Pens on the Prize:

Linking School and Community through Contest-Inspired Literacy

Korina Jocson, Sherdren Burnside, & Mualimu Collins

It was eight o'clock on a Friday morning. The sun was peeking through cirrus clouds, and traffic on downtown interstate freeways was minimal. A high school teacher was at home awaiting the arrival of two colleagues, one a university researcher and the other an independent filmmaker. Her house in East Oakland served as the central meeting place of what was to be a delightful day of critical work. After a quick but thorough debriefing for a 10:30 a.m. panel presentation, we packed our equipment bags and carpooled to San Jose to participate in the California Council on Teacher Education's (CCTE) spring conference. The theme was "Artful Teaching for Testy Times." That Friday morning was hardly the start of a typical day, at least for us, in the San Francisco Bay Area.

This article is partly based on what transpired that day. What we attempted to do at CCTE was new to all of us and forced us to see our role(s) in education a little differently. However, our story is not about that presentation, but about the context that led to it, a context which, we believe, tapped into and linked school and community resources to create a unique learning opportunity for high school students. It was also a context that built upon the pedagogical beliefs of three adult collaborators to engage students in critical poetry and digital media production.

The collaborative work as we will

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describe here was inspired by our on-going exchange of ideas about how to innovate teaching practices in urban multicultural classrooms. These exchanges eventually moved us towards collective action—that is, to work together, build on each other's strengths, and maximize the use of available resources to serve the needs of students attending what has been identified as a low-performing high school in the East Bay Area. Before we turn to our story, we first offer a theoretical framework on literacy from which we operated.

Literacy in the Lives of Urban Youth

Literacy is more than one's ability to read and write; it is tied to the ways in which people live their everyday lives. In recent decades, the focus on sociocultural perspectives in literacy research has led to broader conceptualizations of what is and what constitutes literacy. Within New Literacy Studies, Street (1984) advances our understanding of literacy as a *social practice* mediated and produced by the very contexts it occupies. He extends the notion of literacy events (Heath, 1983), or occasions in which written language is integral to one's interaction with texts. He asserts that literacy involves "power, authority, and social differentiation" and exists within sites of tension between them (Street, 1995). It is neither neutral nor technical.

In other words, literacy has the potential to reproduce and challenge structures of domination. More importantly for the latter, literacy can become a tool for gaining and tapping into available resources for self- and social-empowerment. Building on this conceptualization of literacy, poetry as a genre of writing is a site for understanding critical youth work, in particular for us

in ways that urban youth interpret and produce poetry as a literacy practice as well as a medium for becoming empowered writers in challenging different forms of social inequalities.

Current research in literacy studies indicate that the (re)emergence of spoken word and the proliferation of Hip Hop culture has served as a backdrop for the increased interest in poetry in schools (Fisher, 2003; Meacham, 2003; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Sablo Sutton, 2004). Many youth today are involved in youth poetry slams, writing workshops, and performances through organizations such as Youth Speaks in San Francisco and UrbanWord in New York.

Their words, often drawing from personal experiences and critiques of society, make evident the potential power and possibilities of using poetry in the classroom (Jewell, 2004; McCormick, 2003; Somers, 1999; Weis & Herndon, 2000). For example, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) contend that poetry, rap, and other elements of Hip Hop culture can be used as a bridge to assist students in engaging traditional "canonical" texts. They point out the pedagogical disconnect present in many urban classrooms, how teachers often overlook the abilities of students to memorize, analyze, interpret, and create texts.

If students already had these strengths and skills, they argued, then there must be a way to use them to make better connections in students' learning process. Particularly, they tapped into students' knowledge through influences of popular and youth culture to invigorate their classroom teaching. During one of their poetry units, they carefully paired a number of "canonical" poems with rap songs—each pair consisted of similar literary themes, styles, and devices—for students to deconstruct and make sense of and, later, share through

various types of presentations. This kind of innovative teaching and learning shows the potential power of ideas and collective action inside urban classrooms.

