
Phil Smith Lecture

BLACK EXISTENTIALISM AND YOUTH CULTURE:
EXAMINING THE CIPHER FROM DOO-WOP TO HIP-HOP

Kip Kline
Lewis University

The corner was our magic, our music, our politics
Fires raised as tribal dancers and
war cries that broke out on different corners
Power to the people, black power, black is beautiful.
□ The Last Poets, “The Corner”

I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if
an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words
to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life
that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the
inexpressibly human.

□ Richard Wright, *American Hunger*

Down on Fulton Street in Brooklyn
We used to harmonize...
‘Cause we were looking for an echo
an answer to our sound.

□ The Persuasions, “Looking for an Echo”

POPULAR CULTURE/DISOURSE AND THE DENIAL OF RACE

Though various factions of would be gatekeepers have sought to delegitimize or marginalize the confluence of popular culture and philosophy, an increasing amount of college courses and books in the philosophy section at chain bookstores include treatments of pop culture phenomena.¹ Work has been done to connect popular television shows such as “Seinfeld” and “The Simpsons” with philosophy, as well as movies like *The Matrix* and *Star Wars*. While this is encouraging for those of us who read Deweyan aesthetics as a defense of popular art,² it seems that the connection between pop culture and philosophy has created another philosophical space in which racial discourse is marginalized, if not denied. Even where such discourse is treated (as in Open Court’s *Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason*, by Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby) □ the *one* of 30 or more publications in a series on popular culture and philosophy that explicitly deals with Black culture), Africana philosophy is rarely explicitly acknowledged. This is especially senseless since some of the most powerful and enduring forms of popular culture in the United States have emanated from Black folk and Black culture, and because Africana philosophy can and often does speak to the conditions out of which such cultural phenomena have been formed.

Here, I seek to correct this particular denial by bringing together Black existentialism and the urban youth culture creations of doo-wop of the 1950s and 60s and hip-hop, a more contemporary cultural mode of expression. In particular, the cipher, a structural element that both popular art forms share, is examined through the lens of philosophy of Black existence. I take my cues on Black existentialism and Africana philosophy in general from Lewis Gordon (1997) and Lucius Outlaw (1992), respectively.³ For Outlaw, Africana philosophy is a “gathering notion” which situates a variety of articulations and traditions of African peoples, but also includes the work of those who recognize the legitimacy of African and African American philosophy. For Gordon, Black existentialism encompasses philosophy of existence in general, but with the added “theoretical problem of human designation,” whereby “Blacks live on, as Dostoyevsky might say, in spite of logic. It is the plight of, in other words, *the damned of the earth.*”⁴

No doubt, the intersubjectivity of the street corner, of the cipher in both doo-wop and hip-hop, can be viewed as existential responses to such a plight. These are responses that have shaped powerful popular cultural forces and offer much in the way of elucidating the street corner (both literally and metaphorically) as an elective educational location.

The proliferation of doo-wop groups chronologically mirrored the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. As such, it is appropriate to view the relationship between the creative expressions of doo-wop and philosophy of Black existence through the lens of the struggle to combat *de jure* white supremacy. The more contemporary hip-hop culture began roughly a decade after the Civil Rights Movement, according to most sources, and its prodigious growth and influence has been accompanied by an even further chronological distancing from the Civil Rights Era. That being said, Black folk in the time of doo-wop music and in today’s era of hip-hop faced and continue to face the existential question as Gordon puts it, “What is to be done in a world of nearly a universal sense of superiority to, if not universal hatred of black folk?”⁵ Yet, the question as it applies today is perhaps more layered and in some ways more pernicious than during the Civil Rights Era. When folk were gathering on street corners to sing doo-wop harmonies, Black hatred was explicit and bare in the dominant American culture and in plenty of popular American discourse. In the hip-hop era or post-Civil Rights Era, if you like, Black hatred is often disguised and cunningly executed so as to keep up appearances that “we” have moved past the racial problems of “our” past and as to give credence to conservative behaviorist ideology that asserts that people of color and whites now begin at the same starting line and those who do not finish successfully simply did not make the right decisions or work hard enough. This ideology not only serves the purposes of the conservative behaviorist, it also denies racial discourse and the persistence of white supremacy.

