended to enforce a certain kind of respite from the surplus and cacophony they thought they heard in Coltrane's explorations. Komunyakaa's introductory phrasings are designed to usher us into a certain, and certainly narrower, view of American poetry circa 2003. Lyotard (and immediately upon invoking the name of another French philosopher, let me underscore the fact that his theories grew at least in part from the ground of his experience as a Marxist radical teaching in Algeria during the war for liberation):

argues in *The Differend*, this peace is won only at the expense of a wrong being committed to other regimens and other genres. Since a phrase is always going to be linked in one way rather than another, and because linkage always proceeds with certain ends in view, some regimens are always going to be favored over others. (Naas 101)

The Coltrane exception has operated to bring a fatal peace to the surplus represented by the posthumous success of Coltrane's works. Komunyakaa's phrases operate to form a linkage to the Coltrane exception for the purpose of leading us down one path instead of another. He writes in 2003 of the path he wises were far less traveled, that he writes for the purpose of closing off, that "the scrambled, amorphous texture of most exploratory poetry... parallels what happened in modern jazz after John Coltrane died in 1967, whenever a musician attempted to get away from the blues, from melody" (15). Now the linkage between blues and melody here is itself intriguing, but can we really be expected to have forgotten, three decades later, how often Coltrane was accused of just these sins, of wandering away from the melodic, how, at least for Ira Gitler, even the extended blues of "Chasin' the Trane" were not really so much blues as they were annoyances, yawps, squawks and leaking air? While an exception might be made for John Coltrane, Miles Davis, who did not have the good grace to die in 1967, committed, in Komunyakaa's eyes, acts of cultural treachery thereafter. "How," Komunyakaa asks, "could Miles have recorded Sketches of Spain and The Birth of the Cool, and then betray himself by playing on fusion pieces?" (16). Of course, many of those fusion pieces were adamantly blues-based, some of them played in the company of guitarist Bernie Cosey fresh from his recording sessions with Muddy Waters, and others, like "Maiysha,"



as extended as they may be, never stray at all from their most insistent melodies. The post-Coltrane, self-betraying Miles, it turns out, is close kin to the meaningbetraying exploratory poets. "Likewise," Komunyakaa concludes, "for the poet who has always embraced content as form, any experimentation not in service of meaning is anti-poetry" (16).

For my part, I tend to be a bit more circumspect about placing one aspect of any art "in service" to another. While Komunyakaa charges contemporary experimetalists with the "folly" of "introducing tonal and linguistic flux as the center of the poem" (15), I have to think of the tonal flux at the elusive center of Coltrane's compositions, and when Komunyakaa presents this centering of linguistic flux as a betrayal not just of "the importance of recent history" (15) but of meaning itself, I have to wonder where he believes meaning resides. Meaning is what we make of it. It erupts out of our unending flux of social interactions, which is why it is always excessive, lyric surplus and why it is never, finally, totally, even transcendentally centered. Move to what you think is the center of any thing in art, a Coltrane solo, a great poem, your own thoughts, and you will, will it or not, find yourself in flux; iust ask the axis.

There is, the closure of Komunyakaa's introduction aside, a long tradition of black experiment we might turn to pursuant to meaning's flux. In one text recently brought to my attention by Maryemma Graham, a writer speaks of the ways in which African American cultural invention and transmission are typically presented as voice-centric, thought in terms of the face-to-face performative. This author urges that "to succeed as a race we must move up out of the age of the voice, the age of direct personal appeal" (Griggs 51-52), and goes on to argue for the exploitation of new technologies of meaning and transmission. This writer is no socalled evangelist of the poetic avant garde "armored with critical theory" and setting forth to conduct a "pre-emptive strike" at "those who [see] content as a reflection of their lives and visions" (Komunyakaa 16). The writer here theorizing a move beyond the embodiment of voice is evangelist and activist Reverend Sutton E. Griggs, best known in literary studies as a novelist, writing in 1916, a somewhat more previous avant garde. Closer to our own time and topic, Wayne Shorter recollects how Coltrane "would talk about his desire to speak the English language backwards, and not really in a playful way. It was, like, to speak backwards to get at something else, to break patterns, I guess. It was that innovative spirit he had" (qtd. in Porter 138). If we are to speak of centers at all, this is central. Coltrane is not hoping to escape meaning, and he knows there is no content-free anything. The point of making tonal flux the center is precisely to get at something else, to end up elsewhere from where we already were.

