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Colonial Patronage: Evolutions in the Critique of Sartre's "Orphée noir"

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Colonial Patronage:
Evolutions in the Critique of Sartre's "Orphée noir"

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Abstract

One of the most interesting and controversial episodes in the history of the Négritude literary and philosophical movement came when two white, French authors prefaced the texts of two of the movement's most significant authors. Jean-Paul Sartre's "Orphée noir" is one of these texts in question, and it served as the preface for Léopold Sédar Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*. In one sense, one might characterize Sartre as a friend to the Négritude movement, exposing it to the francophone mainstream and thereby helping it gain traction in Western academia. Viewed a different way, however, and Sartre was intruding into a dialogue in a way he did not truly understand and limiting the movement he sought to help by defining it within his own definition of Blackness. In this project, I propose to investigate the larger implications and perspectives surrounding Sartre's essay in order to extract the most important criticisms against it as well as the most optimistic takes on what good can be salvaged from his work.

Introduction: Contextualizing “Orphée noir”

To begin the discussion of Sartre’s “Orphée noir,” it is first necessary to understand its subject, Négritude. Though there is no singular Négritude, the term generally entails a literary and philosophical movement among African and Caribbean intellectuals who were trained in France and writing in French. Even among its founders (notably Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor), there were different conceptions of the essence and mission of the Négritude movement. Because Sartre’s essay prefaced an anthology by Senghor, and because the Négritude Sartre describes most closely aligns with Senghor’s later elaborations, this project will focus on the popular conception of Senghor’s vision of Négritude.

In the simplest terms, this Négritude was focused on the affirmation and legitimation of the worth of African and diasporic culture and epistemology. Specifically, it was a resistance to colonial assumptions of White and European supremacy that accompanied material colonial oppression. This description misses much of the ideological nuance and political aspirations of Négritude, but it represents one of the commonly held images of the movement as well as the one that inspired “Orphée noir.” Even when limiting the definitional scope to an incomplete understanding of one theorist’s ideas, Négritude is difficult to describe succinctly. Attempting to do so without using the language of “Orphée noir” is even more difficult, as Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay has served as the stepping-off point of many writers exploring Négritude since the mid-twentieth century. The longstanding and near-exclusive significance Sartre’s preface in the discourse surrounding Négritude make it necessary to understanding the history of the movement and its intellectual reception. To better understand this significance, this project will explore the evolving critiques of “Orphée noir” from various groups of scholars, determining its dialectical space and continued relevance.

Positionality and Ethics

As a history student, I understand the research process as a comprehensive analysis of sources contemporary to the subject in question, followed by the educated synthesis of those sources to investigate the truth and significance of that event as it occurred in context. I believe it is important to relate historical events to the present day, but without confining them to teleological paths that would distort the reality of the event; rather, it is important to situate any and all findings in context to understand them as shaped by and reflecting the historical stimuli of their moment. I am a white, upper middle-class American man participating in a Dakar-based program conducted by a U.S.-based institution. I believe this topic is very important, as it concerns the unequal exchange of intellectual property and social capital in the academic/philosophical world; however, my stake in this research is not personal, as my privileged identity is only advantaged by this inequality. I am unsure exactly how systems of oppression will factor into my research as I intend to conduct most of it in archives or through interviews with Senegalese academics. It is certain that the sources I find will reflect the privilege of writing by white people, and therefore I might need to search harder for sources that come from Senegalese authors and commentators.

Because my proposed research does not include participants, my relation to them is not applicable. The only humans I intend to interact with would be speaking as experts rather than as research subjects. I expect to find a mix of perspectives on the interaction between Sartre and Senghor, as I already know that critics such as Fanon were very critical of the Negritude movement's interaction with Europe, while others welcomed the exchange. Through this study I hope to accurately synthesize the thoughts of contemporary observers with the primary works in question to understand the dynamic of intellectual exchange between Jean-Paul Sartre and Leopold Senghor with regard to this particular introductory text.

