



## Breaking Out: The Institutionalized Practices of Youth Prison Guards and the Inmates Who Set Them Free

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My research on the educational experiences of youth in detention has brought forward unanticipated findings around incivilities that were lived out between 2002–2007 amongst staff of what was a youth detention centre in Toronto, Ontario. The qualitative narrative findings come from a place-based educational study of the youth prison that asked “What is ‘educational’ in education?” A re-reading of the interviews with former staff and residents of the facility brings forward unanticipated threads that tie into the study of workplace incivilities and lateral violence. Specifically, there is a sewing together of the detention facility’s hierarchical layers and practices as further narrative analysis of the interviewee transcripts reveals various examples of lateral aggressions and incivilities between the institution’s staff. The interview transcripts from guards and staff who participated in the project repeatedly reference the word *institutionalized* to describe common staff-to-staff interactions. And yet, with hope, that narrative analysis also points to the role of education as a way to de(colonize) such an institution as those same guards and staff shared

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memories of youth inmates who acted for them as models of conflict resolution. Such stories point to an unanticipated hierarchical flip that occurred as inmates became teachers of positive *micro-messaging* (Young, 2007). Extended from the detention centre's narrative data is the consideration that hierarchical disruptions are key to making space for conflict resolution in such a place of enclosure.

The chapter is prefaced with an introduction to the original research project and the participant-interviewees. I then contextualize the narrative analysis by parsing vocabulary from literature pulled from the fields of microaggressions, lateral violence and incivility. The rest of the chapter uses narrative material mined from the interview transcripts, divided into three sections. I consider *hierarchical layers and practices, the role of silence in micro/lateral aggressions and incivility* and *de(colonizing) institutions* as each of these themes played out in the participants' stories of the now-closed York Detention Centre (YDC). Based on my close reading of their stories I conclude with some future projections for how the former prison's narrative data can be extended. Specifically, I suggest that further analysis of hierarchical disruption is key to making space for educational conflict resolution in such a place of enclosure.

### THE WHO AND HOW: PARTICIPANT-INTERVIEWEES AND TRANSCRIPT ANALYSIS

To contextualize the original research project, I began my teaching career as a literacy teacher for one of the largest schools boards in Canada. I was placed in an alternative classroom that was located in what was Ontario's central booking facility for youth awaiting trial. The former youth prison—YDC—was closed in 2009 but the building remains standing in downtown Toronto, and the experience of teaching there has continued to shape my life as an educator to this day. Over the two years that I taught at YDC I met various students and staff who maintained positive relationships with each other and the detention centre even after its closure. My doctoral research brought me back to some of those relationships in 2013 when I decided to return to YDC to investigate why this long-closed facility has continued to impact my educational journey. I wondered if memories of time spent in the centre had a similar educational impact on others who had passed time within its walls. The study adopted narrative analysis as its methodological approach, an approach that looks to various forms of storytelling and narration as forms of authentic knowledge dissemination.<sup>1</sup> My ethics-approved study was

comprised of document analysis, pulling forward remnants of old YDC student assignments that were salvaged before the closure. A secondary component of the research emerged from participant interviews where I spoke with two former residents and two different staff members. Those interviews were designed to help diversify the educational stories I hoped would be shared of YDC. This approach situated and helped to validate my connection to YDC as a former teacher, and thus informed both the interview questions and the conversations that followed.

The process for mining and coding the interview transcripts was influenced by McCormack's (2000) strategy of adopting "lenses" for the work of narrative analysis. To view the interview transcript through multiple lenses means:

Immersing oneself in the transcript through a process of *active listening*; identifying the narrative *processes* used by the storyteller; paying attention to the *language* of the text; acknowledging the *context* in which the text was produced; and identifying *moments* in the text where the unexpected [occurs]. (p. 285)

Because the data involves already marginalized voices of incarcerated youth, joined in story with those whose job was to enact certain systems of power over them, J. Arendt (2011) writes about the importance of adding "layers of significance in the narrative process" (p. 265). Thus, in this project interpretive layers were added with every new lens I adopted throughout my analysis. I give this contextual snapshot to set the scene for what were highly charged, memory-based interviews with four individuals who had passed time together at YDC: Mila, Dee, Alex and Naomi.<sup>2</sup>