In Om that meant, among other things, starting out in pursuance of a Vedic chant. For most audiences of our day, that opening textual passage to India is perhaps the least disturbing passage of the piece, despite the choral recitation, the ghostly intonations and the keening sounds of the wandering woodwind blowing behind and through it. Openly derided by many reviewers, *Om* is now marketed as one of Coltrane's acknowledged major works. No such subsequent reception has been afforded the voices of most of those exploratory black writers who followed

Coltrane in his backwards walk through the English language. There is another recording I think of in this context, a recording made not long after Coltrane's passing. Norman H. Pritchard's poem "Aswelay" was not an instance, as Komunyakaa says of the follies of the new avant garde, of "death in language" (15). Pritchard was not pre-empting any new voices that had begun to rise from the fringes of American society, his was one of those new voices. Still, what it said was not that readily assimilated to what everybody else was following one another in saying. His was an effort to get at something else, to get us somewhere else, to get us out there a minute. The poem has left far less record of response in the critical literature (so much for supposedly begging theorists to decode the work) than have the poems of Yusef Komunyakaa, awarded, celebrated, well-reviewed (including by me, I should add in the interests of full disclosure) and anthologized widely. But there remain intriguing echoes of the poem that Pritchard left behind both on the page and in the grooves of a long-playing record album, traces of the poem's passage through our universe. In the midst of that riotous linguistic and tonal flux that makes up Mumbo Jumbo, the novel by Pritchard's fellow Umbra Workshop alum Ishmael Reed, and whose very title is the dismissive phrase by which white people historically excommunicated black people and their language from the world of meaning —there at the roiling heart of the text we find printed the not-at-all-meaningless but nearly unassimilable word "Aswelay." This is more than merely Reed's shout out to an old accomplice in over-experimentation. By way of anachronism, by passing Pritchard's performance through the time tunnel of Mumbo Jumbo's intricate corridors to an earlier jazz age. Reed shows us how such exploratory works, twining themselves into the future anterior, out-precedent themselves; how, like string theory, they confound the criticisms of those locked into the known dimensions of the familiar realm of appearance, who would work as editorial gate keepers to prevent our passage to something over there, beyond, in surplus; those who would have us remain in the comforting forms of the old way. But the old way was experiment, quiet as it's kept. Back in the day, "Aswelay" was already dropping heavy science, and isn't that always the way? We explore because that's the only way out; because we can't sit still; because we can't stand for closure, which is why one phrase must always link to yet another, which is why, even in the closed shop of Komunyakaa's editing, room was still found for the "layering in fragments" of Ed Roberson's "Sequioa Sempervirens," a poem in which the poet "wanted to construct comparisons that were beyond proportion as their reality, outrageous strutting comparisons" (Best American Poems 2003 221). Roberson's work is not experimentation "in service of meaning," not some wearying eternal recrudescence of the same, anymore than was Pritchard's earlier "Aswelay." It is poetry, language, strutting itself, so, in the end, even Komunyakaa was taken in by the exploratory, had to make a way out of his "no way," had at last to find a home over Jordan, in the land east of Eden, the land of the so-called, who would work as editorial gate keepers to prevent our passage to something over there, beyond, in surplus. Rampersad, too, was unable to complete his definitive portrait of a people without at least gesturing in the direction of some of the outliers, the brightly mischievous transgressors who make realistic portraiture so difficult. So, lingering around the edges of his composite, one

can find a Harryette Mullen and a Jayne Cortez. The astute reader will seize on these, knowing they could not be the only ones, sensing that there is exciting surplus left on the cutting room floor. There will not be a special edition with extra features as we've become accustomed to expecting in our DVD world. Oxford does not label their products "definitive" with the intention of providing alternatives. But any claim to be definitive founders on its own surplusage. Just as lovers of jazz for whom Coltrane was no exception have followed their ears to the works of Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, Charles Gayle, David S. Ware and so many others, readers will find, even in the severely limited editions of Komunyakaa and Rampersad, reason to go looking for those other anthologies, nearly hidden, almost secret archives of innovation, who would work as editorial gate keepers to prevent our passage to something over there, beyond, in surplus.

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