One of the reasons I choose popular culture and popular discourse as my canvas for questions of Black existence is that in our current historical moment, they are fraught with salient insights into the contemporary white supremacy/denial of racial discourse and Black existential responses to it. (I include in my conception of popular culture/popular discourse, mainstream media outlets and their not-so-subtle devolution into entertainment news. It is often difficult to find significant substantive differences between morning “news” shows and “Entertainment Tonight.”) A most recent example of this phenomenon is the virtual silence about the Jena Six or Megan Williams stories on any of the network television news outlets.

White supremacy is also implicated in the rising cache of the phrase “play(ing) the race card” in popular discourse. Ostensibly, this phrase serves to treat situations in which a person (almost always Black) has inappropriately injected race into a discussion in order to serve her or his (selfish) purposes. “He is playing the race card” is a phrase that, ironically, is used almost exclusively by white people in popular discourse. Further, it becomes evident based on the ubiquity of the phrase that what is being claimed when it is invoked is not really that race has been inserted where it is not a factor, but rather, that race is *never* a factor in social phenomena and therefore whenever one suggests that it is, she or he is introducing a gross red herring into the discussion. Sometimes the sentiment against introducing race into a discussion in popular discourse is so fervent that those who do suggest that race matters in a particular social event or phenomenon are accused of being “racist” for doing so. It is not uncommon to find this kind of white supremacist “flippin’ the script” on talk radio, conservative pundit television shows, or the blogosphere.

Another notable event that illustrates the confluence of popular discourse and white supremacy is radio personality Don Imus’s fall from grace. Although Imus’s racial and misogynist slurs were, for the most part, treated with disdain in the dominant cultural discourse, the disdain was accompanied by a self-congratulatory moment in which “we” were proud to live in a society that so readily condemns such hate speech. Yet, it was immediately apparent that in the wake of the disdain and self-congratulation, the blame for Imus’s impropriety would be laid at the feet of hip-hop culture as evidenced by discussions on radio and television talk shows and on the Internet.

Popular discourse, then, is replete with examples of the denial of racial discourse in dominant culture. Paradoxically, popular art has been and continues to be a location of resistance to this denial. Most notably, hip-hop culture has historically been most explicit in its resistance. Some have criticized hip-hop in its contemporary hyper-commercialized iteration as “adolescent play,” as Gordon does,⁶ or as Paul Gilroy has charged it, as succumbing to revolutionary conservatism.⁷ While I share some of the concerns of Gordon and Gilroy as they relate to what is implicated in the commercial products hip-hop currently produces, my interest in hip-hop culture lies primarily in its so-called underground form, and my focus is not on the artifacts

its produces, but rather on the aesthetic processes that are constitutive of those *practicing* the culture. Put another way, I am focusing on what certain members of hip-hop culture *do*, not necessarily what they produce. I also focus on aesthetic process within doo-wop. I am less concerned with the commercial products of this kind of music, as well, and more interested in the street corner harmonizing and the social, cultural, and existential dimensions of that aesthetic practice. Additionally, while dealing philosophically with these issues, I periodically employ my ethnographic work with underground hip-hop artists in Chicago, taking seriously Jürgen Habermas’s conception of the relationship between the reconstructive sciences (which include ethnography) and philosophy.⁸

DEFINING THE CIPHER IN DOO-WOP/HIP-HOP

Both doo-wop and hip-hop employ(ed) the cipher as a salient structural element that is central to performing the culture. On its most basic level, the cipher is a group of artists gathered in a (roughly) circular formation for the purpose of blending individual artistic efforts into a single aesthetic experience for all the participants. Imani Perry defines the cipher in hip-hop as “a conceptual space in which heightened consciousness exists.” She goes on to claim that it “indicates a mystical and transcendent yet human state,” and that it “creates a vibe amid a community, as well as a spirit of artistic production or intellectual/spiritual discursive moments.”⁹ My own ethnographic work with so-called underground hip-hop artists in Chicago produced additional ideas informing defining notions of the cipher. One artist vividly describes the cipher in one of his rhymes.