Mila was a former YDC Child and Youth Worker (CYW) who spent four years on the detention centre's staff roster. As a full-time employee Mila was the primary caseworker for youth assigned to her care whilst they were incarcerated. One such former youth was Dee. The two have remained in contact as unofficial mentor and mentee in the years since the centre's closure. Because of her various arrests, Dee was a regular at YDC, and as she grew older was incarcerated in the youth superjail that replaced YDC in 2009. In our conversation, Dee informed me that she had also spent a two-month stint in an adult prison facility. Alex, the other former youth participant, was not in and out like Dee, but spent two straight years inside YDC due to the severity of his charges. Alex and Dee crossed paths during his two-year stay but neither have been in contact with the other in the years since their release. Finally, Naomi was

hired first as a CYW when YDC was still operated by Ontario's Ministry of Child and Youth Services. She stayed on with the centre, through privatization, to become a part of the detention centre's management as School Coordinator. Naomi was with YDC for 11 years in total. My own personal reflections on my own role as a former teacher at YDC weave their way through the mining of these interviews.

In their interviews Naomi, Mila, Alex and Dee each told stories from their past experiences at YDC, sharing *missed* moments of "educational becoming" that I worked to tease out in my original research (Davey, 2016, Dissertation, p. 6). Each interviewee described very personal feelings attached to the former detention centre and how those memories informed their interactions with, and movements in, the place that was YDC. The crux of my original research was that meaning-making (Till, 2005) in and of such a space was relationally based, symptomatic of the set-up that was YDC's environment as a whole. With my research, I desired to shine a light on what was missed in the closure of that facility. The interviews showed in story after remembered story that almost in spite of itself, the institutional and environmental makeup of YDC facilitated educational moments that positively fostered who those on the inside were to become over time. A commonly shared experience was that inmates, guards and teacher all lived out incarcerated experiences of doing time in some fashion. The notion of *doing time* became more nuanced and educationally imbued, for it was noted by all five of us that in our various roles each was impacted by having entered the space at an age of great influence. Our connected narrative showed that the time spent inside the prison walls affected not only our developing sense of selves but also the world around us.

And yet, even with this hopeful light shone on the memory of what could have been a very dark place, a narrative analysis of the original transcripts that is read with an alternative lens (McCormack, 2000) points to an issue that is not new to the original research project, but has remained in the shadowed periphery of the study until now. This chapter obligates a closer look at the dysfunctional realities that were lived out in the YDC staff-to-staff incivilities. I believe that they must be attended to for the former prison to truly be deemed as having ongoing educational potential.

### MICROAGGRESSIONS, LATERAL VIOLENCE AND INCIVILITY

To help me analyze the participant narratives, looking specifically at staff conflict, the lexicon from which I am drawing coheres various studies done on microaggressions, lateral violence and incivility.

Brennan (2014) describes microaggressions as “subtle verbal and non-verbal insults directed toward [people of colour], often done automatically and unconsciously. They are layered insults based on one’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname” (p. 1). Microaggression is a term coined by psychiatrist Chester Pierce in the 1970s to describe acts of racism so subtle that neither the perpetrator nor the victim is even fully conscious of what is happening. Though there is work being done (Brennan, 2014) to dissect and categorize vocabulary for literature in the larger field, the language used in the study of microaggressions, lateral violence and incivility exists with some interchangeable fluidity. The literature around lateral violence has grown predominantly from studies in hospitals that have examined nurse-to-nurse aggression. According to Roberts (2015) the most commonly cited theoretical explanation for lateral violence “is based on the oppressed group behaviour theory of Freire (1971), who theorized that members of powerless, oppressed groups develop distain for members of their own group” (Roberts, 2015, p. 37). Freire’s theory suggests that the oppressed group’s belief in their own inferiority is a result of “feeling devalued in a culture where the power resides in another more dominant group” (p. 37). In the traditionally gendered environment of the health-care industry where the power of nurses is subject to the more dominant power of doctors, studies note that the ten most common forms of lateral violence in nursing are: non-verbal innuendo, verbal affront, undermining activities, withholding information, sabotage, infighting, scapegoating, backstabbing, failure to respect privacy and broken confidences (Griffin, 2004). Such descriptors connect with what has also been determined to be incivility in the workplace (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), that which is defined as “low intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect” (p. 457). Authors of criminology literature have defined incivilities as “low-level breaches of community standards that signal an erosion of conventionally accepted norms and values” (LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992, pp. 311–312 as cited in Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Each of these definitions are differently nuanced but are still commonly linked by a focus on relational power dynamics that are lived out in the workplace.