Another example is Weiss and Herndon's (2000) five-week guide to assist English/language arts teachers in exposing students to and using spoken word poetry in the classroom. Based on their work with after-school workshops through Youth Speaks in New York (now named Urban Word), they suggest various ways of interweaving creative expression, writing, and performance—from mapping a kind of pedagogical space, to crafting thematic poems, to delivering them in a culminating public event.

Most useful to teachers are the practical exercises they provide to illustrate the application of poetic techniques and literary devices in developing as well as enhancing students' production of poetry. Weiss and Herndon's guide is a springboard to innovate the teaching of poetry and offers an introductory understanding of the complexities of creating a dynamic learning environment while enabling young people to grow as writers/artists.

In the March 2005 issue of the *Council Chronicle*, the National Council for Teachers of English declared "Celebrate Poetry!" and "Free Student Voices" in April to prepare for the 10th year anniversary of National Poetry Month. Several authors and poets had encouraging words to share in the issue's centerfold. In Pat Mora's words, "[Writing poetry] allows me slowly to sink into the pool of languages…I discover what rises on the page. The internal exercise revives me. I emerge refreshed."

These words ring true as more and more teachers are employing innovative approaches not only to uphold students' interest in poetry, but also to build upon their existing reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills toward academic and critical literacies. This is one approach we as collaborators were more than willing to try in the context of an inaugural poetry contest celebrating the legacy of the late poet June Jordan. However, what we intended to do in our work did not stop there. We also wanted to tap into the power of digital media to extend what students had created in writing for the contest.

One consequence of rapidly changing literacies in the 21st century is an understanding of the many influences of digital media on learning and literacy development (Alvermann, 2002; Gee, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Literacies taking on various multimodal forms afford students multiple ways of interacting with texts (Kress, 2003). More than a medium for intertextuality, however, digital media production can also serve as a tool for critical literacy. As Goodman (2003) found in his work through the Educational Video Center in New York, youth as producers develop sophisticated filmmaking skills while offering critiques to dominant forms of culture. These youth employed critical literacy in making video documentaries about larger social issues informed by various media, media that they too were informing through their work as producers.

Reading the world and reading the word, as Freire's (1998) letters remind us, are key elements to any social action. The challenge to educators is to imagine praxis, one that is based on dialogue and problem-posing approaches, one that represents reflection and action to transform the world. We as collaborators believed in this kind of pedagogy and took advantage of an opportunity to explore new ideas and technologies when we came together in 2004. It was then when we set ourselves up to innovate current classroom practices around poetry and digital production.

Research Questions

This article looks closely at one instantiation of a poetry-centered practice as supported by June Jordan's Poetry for the People, specifically in the context of an inaugural poetry contest. It builds on an earlier empirical study, which investigated the partnership between Poetry for the People and one East Bay Area high school and the rich learning environment that this partnership provided.

Within that environment students participated in a particular writing process that included generative themes such as racial profiling and self-affirmation. The focus of this article is Poetry for the People's presence in other school settings and the involvement of students through a contest-inspired practice. The following questions guided the current investigation:

(1) What role does Poetry for the People play in the proliferation of poetry in schools?

(2) How does Poetry for the People contribute to the current efforts of teachers to facilitate the understanding and writing of poetry?

(3) In what ways does Poetry for the People contribute to the literacy learning of diverse urban youth?

The Contest

Poetry for the People, a university program in Northern California, offers unique learning and teaching opportunities to use poetry as a medium for artistic and political empowerment for and by historically denied populations. According to Muller and the Poetry for the People Blueprint Collective (1995), the program was crafted with three guiding principles in mind, that (1) "students will not take themselves seriously unless we who teach them honor and respect them," (2) words can change the world and save our lives," and (3) "poetry is the highest art and the most exacting service devoted to our most serious, and our most imaginative, deployment of verbs and nouns."