hip-hop is our place to exist
 the whole of ourselves in the radically egalitarian paradigmatic
 challenge to dominant cultural Darwinism□
 the cipher
 where we unwrap the multiple layers of identity and document the
 real life happenings of our block
 of our mind
 of our community and country from our perspective.¹⁰

“Freestyling” is an artistic practice in hip-hop that has strong associations with the cipher. It involves an MC ad-libbing a rhyme (or a rap) and creating poetic lines on the spot, unrehearsed. This is a practice that can take many forms, but is often enacted in ciphers where hip-hop artists form the aforementioned literal or metaphoric (with current technology it is possible to form ciphers across vast amounts of space) circles and “freestyle” in such a way that one member of the circle will pick up the rhyme or rap and continue it from wherever the previous person has left off.

Very little scholarship has been produced with regard to ciphers in doo-wop. In fact, it is difficult to find the word “cipher” in print anywhere related to

doo-wop groups and doo-wop music.¹¹ Yet, the somewhat circular gathering of the vocal quartet or quintet on the street corner that pervades imagery associated with doo-wop certainly seems akin to the hip-hop descriptions of “cipher.” No doubt there was a creation of a communal vibe and artistically colored discursive moments when groups gathered on the street corner to harmonize. Also, it is possible to read these communal efforts in doo-wop as a pursuing of some kind of transcendent state. This is evidenced in part by the ultimate value placed on reverberations of the vocal harmony. Scores of doo-wop groups have noted their zealous pursuit of bathrooms and other small, enclosed public spaces with hard surfaced walls and ceilings that could make even unsophisticated or inaccurate chords ring. Also, the melisma so often found in the lead vocal lines of doo-wop with respect to melody finds its kin in the melismatic treatment of colloquial words, phrases, and themes in the hip-hop cipher, both of which become aesthetic bridges to heightened consciousness.

THE CIPHER AS EXISTENTIAL RESPONSE TO AN ANTI-BLACK SOCIETY

In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin recalls that moment when, as a Black boy growing up in Harlem, he realized that he and every Black boy “stands in great peril and must find, with speed, a ‘thing,’ a gimmick, to lift him out, to start him on his way.”¹² The necessity of the gimmick for Baldwin is related to survival in a white supremacist society. Of course, that survival is in part a psychic survival in the midst of a society that *abnormalizes* Black and Brown people.¹³ Therefore, the “gimmick” may be conceived of as a method of seizing creative and possibly intersubjective space that is denied in the main of the anti-Black society. The street corner harmony of the doo-wop group becomes such a “gimmick” where Black youth attempt to resist the abnormalization from white supremacist society through creative, intersubjective aesthetic processes that have actualization as their limit case. Doo-wop groups were not only able to employ the street corner singing as a gimmick that would stave off threats to their physical survival in an anti-Black society, but it also provided the space to thwart nihilism and seize space for creatively addressing issues of Black existence, including notions of selfhood. There is significance in the choice of the street corner as a place to harmonize. It is a seizing of public space that, as The Last Poets remember, served as the location for “our magic, our music, our politics...our *testimonial* to freedom!”¹⁴ This corner, this highly visible and public location, also became a space for creatively engaging questions of selfhood and Black existence as evidenced in the retrospective Persuasions song, “Looking for an Echo,” in which the members were seeking “a place to live in harmony, a place we almost found.”¹⁵ This “looking for an echo, an answer to our sound” is certainly reminiscent of a young Richard Wright hurling words into the darkness, as in the passage from *American Hunger* quoted above.¹⁶

No doubt, hip-hop maintains a variety of cultural and aesthetic practices that aim at resisting the denial of selfhood that anti-Black society levels at Black and Brown people. The exploding bass in car stereo systems is a symbolic demand to be heard. The seriousness with which hip-hop artists employ the phrases “are you with me?” and “do you feel me?” speak to the depth of the relationship between hip-hop aesthetics, intersubjectivity, the search for selfhood, and the agentic grapplings of the artists.