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Methodology¹

The original methods for this project were made impossible by the global outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent travel restrictions and program closures, and the resulting changes in research are worth note. The research was to be a comparison of published critiques of “Orphée noir” written by scholars and unpublished documents commenting in the piece and its impact. This latter section of research was to focus particularly on the correspondences of Léopold Senghor in order to unearth any potential differences between his private thoughts on the essay and its reception and his published comments. Because the essay introduces Senghor’s anthology, and because its main subject is the movement he co-founded, his contributions to the overall critique of “Orphée noir” were to be the center of this paper. As it was, I did not have access to these documents and had to rely instead on secondary, primarily electronically accessible sources. As a result, my findings do not have the same potential for unearthing new information, but still derive insight from existing sources.

To study the evolution of the critique of “Orphée noir,” I have divided scholars into three essentially chronological groups: primary critics (those associated with the Négritude movement), secondary critics writing in the 1960s and 1970s, and post-colonial critics writing after 1980. I made these divisions based on informed decisions about ideological shifts between the three

¹ The nature of this project being an exploration of academic literature on Sartre’s essay, a literature review would be redundant here. Instead the main body of research presented functions dually as the literature review.

groups. The first group is made up of those writers directly associated with Négritude, who established the movement's mission and indeed enlisted the intellectual support of Jean-Paul Sartre.² I expected this group's critiques of Sartre to be mostly apologist, seeing as his essay was important in legitimizing their intellectual movement to an enduringly White-supremacist Western academy. The second group consists both of critics of Négritude and several Western scholars. The most significant differences between the first and second groups is generational and contextual. The intellectual generational gap that divides the practitioners of Négritude from its critics (i.e. Frantz Fanon, Cheikh Anta Diop) saw resistance to Négritude's main goals and means. Therefore, critiques from this group include a rejection of Négritude in general, limiting the attention paid to Sartre's precise role in the movement. The Western scholars of this second group are obviously more detached from the discourse on Négritude than either the first or second groups, and I expected that their contributions would reflect this detachment by emphasizing the academic, rather than colonial, impacts of Sartre's essay. The third and final group studied consists of scholars using a post-colonial framework in their critiques, following the popularization of this framework in the 1980s. Considering the stronger consciousness of colonial and neocolonial practices and outcomes inherent to this group, I expected their critiques to focus on the colonial implications of Sartre's role in the Négritude discourse more so than previous scholars.

The Subject: "Orphée noir"

As stated above, Sartre's prefatory essay has served for many as the basis for understanding Négritude. To truly understand its significance in this discourse, though, one must separate the piece from the intellectual movement and see its work in *creating* that discourse. "Orphée noir" is

² As explained later, this group is represented exclusively by Léopold Senghor in this paper because of time and resource constraints resulting largely from the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, this group is not voiced thoroughly.

an interesting essay most of all for its ambition. It is at once self-conscious, well-sourced, at times mythologically confused, and above all alien to its subject. Indeed, despite being white and French, Sartre writes about Négritude with such familiarity that Valentin Mudimbe would later write about him “as an African Philosopher.”³ This irony is clearly intentional, and it speaks to the presumptive nature in which Sartre adopts Négritude simultaneously as a patron and an honorary participant. The following overview of Sartre’s essay will detail his idea of Négritude as well as his own predictions and prescriptions for its future.

To begin with the essay’s most well-known line, Sartre describes Négritude as an “anti-racist racism” deployed for the sake of “the abolition of all racial differences.”⁴ He understood the intellectual movement as a refusal of Western cultural domination and the supremacy of European epistemologies. Therefore, the work produced by this movement was aimed both at Western colonizers, to demonstrate the legitimacy of the cultures they suppress, and above all at the colonized themselves, who needed to accept by force the paradigm of Western supremacy. Indeed, Sartre quotes Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* in referring to Black people as “Those who have invented neither powder nor compass / those who have never tamed either steam or electricity [...]” in part to demonstrate the disparity between the technical Western culture that dominates and colonizes and an idea of African culture that is “non-technical” and “anti-modern.”⁵ Therefore, while some misunderstand this line to mean that Négritude is “reverse racism,” Sartre clearly indicates that his understanding of the emphasis on race acts as a discursive resistance rather than an academic racial offensive.