The late professor, activist, and poet June Jordan initiated the Poetry for the People program at the University of California, Berkeley in 1991 and with much success on the university campus began a partnership with a nearby high school in 1996. This partnership utilized college student-teacher-poets (STPs) to facilitate poetry discussions and writing workshops inside English classrooms. In this "collaborative intervention" between STPs, high school teachers, and students (Jocson, 2005), the emphasis was on the construction of well-crafted written poems, followed by performance or public reading.

In 2004, Poetry for the People in association with author Alice Walker and the Oakland Unified School District launched a new(er) movement in response to and in support of the needs of high school students. In the spirit of June Jordan's work, they called upon 9th and 10th grade English language teachers in the San Francisco

June Jordan

East Bay Area to incorporate poetry into their curriculum and, more importantly, to invite their students to participate in the first ever June Jordan Poetry Prize Contest. The Prizes were $1,000 for first place, $500 for second, and $250 for third. The call is shown in Figure 1.

After weeks of writing and revision, many students submitted their poems to participating teachers at their respective high schools, in many cases their own; these teachers then forwarded the submissions to the district coordinator and, later, to the June Jordan Poetry Prize Steering Committee, consisting of a select number of teachers and supporters of the Poetry for the People program. There was an accompanying reader made available to participating teachers to help incorporate the contest and determine their curriculum (see Figure 2). The reader provided teachers Poetry for the People's set of writing guidelines, technical checklist, and tips for poetry readings along with various sections of poetry and samples of June Jordan's work.

The Site

City High (pseudonym) is located in Oakland, California. It is situated in a working-class community where 23% of households earn an income less than $15,000, 50% earn less than $35,000, and 70% less than $50,000. This community is currently designated a Federal Enhanced Enterprise Community, a State of California Enterprise Zone, and a City of Oakland Targeted Employment Area—all indicators of urban poverty.

Based on 2002-2003 statistics, City High housed nearly 1,700 students from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, including 57% African American, 34% Chicano/Latino, 4% Asian, 2% Pacific Islander, and 3% other. Additionally, according to the California Department of Education, City High is considered a low-performing school with an academic performance index score of 2 (with 10 being best). At the time of the study, the school was on the brink of breaking up into three separate schools as part of the small autonomous schools movement.

Two of Sherdren Burnside's 10th grade English language arts classes served as the focal sites for this study. When we began our collaboration in March of 2004, students in these classes were near completion of their short stories to be submitted for the Chester Hymes' Writing Contest. The poetry unit, with a focus on the Harlem Renaissance as a starting point, soon followed. It was important for students to have a sense of this poetic tradition and locate various 20th century African-American poets in the literary continuum before moving into the works and life of June Jordan. The intent was to contextualize the poetry contest so that students understood its significance and Jordan's contribution to a literary tradition, a tradition that sees poetry not as luxury but as an empowering medium for transforming silence into action (Lorde, 1984).

Methods and Data

Using participatory ethnographic methods, we collected various types of data including audio-taped teacher and student interviews, video-taped student performances, participant observations, photographs of students in different settings, and student poetry artifacts. This data corpus from the spring and summer of 2004 provides rich and complex accounts of students' experiences reading, writing, performing, and producing (digital) poetry—in the classroom, on school grounds, in an after-school community organization, at the awards ceremony, and other locations in between. Each of us collected data related to the specific role(s) we played and the different access each of us had with students and their work.

As participants in the development of the project, we knew that we were informing the study in such nuanced ways. On the one hand, Burnside spent everyday with students during class, while on the other Korina Jocson and Mualimu Collins interacted with students on occasion, but during *and* after class. Burnside and Jocson as writing instructional support were often in front of camera with students, while Collins as documentarian was behind. Throughout the various stages of the project, Collins was responsible for capturing in/out of classroom activities and conducting individual and focus group interviews with students; he also served as the main filmmaking instructional support to guide students while in production.