Versions of these descriptions for microaggression, lateral violence and incivility all connect to what Mila and Naomi describe in their interviews regarding their past working conditions in the prison setting. The incivility spiral—the movement from incivility to acts of aggression or intent to harm—is similar if one were to read Roberts (2015) interrogation of the

hospital environment and my analysis of the youth detention setting side by side. Both spaces are constructed around built-in requirements of caregiving and hierarchy so that their impact may not be noticed or effectively addressed. Of such spaces, Andersson and Pearson (1999) writes that,

Our social interactionist perspective emphasizes the interpersonal and situational factors involved in the exchange of incivilities and coercive actions...the situation can sometimes cause instigators to perceive their own incivilities as legitimate or moralistic, potentially perpetuating the exchange of negative behaviours. (p. 453)

Essentially, both nurses and CYWs work in environments where they are charged with the care of powerless and often traumatized clients, and have to do that challenging work under the cloud of systemic and workplace hierarchies that render them powerless as well. For example, there is limited power for a CYW in the face of a legal system that presents, at a policy level, to work for the benefit of the children it houses, but proves itself otherwise as young people become caught in its wake (Alvi, 2012). As overworked caregivers feel both powerless and devalued negative behaviours such as incivilities between colleagues are brought to the fore. As energies are focused on the client's ladder of needs, incivilities occur within the ranks, not from above or below.

Thus, even as the nuanced differences between these various delineations are worth noting, in light of the prison setting being analyzed in this chapter, the term *incivility* will be used to describe the harms lived out between staff in the detention centre, contrasted at the end of the piece with Young's (2007) positive counterpoint of *micro-messaging* observed in resident-to-staff interactions.<sup>3</sup>

## SETTING THE BAR: HIERARCHICAL LAYERS AND PRACTICES WITHIN YDC

The not so subtle play on words that makes up this section's subtitle gestures to the hierarchical set-up lived out in the prison setting—bars define such a space, keeping inmates contained and keeping staff in control. The physical environment dominates in such a setting as every action and movement is determined according to constraints. Students were physically searched with a metal detector when moving between the unit where they slept and the rest of the detention centre, including the

school. One of my interview questions asked the participants to describe their feelings around this daily search experience:

*Davey:* What about the routine of literally going to class—like the wandering routine? I remember that we actually stood quite close together in those moments...

*Alex:* There was some bonding experience there because we'd have to be in a tight line going up and down the stairs...one of the reasons I wasn't a big fan of it was that when I hurt my leg it hurt going up and down the stairs...but you did get to learn a little bit about people as we joked around...though some of the staff took it very seriously...<sup>4</sup>

Alex's memory of his injured leg signifies much about the space that was YDC. The injury dominates his response to a question that asked specifically about the experience of having been wanded, a physical statement and daily reminder to the residents of their incarceration. I am struck by Alex's focus on his injury because as he makes mention of bonding with his fellow residents "going up and down the stairs" he punctuated his awareness of "staff who took [such routines] very seriously" with references to shared jokes in tight spaces. Because the stairwells had to be climbed many times a day, to and fro the unit to school and mealtimes in the cafeteria, his reframing of the stairwell as a space that in fact facilitated the forming of relationships, points to complicated hierarchical constructs lived out between guards and inmates in the former detention centre.

Dee's response to the same question started with a description of the superjail facility that she was sent to upon her arrest at the age of 16. She described life in both facilities as very different, specifically speaking to the hierarchical set-up between staff and the residents. Dee said of the superjail: "It was just different [from YDC]. Just different...They tried to treat it like adult jail." When I asked her to tell me in more detail about how they were different she said:

At YDC you guys were in your own clothes but at [the superjail] they were wearing like the actual correctional outfits – ya – so they would actually treat us like prisoners – they would act like they were real cops and at YDC you guys were like teachers or Youth Workers. Uniform meant their chest was too high so they would talk to you like this or like that – and at YDC they actually talk to you...like a person.