³ Valentin F. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Creation of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 83.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Black Orpheus,” trans. John MacCombie, *The Massachusetts Review* 6, no. 1 (1965), 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

While the above argument puts into theoretical terms ideas that Négritude practitioners had not affirmed at that point, Sartre maintains his position as commentator and interpreter for its assertion. Where he clearly steps beyond this role is when he describes the internal turmoil of oppressed people and the double alienation experienced by the Black intellectuals at the forefront of the Négritude movement. Throughout the essay, Sartre hints at his own self-consciousness as a White French man writing in the Négritude discourse. He frequently uses “we” to identify Europeans and colonizers and even states that he is “talking now to white men.”⁶ However, this self-consciousness falters when he follows with lines about how it is “through a poetic experience that the black man, in his present condition, must first become conscious of himself,” or how “when he [a Black man] makes love to a woman of his race, the sexual act seems to him to be the celebration of the Mystery of Being.”⁷ Though Sartre quotes expressive Négritude poems throughout and implicitly grounds his explanations of the movements inner motivations in them, he does not write in a way that suggests this, rather describing the workings of the Négritude mind much like a romantic and fascinated observer. Though this aspect of the essay is not the most criticized one, it demonstrates the level of immersion—imagined or otherwise—into Négritude that Sartre felt comfortable with assuming.

Sartre’s emphasis on Négritude’s dialectical position is perhaps the most important aspects of “Orphée noir”, and possibly the most disputed as well. Sartre goes beyond the description of Négritude as a form of resistance and marks its specific location in the racial dialectic. He writes that “the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Négritude as an antithetical value is the moment of negativity,” and that the dialectic is aimed

⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁷ Ibid., 16 & 40.

toward “the synthesis or realization of the human being in a raceless society.”⁸ In placing Négritude at this position in the dialectic, Sartre makes it clear that it is the “up-beat” or weak stage of the dialectic and that it is only a point of transition: a “crossing to” rather than an “arrival at.”⁹ The elaboration that this position indicates Négritude’s ultimate mission of destroying itself seems to be mostly Sartre’s invention, the only support offered being an excerpt from Jacques Roumain’s poem “Bois-d’Ébène” imagining the one race of “peasant workers of all countries.” From this line of communist rhetoric, Sartre extrapolates the inevitable abandonment of Black valorization and the dissolution of Négritude into the larger humanist revolution.

Here appears another of Sartre’s largest moves in his essay, as he uses his explanation of Négritude as a vehicle for defending and applying his own ideologies of Marxism and Existentialism. Though he does not exactly conflate class struggle with the racial, anti-colonial struggle, his separation of the two remains rather theoretical and technical: “the former [class] is concrete and particular; the latter [race], universal and abstract.”¹⁰ His ultimate call to political action via the death of Négritude’s cultural advance reflects his materialist ideology as well as the Existentialist prescriptions of his own invention. Sartre positions the Black intellectuals at the forefront of Négritude in the position Existential nausea that pervades his theoretical and fictional writings.¹¹ By proposing action as the solution to this state, Sartre sets Négritude up as the ideal application of his own philosophical work.

These moves by Sartre do not capture the entirety of “Orphée noir” nor do they fully explain the author’s interaction with Négritude; however, these points of contact serve as the most significant areas targeted by critics and therefore represent the most worked-with portions of the

⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 19-20.

work for the purposes of this project. With this information in mind, the different critiques shed light on the essay's impact and perception through time.

The Critiques

Beyond illustrating the differences between generations of scholars and their particular views of "Orphée noir," the following genealogy of the essay's critiques shed light on the accumulation of criticism against Sartre's contribution to Négritude. For the pieces written on his work did not merely change in content, but adopted progressively different frameworks for approaching the essay.