Phil Carspecken refers to the kind of motivation human beings have to actualize in this way as an attempt to fulfill “expressive needs,” by which he means “the need to become a self, maintain a self, and grow as a self through expressive activity.”¹⁷ That praxis theory is ultimately about the desire to meet these expressive needs leads Carspecken to group G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Herder (whose ideas were labeled “expressivism” by Charles Taylor because Herder thought that the existence of human beings was basically an expressive movement from potential to manifestation¹⁸) together as having sophisticated, though implicit, theories of human motivation.

The key conclusion related to doo-wop and hip-hop aesthetics is that Hegel, Marx, and Herder all implicitly captured the notion that human beings are fundamentally concerned with *identity*. Praxis is a theory of human existence that connects humanness with desire and motivation. Carspecken reminds us, though, that praxis cannot be solely about work oriented toward the physical world. Herder and Hegel were more aligned with the notion that praxis needs can be met through expressive activity that does not produce a material product. Hegel noted the desire for recognition from which human expression flows. Carspecken comments that this means praxis is “more about human-to-human relations than it is about human-to-physical world relations.”¹⁹

Human beings, motivated by the desire for recognition, seek to meet their “expressive needs” of forming and maintaining a self through production. This is Marx’s praxis theory, but he lost key insights from Herder and Hegel along the way when he focused exclusively on action oriented toward the physical world. The desire for recognition that Hegel was on to is fed by human-to-human relations. This is the kind of reformulation of praxis theory that Paul Willis’s critical ethnography *Learning to Labor* does, albeit implicitly. This also describes the way “expressive needs” are met through the engagement of doo-wop and hip-hop aesthetics, perhaps most notably in the cipher.

Another locus for gaining insight about the confluence of Black existence, expressive needs, and doo-wop/hip-hop aesthetics is the distinction between action oriented toward consequences and action oriented toward understanding. In action oriented toward consequences, the level of success of the goal is observable in the objective world, while goals related to action oriented toward understanding are observable only in nonobjective, subjective states. Carspecken adds that communicative goals often are not clarified in terms of the exact understanding that is desired until after the communicative

act is completed.²⁰ This has significance both for identity claims and, notably, for communicative goals that are bound up in expressive needs and pursued through performance as is common for hip-hop artists in our own time to be sure, and one can imagine it applied to the doo-wop groups of the 1950s and 60s as well. As Carspecken says, it is not uncommon to hear someone say, “I didn’t know what I really needed to say until after I said it!”²¹ This is so because agents often have implicit and holistic understandings of that which they wish to communicate that come prior to the explicit content that comes in the form of words, gestures, or performances. There is a kind of uncertainty that the actor feels in this prior moment of holistic understanding about the significance or validity of the content. This uncertainty becomes the impetus for expressing what the actor has understood implicitly and holistically. It is important to note that agents can feel that the expression falls short of the prior holistic understanding. This often leads to a person saying something like, “No, I guess that’s not really what I meant,” or “That’s not quite it.” On the other hand, the expressions can sometimes exceed what was grasped holistically and prior to the articulation, and in these cases the actor often mentions surprising herself. Again, this is of special significance when it comes to artistic expression and in particular doo-wop and especially the hip-hop artists from my ethnographic work who have talked about performances in ways that match the ideas above.