Dee's awareness of each site's hierarchical dynamic informs her response differently than Alex, even though both refer to a relational atmosphere that defined for them the space that was YDC. Alex was in one very enclosed place for two years whereas Dee had the experience of moving around, thus exposing her to two very different realities. Both facilities were detention centres, thus prison-based hierarchical patterns of behaviour underscored relational encounters in both settings. Of note is how different the resident responses to YDC's environment are from the memories shared with me by former staff, Mila and Naomi. The residents tell stories that mitigate hierarchical layers and practices within the space through relationships—the staff tell a very different story.

Mila, for example, gestures to institutional rules and regulations that she felt opposed to when thinking back on her time at YDC. She balked at the instructions given to her by her superiors regarding what was considered appropriate staff-to-student conversation. She says,

I felt the way we were supposed to talk to them wasn't realistic. It was a lot about "You know that thing you did was dumb right?"

I pushed further with questions of educational impact and place-based relationships to which she responded:

I never thought of myself as impacting them...I guess they thought I wasn't supposed to be that real with them and they were surprised [that I was]. So then they would talk to me about problems with their girlfriends. What they should do. No, that wasn't teaching them life lessons for like careers...but that was the "in the moment" person I was. I think I went into YDC thinking I'd be working with a bunch of criminals...thinking "what am I going to do with them?" But when I was leaving I felt I'd miss the kids more than the staff. I engaged with them. They taught me as much as I taught them.

Thus, for Mila, relationships with the residents were more important than those developed with her colleagues. I wanted to investigate why this was so, and as I spent time with Naomi the picture started to come into focus. Naomi's response to YDC's hierarchical practices was affected by her managerial role within the prison. As the school coordinator, she was tasked with the responsibility of directing fellow staff, encouraging them to participate



in the school setting as much as on the unit. She was not their boss but the dynamic was impacted by a power differential. She said of her superiors:

I've been blessed on my journey to have bosses who have trusted me to do what I do. I just wanted it to be a learning environment. Not just for the students but for the staff too! ...The staff would fight about who would have to come to school.

I went on to ask about her opinions of fellow staff in the school setting and her response took on a philosophical tone.

*Davey:* What was that about? I had one interviewee, a staff, who said she felt more freedom to do one-to-one “teaching” upstairs on the unit whereas in school they felt disengaged from the classroom space.

*Naomi:* But that's up to the individual. If you're going to be engaged and interactive...I mean anyone can sit back and hold a chair. It's on you to assist the teacher, be part of the learning...

*Davey:* Do you think some of their negative experiences at YDC came from their own schooling experiences?

*Naomi:* Ya...I mean maybe that whole environment was...

*Davey:* Loaded.

*Naomi:* Could be...and similar to a lot of the youth who'd attend. A lot of the time the youth are forced to go but when they're in their community school they're not...to be put in the classroom, in that school environment, similar to the staff needing to be engaged and involved, it was the same with the youth.

Naomi's analysis of her co-workers was not collegial; Naomi's managerial position informed her tone as she remembered the detention centre's I/They dichotomy. Her tone is important to my overall narrative reading of YDC's staff story since it sets the scene, especially when read side by side with Mila's account of her impactful relationships with residents. Narrative analysis demands of the researcher that the words of the interviewee be considered, but a nuanced attentiveness to tone is equally important in discerning and making meaning of the story being shared and shaped by the teller (McCormack, 2000). Both Naomi and Mila highlight relationships that were impactful and very much defined by power differentials.

“WE WERE INSTITUTIONALIZED!”—THE ROLE OF SILENCE  
IN MICRO/LATERAL AGGRESSIONS AND INCIVILITY

The staff-to-staff power differential was remembered most explicitly by Mila in her interview. She said,

My experiences waking up at YDC were not always good...it was me having come from going out [partying]. The kids were very respectful of my having been out and thought I was hung over...and because I struggled trying to fit in or...um...[was] trying to figure it out...I used them seeing me as human as a way to be human with them. I never told them what we did or where we went but it gave me an opportunity to sit and talk to them. I used every chance I could get to talk with them. I didn't do a lot of night shifts...but leaving and coming out of the buildings started to change for me when dynamics with the staff changed...because we all became institutionalized. When in Walmart I'd hear them call for assistance it would actually give me a jolt because it was like hearing "assistance needed in south unit."