Primary Critics: Léopold Senghor

The most proximate observer of "Orphée noir" is, of course, the author it introduced, Léopold Sédar Senghor. To begin by disclaiming, this section was originally intended to include comprehensive critiques from Négritude writers other than Senghor, as well as information from archival documents and correspondences. However, I had very little access to Senghor's writings and the critiques of other Négritude thinkers, and no access at all to Senegalese archives. For this reason, all of the material supporting Senghor's views on Sartre's essay and contribution to Négritude in general is limited to his *Liberté I* and *II*. For this reason, this project will demonstrate the interaction between only one voice of Négritude and "Orphée noir." Despite this, Senghor's comments on Sartre are consistent and were written more than a decade after the publication of "Orphée noir," so for the purposes of this essay they will represent a major aspect of his point of view.

In general, Senghor's discussion of Sartre focuses on his work not associated with Négritude and explains the similarities between Existentialism and Négritude's approach to the world.

Notably, in applying the term *action révolutionnaire* to Négritude, Senghor identifies culture as an action implying humans' power to create "consciously, freely," and cites this action as the essence of humanity. This clearly echoes the Existentialist theories of Sartre and Senghor concludes the line by paralleling Sartre to a Bantu philosopher.¹² This move indicates the level of justification and legitimation that Senghor saw in the alliance with Western philosophy through Sartre, and explains the relative lack of attention paid to the negative or reductive sections of Sartre's work that diminish the lasting significance of Négritude.

When he does address "Orphée noir," Senghor typically quotes the text without comment, using the frequent refrain "pour parler comme Sartre."¹³ This phrasing in particular is enlightening, as Senghor not only accepts Sartre's ideas, but at times even defers to his rhetoric and metaphor. This would not be so remarkable if the movement were not co-founded by Senghor or if Sartre had a more direct link to it, but as it stands Sartre is an alien to the Négritude movement. The use of Sartre's writing on Négritude here seems to be a legitimation of the movement's value. Indeed, his involvement in the first place seems to have been an attempt at proving the philosophy's worth to the Western world. The continued reliance on Sartre's word for support here demonstrates the disproportionate sway he held in and for the Négritude movement, even from the pen of one of its creators. To be sure, Senghor offers corrections to some of Sartre's comments, such as with the latter's discussion of the French language as the medium for French poetry. For Senghor, Sartre's "armes volées... à l'opresseur, dont on se sert contre lui" connotes too much concerted effort among the colonized, and he counters that their linguistic condition was imposed instead of chosen.¹⁴ Though this correction is syntactically significant in that it reiterates the oppressive

¹² Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté I: Négritude et humanisme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964), 95.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 142.

condition of coloniality, it is far from a critique of how Sartre writes about Négritude. Indeed, this sentence tacitly affirms the majority of Sartre's writing in targeting only relatively small phrasing issues.

Though this depiction of Senghor's response to Sartre in *Liberté I* cannot begin to adequately represent the whole of the Négritude critique of the essay, it says a lot that even just here Senghor says so little about the limits placed on his philosophy by Sartre. From this silence, one can discern a lastingly unequal exchange between intellectual movements from the metropole and colony, even with "allies" who support the anti-colonial cause. This episode in the critique demonstrates the unsettling power dynamic that Sartre held in the Négritude discourse.

Secondary Critics: Colonial Observations

The second group of writers dealing with "Orphée noir" varied greatly in their sympathy for Sartre and for the movement he spoke for. This group includes those anti-Négritude scholars involved in the primary dialectic with Négritude as well as those up to the 1970s before the large-scale mobilization of post-colonial studies. Because of this epistemological context, it is not surprising that the majority of critiques against Sartre from this group concern his discursive action and the validity of Négritude in general more than his colonial and patronal position.