This is also a moment at which recognition enters the scene. The success of a communicative act is often the result of the agent recognizing her own act. Indeed, she will also notice a sense of shortcoming if the act is unsuccessful. After the act is completed, the actor will find a match between holistic, implicit understandings and the expression or not. Carspecken points out that this idea is connected to the concept of expectation. “Among the many expectations constituting any meaningful act are always a cluster that anticipate what the act will bring out *for the actor*.”²²

Further, recognition is a desire to be recognized as an autonomous agent by others. This desire manifests itself in the identity claims that are a part of every meaningful human act at various levels of foregrounding or backgrounding. It is clear that this desire for recognition from others indicates a need for human beings to construct a social self. This desire leads to identity claims and these claims are often attached to the fulfillment of expressive needs. Yet there is the contradiction in that the social self never captures what is desired (“looking for an echo, an answer to our sound...a place we *almost* found”). The connection between the cipher in doo-wop and hip-hop aesthetics and the desire for recognition is clear. The motivation to perform in a cipher comes from the desire to be recognized as an autonomous agent and the desire to maintain a social identity, but it also is motivation for self-knowledge. “Freestyling” in hip-hop,²³ especially in a cipher, can meet expressive needs and offers immediate and multilayered feedback (both physical and communicative). Goals oriented toward understanding take center stage in the

cipher, and success is easily monitored through the kind of recognition that the group gives back to each individual participant. Not only that, but the cipher is also a place where the uncertainty of the self is addressed. The nature of the cipher and the art of freestyling necessarily means that each actor/participant will have holistic and tacit understandings of her or his expressions prior to expressing them, and only after expressing them are they able to recognize themselves (or not) in their words. There is a vivid description of the cipher that pertains to these ideas offered by a participant in my recent ethnography of so-called underground hip-hop artists in Chicago.

In a cipher when words are being passed and people are being playful, it becomes this like□ it's like taffy and everyone's pulling at it and you can't get it off you, you know what I mean, and it's just this big space and you forget who is where and it's just creation, you know? I think in recitation that happens too sometimes...you just kind of forget, you transcend that space, you know. To me sometimes, I'm speaking in that space [performance space, on stage] but I'm also speaking to and for my ancestors and for people who can't speak anymore or who wouldn't be able to be in front of that audience...I don't know if it's a "wave" or whatever, something that you ride and that, it feels like, you're not concerned with space and time. You're just creating.²⁴

BLACK YOUTH, ELECTIVE EDUCATION, AND THE MYTHS OF AMERICAN CHILDHOOD

Both doo-wop and hip-hop culture contain aesthetic practices that reveal a privileging of an aesthetic way of knowing. Hip-hop culture also reveals itself in other ways as an elective location for learning. Certainly the connection between the cipher and intersubjectivity, acts oriented toward understanding, and knowledge of self reveals a strong relationship between the aesthetics of hip-hop and doo-wop and learning. In fact, most of the hip-hop artists in my ethnographic study thematize the notion of an elective education, often alongside criticisms of their institutional (mis)educative experiences.²⁵

We can expand and explain this notion of elective education through an examination of Steven Mintz's myths of American childhood. In his recent, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, Mintz argues that five myths have obfuscated public thought about childhood. They are (1) the myth of a carefree childhood, (2) the myth of the home as a haven of stability, (3) the myth that childhood is the same for all children, (4) the myth that the United States is a particularly child-friendly society, and (5) the myth of progress or decline (that children are regressing or progressing with each generation).²⁶ These myths are perhaps easy to see through for academics, but Mintz provides a prodigious amount of evidence that suggests they are largely believed by the dominant culture and therefore have affected public policy and popular discourse. From the perspective of Black existence, it is easy to dispel these

myths, especially the myth of a carefree childhood, that childhood is the same for all children, and that the United States is a particularly child-friendly society. It is the myth of a child-friendly society that most readily applies to the idea of the cipher in doo-wop and hip-hop as bound up in issues of Black existence. Societal structures that are presumed friendly to children are often not so, and this certainly applies to institutional education. Where structures are not necessarily friendly to children broadly speaking, this is intensified for Black children in an anti-Black society. Scholarship reveals that, in fact, schools can be not only unfriendly to Black students but are often complicit in their criminalization.²⁷ There is little question, then, why Black youth have historically and continue to engage in elective educational sites such as the cipher in doo-wop or hip-hop.