Mila's use of the term *institutionalized* jolts me as much as hearing the Walmart "call for assistance" did for her. My original research question looked at the impact of physical space on one's relationships to it and within it. Mila's personal reflection on such a loaded term speaks to how trapped she felt, and how contained the inmates truly were for her to make such a comparison. I am reminded of Legault's (2012) essay on *King Lear* when he refers to all of the wounded characters as mental health patients who are obligated to take care of each other; the sick taking care of the sick. When analyzing YDC from Mila's perspective, one turns the pages on a comparable story. As a CYW she would spend hours with the inmates in the school setting of YDC and even more time with them on the unit. That time spent together in close quarters created space for blurred boundaries, specifically regarding who was the caregiver and who might be receiving care in that place. She remembers,

There was one guy, P\_\_\_\_\_, who said he'd take care of me outside. So when there were problems male staff would send me down the hall to calm him down...I remember being really uncomfortable with it...using strategies that were instinctive – or just me being me. He could see what the male staff were doing. I could see what they were doing.

Mila names being uncomfortable with her fellow staff members' response to the resident, and all the more their reliance on her to keep the peace for them but not with them. She recognized that her being female was something her colleagues used as a tool to calm this resident down for he had shown himself to struggle with male authority within the YDC facility. Her summary of that time:

It was in the mess moments – that I figured out after, in the midst of a lot of other mess – right? We were all institutionalized. There was a lot of ugliness.

Naomi had a very different relationship with YDC by virtue of her having been in the position of school supervisor, a position that was not quite management and not quite staff. She remembers having enjoyed a sense of independence and personal mission that was less instinctive than Mila's dedication to the residents, more definitively built around her role and title:

*Naomi:* Being the school coordinator it was school that I woke up for. Having the brief [meeting] every morning with the teachers—and then upstairs again with the staff—gave me a sense of mission...What [conflict] was from upstairs would come down and our [school] team had to deal with that. It all fell on us. Ready to work, ready to teach.

*Davey:* So did you feel more team with one side or the other?

*Naomi:* I was already pegged as management because of my supervisory role in that school space, so I always felt divided. I might have seen behaviours in the day that I would record differently on the page than the staff who would be like “No, no, no, why are they getting a 5?”<sup>5</sup>...but I might have put down that they had a great day [in school]...so it was about that measure of success based on relationship, where we might see small successes even if someone else doesn't [based on the space in which it happened?]. Measures of success could be so static because across an eight-hour staff day how do you sum it up? But my job was to be in charge of that small chunk of time. And I would ask [the kids]—how do you think your day went?

This section of Naomi's interview is rich because evidence of conflict is not necessarily overt but, read through a different lens, incivilities lived out in that setting start to come into focus. On a first reading, I saw Naomi's attention placed heavily on her relationship with students, valuing interactions with the residents much like Mila. But upon a second and third reading, where I focused on tone and diction, I read Naomi's power struggle with staff as having impacted her day-to-day duties with those residents in the workplace. What presents most clearly when reading Naomi and Mila's interviews side by side, is that differences in opinion regarding inmate behaviour served to divide the people who were hired as a team to supposedly guard and guide them towards rehabilitated behaviours.

### DE(COLONIZING) INSTITUTIONS—DETAINED YOUTH IN(ACTION) THROUGH POSITIVE MICRO-MESSAGING

There is a striking contrast between the marred staff relationships that Mila and Naomi remembered during their interviews with me, and the positive stories of resident/staff relationships shared by all four of the participant-interviewees. That contrast has necessitated a term to help me describe what I believe to be an unusual or unanticipated hierarchical shift in power. What Young (2007) calls *micro-messaging* Brennan (2014) calls *micro-affirmations*. She says,

[M]icro-affirmations [are] a way of reaching out to those who suffer from micro-inequities [in the workplace]. Micro-affirmations may take the shape of deliberately reaching out to a student, colleague or co-worker who is isolated. One might make a special point of recognizing this person's contribution in the workplace. The idea is the positive micro-messaging can redress and rebalance the harms caused by micro-inequities. (p. 16)

What emerged in my re-reading of their shared stories has been a surprisingly consistent narrative thread; the ways in which the residents practiced positive micro-messaging or micro-affirmations with staff like Mila and Naomi worked to positively affect the space for all of the individuals who spent significant time within the former detention centre. Said another way, a re-storying of YDC shows student-residents, even from their incarcerated position of weakness, to have been active powerbrokers in establishing an inherently educational ethos for their caregivers.