The most prominent writer in this group is Frantz Fanon, and his significance here is two-fold as an ardent decolonialist as well as an outspoken critic of Négritude. While exploring the psychological traumas experienced under the colonial in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon recounts the significance of Sartre's essay in biting terms. He quotes Sartre's point about the transience and inevitable self-destruction of Négritude and thereby "dealt a fatal blow" to Black poets by

“demonstrating the relativity of their action.”¹⁵ Fanon describes that, essentially out of self-aggrandizing pride Sartre sought to “intellectualize black existence” and thereby destroyed the source of spontaneity that legitimized the African culture and epistemology that Négritude labored so hard to valorize.¹⁶ For Fanon, then, Sartre’s essay represents a betrayal of Négritude and the explosion of those things that gave Négritude worth in legitimizing the existence of Black people in the face of White supremacy and Western domination.

The effect of Fanon’s striking critique changes, though, when considered alongside his other work, particularly when he criticizes the intellectual work of Négritude. For instance, one of Sartre’s main points in the dialectical positioning of Négritude was the need to move past cultural evaluations of Blackness and instead organize and act politically. Though Fanon lamented this sentiment in *Black Skin, White Masks* for its practical dismissal of Black culture, he would later write in *The Wretched of the Earth* that “There will be no such thing as black culture,” and that politics was the only way forward for colonized peoples.¹⁷ Through his rejection of Négritude, Fanon ultimately affirms Sartre’s position on Négritude’s relativity by emphasizing its misplaced stock in culture rather than material politics. From this example, one sees that the criticism negating Négritude reifies “Orphée noir,” and cannot escape the destructive logic there entailed.

Besides Négritude’s critics, this group of scholars includes Western writers largely detached from the Négritude discourse who can easily write about the movement and Sartre’s essay without feeling the need to engage the problematics of a colonial position, focusing instead on his rhetorical decisions and the impact they had on the discourse surrounding Négritude. For example, “Orphée noir” fits into academic discourses that do not properly address Négritude at all, but

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

instead focus on the philosophical happenings of Europe. These pieces tend to frame Sartre's take on "Black Surrealism" more positively, especially relative to his other writings on Surrealist poetry. Whereas Sartre largely discounted the Surrealist movement as poetic theory without revolutionary substance, he goes on at length that Négritude offers perhaps the only "poetic praxis" anywhere.¹⁸ This move positioned Sartre even more as a patron of the intellectual movement as he advanced its political value even over that of European Surrealist artists. Specifically between Sartre and André Breton, perhaps the leading figure of French Surrealism, there was great tension over the relative value of art and revolution, with both turning to the work of Négritude poets for evidence.¹⁹ Analyzing this discourse, observers more easily extract the positive exposure Sartre gave to Négritude as a legitimate revolutionary theory.²⁰ Without emphasizing the criticism that this contribution continued to limit the theory by asserting its relativity, though, as well as failing to interrogate the use of Black poets as props in intellectual polemics, this point of view excludes many of the problematics entailed with this essay. To consider the impact of "Orphée noir" on Surrealism, and limiting Surrealism to its European context, ignores the literary contributions of the Négritude movement and amputates the capacity of the analysis in question.

An especially important note here is that Sartre's essay is included as an unqualified source of information in many of these writers' understandings of Négritude, even writers from Africa such as Abiola Irele. To be sure, they also include poetry and prose work from Négritude writers, but the inclusion of "Orphée noir" demonstrates the acceptance that scholars gave to this work as a valid representation of a movement that belonged to others. The level of influence that Sartre

¹⁸ Sartre, 40.

¹⁹ Similar to Sartre, Breton prefaced Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. His essay was titled "Ce grand poète noir."

²⁰ Steven Ungar, "'Sartre, Breton, and Black Orpheus: Vicissitudes of Poetry and Politics,'" *L'Esprit Créateur* 17, no. 1 (1977), 6-7.

had on the discourse of Négritude mirrors the same in colonial narratives of indigenous populations and cultures, and the willingness with which these scholars accepted that influence indicates either their complicity in or their inconsideration of the starkly colonial position of Sartre's work.