Mintz concludes his book by examining current youth trends and phenomena and with a chapter devoted to the Columbine shootings. One of his conclusive lessons after a consideration of the events is that, “Contemporary society provides the young with few positive ways to express their growing maturity and gives them few opportunities to participate in socially valued activities.”²⁸ Again, if this is true for American youth broadly speaking, then it seems that contemporary society is even less accommodating to Black youth. Therefore, Black and Brown youth must create their own spaces for exploring the uncertainty of the self, for attempting to form circles of intersubjectivity.

CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS

If it is true that the cipher in doo-wop and hip-hop aesthetics is in part a response to a society that is not as friendly toward young people and especially young Black and Brown people as it claims it is, how are we to think, in our current historical moment, about questions of Black existence for young people and education? Clearly schools deny for most young people and especially those who are Black and Brown the space to explore the uncertainty of the self and to approach intersubjectivity with groups of peers. This is in part why so many of them reject the system and yet elect to be educated within the aesthetic processes of hip-hop culture. But what is the alternative in an anti-Black society? In other words, is it possible or even desirable for schools to provide and encourage intersubjectivity for Black and Brown youth? Should we wish for a system so Eurocentrically skewed and inherently conservative to be a provider of such spaces for addressing questions of Black existence? On the other hand, if we leave intersubjective spaces to the hip-hop cipher alone, we may be facing a problem of maturity, as Gordon suggests.²⁹ Or we may be resigning ourselves to admitting that Black youth will continue to need a gimmick for survival as Baldwin did. A few things, I think, are certain. There will continue to be ciphers where young people creatively express themselves in an anti-Black world. There will be subsequent generations of Black and Brown youth. And they *will be* looking for an echo...

NOTES

1. One of the most salient forces in this momentum is the Open Court series on popular culture and philosophy that, to date, has published an astonishing 30 titles with eight more forthcoming.
 2. See Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, M.D.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
 3. See Lewis R. Gordon, *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York: Routledge); and Lucius T. Outlaw, “Africana Philosophy,” *Philosophical Forum* 24 (1993).
 4. Gordon, *Existence in Black*, 5.
 5. *Ibid.*, 1.
 6. Lewis R. Gordon, “The Problem of Maturity in Hip Hop,” *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 27 (2005).
 7. Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Race, Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 178.
 8. Jürgen Habermas, Maeve Cooke, and NetLibrary Inc., *On the Pragmatics of Communication* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).
 9. Imani Perry, *Prophets in the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 107.
 10. “Prologue,” in *Idris Goodwin* (Naïveté, 2004).
 11. See Philip Groia, *They All Sang on the Corner* (Port Jefferson, N.Y.: Phillie Dee Enterprises, 1983) for a (loosely) social history of doo-wop and R&B groups in New York. Unfortunately, the text does not fully live up to its advertisement of a “sociological study” found in its preface.
 12. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963), 24.
 13. Gordon, “Problem of Maturity in Hip Hop,” 370.
 14. Common, “The Corner,” in *Be* (Geffen, 2005).
 15. Perhaps the most popular recording of the song is by The Persuasions; however, many doo-wop groups have recorded the song.
 16. Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (New York: Harpercollins, 1982).
 17. Phil Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning and Other Essays in Critical Philosophy and Critical Methodology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 38.
 18. Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society, Modern European Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).
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19. Carspecken, *Four Scenes for Posing the Question of Meaning*, 40.
 20. Ibid., 88.
 21. Ibid (emphasis added).
 22. Ibid., 92.
 23. It should be noted that hip-hop freestyling does have a relationship with the aesthetic process in doo-wop. Street corner harmony was never read of the musical page, and therefore arrangements can be thought of as “freestyle” in the sense that they were ad-libbed, and certainly the ornamental treatment of melodies by the lead vocalists were freestyled in a sense.
 24. Kip Kline, *Represent! Hip-Hop and the Self-Aesthetic Relation* (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2007).
 25. Ibid.
 26. Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2 and 3.
 27. See especially Ann Arnett Ferguson, *Bad Boys: Public Schools and the Making of Black Masculinity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).
 28. Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 381.
 29. Gordon, “Problem of Maturity in Hip Hop.”
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