For example, Alex shared with me an insight made of the former detention centre, reframing it as a space of learning:

Like in the resident area you could learn some things from the staff...or other residents...ummm...by just like hanging out and like playing different kinds of little board games or just even talking...you would learn something either about them or...umm...I don't kind'ov know how to put it...you'd learn about them. It was like you were always learning something new about ummmm... people.

I said in response “That makes a lot of sense to me. Because education for me is about learning, not just about what we kind of construct as school.” Alex then hit on the heart of what is educational in education when he replied, “Ya. Not just about what's in a book.” And putting words into action, Alex went on to share with me a story that occurred after his release from YDC:

*Alex:* One thing I was pretty glad about was that while I was at YDC I accumulated money doing chores and stuff like that...and... When I was found not guilty all of that extra money I had saved up I was like just get them something like pizza or something like that...something nice for people who were like...there...

*Davey:* Why'd you do that?

*Alex:* Just thought do something nice for all of the kids and staff...so it would get used up...like it was almost \$60. I mean I said it...I don't know that they did it...but I hope they did.

Ritske (2012) writes “There are many views of decolonization, often contrasting and competing, but one thing is common: the belief that through action, change can occur.” Alex's decision to share his earnings with his place-mates gestures to the change that can occur. The colonial power dynamics that imbue the construction and running of both prisons and educational systems are part of the present-day discourse (Alvi, 2012; Bhatti, 2010; Gooch, 2013). Yet Alex and Dee, who remains in a mentoring relationship with Mila to this day, proffer narratives in which action, and therefore change, are in fact occurring at both the personal and systemic levels inside prison walls.

The positive micro-messaging delivered by residents to staff provided momentary respite for people like Mila who expressed feeling great unhappiness with her colleagues near the end of her tenure at YDC.

She described feeling constantly judged before even entering the building for a shift saying, “They stared at me as I walked across the street from them, arms crossed and staring.” Such silent acts of incivility had the potential to wound—and obviously did—but I am struck by the mitigating effects of residents’ positive micro-messaging to the staff. Through positive micro-messaging, Alex and Dee had the power to redress and rebalance the harms caused by staff-to-staff.

So it is with hope that I suggest there be further study on such topics so as to add into the limited discourse and literature available around education and youth in detention. My own narrative analysis points to the role of education as a way to de(colonize) school and prison-based institutions as youth inmates are reframed to be mentors and educators who acted for staff as caregivers and models of conflict resolution. These stories point to the benefits of positive micro-messaging in spaces of containment, a potentially powerful tool to disrupt incivilities experienced by those who work on the inside. Thus, extended from the detention centre’s narrative data is the consideration that hierarchical disruptions are key to making space for conflict resolution in such places of enclosure.

## NOTES

1. See Denzin (1994) and Polkinghorne (2007) for more detailed descriptions of Narrative Analysis.
2. The names of the participant-interviewees have been changed to protect their privacy.
3. An example of one researcher who is working to interrogate the vocabulary in this wide field is Brennan (2014) who “worries about the language of ‘micro-aggression’ [as different from micro-inequity for] wrong-doing and culpability ... seem built into the idea of aggression and aggressive behaviour and that is not the case for micro-inequities. Indeed, the question of wrong-doing and micro-inequities is part of what is at issue here” (p. 3). Her dissection of these terms points to the necessity for specificity and clarity as more literature in these intersecting fields is disseminated.
4. The quotations for this chapter have been mined from the original research interviews, completed in July, 2014.
5. Inmates were given a daily rating of one to five based on their interactions with fellow residents and staff. Those ratings were used to reward inmates with extra privileges or to have certain privileges removed as punishment.

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