Post-colonial Reflections

Following the popularization of post-colonial studies and a more contextualized historiography in the 1970s, reflections on "Orphée noir" began to reflect a greater consciousness of the colonial situation as it related to Sartre, and not just the subject of his work. This process started with the essay's treatment in V. Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*, where, as stated above, the author devotes a section to Jean-Paul Sartre "as an African Philosopher." More than any other writer included here, Mudimbe emphasizes the importance Sartre held as the first "theorist" of Négritude despite his outsider identity. While Négritude poetry and literature preceded "Orphée noir" by many years, it was Sartre's essay that "transformed negritude into a major political event and a philosophical criticism of colonialism."²¹ On the one hand, it is clearly a positive development that the attention Sartre brought to Négritude elevated its perceived significance in the West. However, the power entailed by this introduction is also too great to be wielded by an outside observer, especially one who goes beyond introduction to derive a theoretical framework of Négritude based on his understandings of its art. In emphasizing the role Sartre held and its inappropriateness given his position, Mudimbe sets the tone for the post-colonial critique of "Orphée noir." Indeed, the majority of writers falling into this group echo Mudimbe's point on Sartre's excessive involvement in the discourse, coupled with the point of his dialectical limiting of Négritude's possible futures or outlets. Benetta Jules-Rosette details his continued activity with *Présence*

²¹ Mudimbe, 83.

africaine, the conference and publisher established by the Négritude activists, even writing an article in their first publication.²² Sartre's eagerness to remain engaged directly in the discourse of Négritude implies the depth of his influence and its activeness following "Orphée noir."

Conclusion: Decolonial Futures

From the waves of critique and the accumulation of problematics regarding Sartre's "Orphée noir," one can easily come to the conclusion that its contribution to Négritude was a negative one that limited the intellectual movement according to the imagination of a French man and gave massively disproportionate discursive power to an outsider to the movement who would influence its perception for decades to come. This conclusion is fair and is, in many ways, the most accurate conclusion to draw. Sartre's invasion of Négritude and appropriation of its struggles for its own philosophical ends marks one prominent example in a long and continued history of academic neocolonialism that sees Western outsiders determine the perceived realities and dialectical positions of colonized people's experience and culture. Such moves are easy to identify in the case of capital exploitation and the portraying of "third world" peoples to the end of profit. However, they are just as relevant in the creation of an intellectualized "other" in the academic depictions of non-Western political and intellectual movements coming from the Western academy. Sartre's work here is related to all of this and participates in a toxic discourse that reduces and objectifies others' intellectual work.

However, there are also positives to be extracted from Sartre's essay and its treatment both in the form of negative lessons and positive extractions. For one, Sartre's understanding of Négritude's valorization of African epistemologies seems to predict one of the primary tenets of

²² Benetta Jules-Rosette, "Jean-Paul Sartre and the philosophy of négritude: Race, self, and society," *Theory and Society* 36, no. 3 (2007): 270.

contemporary “decoloniality.”²³ Already he emphasized the importance of being able to use epistemological tools that did not originate from the colonizer but that were instead indigenous to the oppressed. In this rare moment of positive theorization in the essay, Sartre offers a positive solution to the colonial situation that does not simplify or de-essentialize Négritude, but advances some of its most important ideas of breaking from European supremacy. More often though, Sartre provides examples of a failed intellectual alliance that sees him overstepping his role and dominating the discourse, both distorting the message of Négritude and diminishing the central value of the movement by representing it as a European. The de-racialization of Négritude’s message and the application of the movement to universalist ideologies such as Marxism, not to mention the condemnation to dialectical destruction, all bear the mark of Sartre’s influence and control in the perception of Négritude and denote the catastrophe of his involvement. From him, one can learn the specific iterations of a rather obvious lesson in intellectual alliance. For Sartre’s work on Négritude might have been purely constructive had he maintained his position as an outsider describing the work of poets and philosophers. It is at the point of immersion and direction that an outsider oversteps their role and colonizes a discourse rather than supporting it. If one is to learn anything from Sartre’s interaction with Négritude, it is that true alliance is impossible given the level of involvement and domination that Sartre assumed. Striking the balance between assistance and cooptation therefore demands humility and restraint, but both made all the difference in determining the legacy of “Orphée noir” and, to a disproportionately large extent, Négritude.

²³ Sartre, 23.

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