Significant in this process was our constant exchange and query about student work that ultimately directed our actions and contributed to the overall narrative captured in film. All in all, we came together in this project believing in the potential power of the work we had imagined. Of course, each of our own particular set of experiences, knowledge, and values about education served as important departure points. They are briefly described below.

Korina Jocson

Teaching and working with students on various levels drew me to research. As a product of California's public school system, I strongly believe in the democratic ideals that schools on the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels hold for the nation's poorest and most marginalized populations. Through multi-layered practical approaches and interdisciplinary research methods, I have been able to learn different ways of conceptualizing literacy in the context of changing technologies.

One way has been to engage in collaborative projects that focus on educational issues relevant to traditionally underserved and minority youth. It is in my interest as well as those who I work with to increase the practical possibilities of

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Figure 1. June Jordan Poetry Prize Contest—Call for 2004
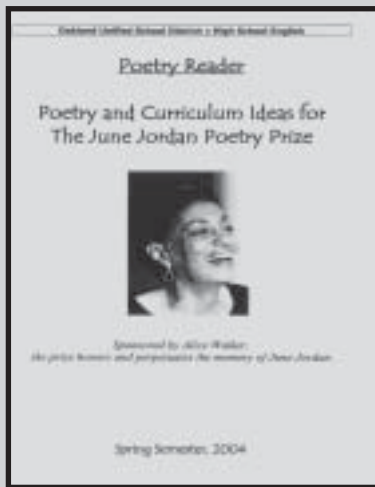
WRITE FROM YOUR HEART!!!!!
Deadline for Submission is April 30, 2004

Students are required to submit two poems:

POEM #1 prompt: June Jordan said, "We are the ones we have been waiting for." What did she mean? Write a poem inspired by these words or write a poem about a country that she loved. Read her poetry to find out more about what she stood for and had to say about the world.

POEM #2 prompt: Write a poem from your heart about something that inspires or enrages you! Or, write about someone or some place you love. Submit your best poem and express the depth of your emotion without profanity.

Figure 2.
Front Cover of Poetry Reader

Oakland Unified School District • High School English

Poetry Reader

Poetry and Curriculum Ideas for
The June Jordan Poetry Prize

Sponsored by Alice Walker;
the prize honors and perpetuates the memory of June Jordan

Spring Semester, 2004

developing rich learning contexts in urban education. Literacy research that examines youth cultural production (written or otherwise) and its connections to academic and critical literacies has been central to the types of questions that I ask and methods that I use to investigate these areas.

Sherdren Burnside

In my decade-plus experience teaching high school English, I have wrestled with different ideas and experimented with methods that deal with language and literacy. For example, in 2001 when I began my post at City High, I remember students' interest in Romeo and Juliet to be extraordinary. From the outset students were asking, "Are we going to act it out?" To me this meant that they wanted to do more than just read and interpret the play.

The lesson I took from this pushed me to do more with literature in subsequent years. What I realized then, and realize now, is that I teach a generation of students who want more, demand more, and need more from their educational experiences. Teaching students content is one thing, but teaching them how to prepare for life (with life skills) is another. For me it is important to provide students the kind of learning space that will equip them to be knowledgeable, conversant, and productive in the multimedia age in which we live.

This along with the need for additional human and material resources in the classroom is why I have increasingly invited others from the community to enter my classroom and take a more active role in providing support for my students. Mualimu Collins from the Digital Educa-

tion Foundation helped me to achieve my earlier objective of teaching students how to read and write film on three levels—literary, dramatic, and cinematic. The latter level was most important in the digital project we decided to take on in integrating media literacy with literary analysis.

From this collaboration Collins and I created "Romeo and Juliet: The Remix" in the spring of 2003, which then led us to further expand our ideas about creating a narrative documentary the following year with the help of Korina Jocson. My classroom in the spring of 2004 was again transformed into a writing laboratory and an independent filmmaking company, so to speak. Students were busy writing poetry for the June Jordan Poetry Prize contest while simultaneously collaborating with us on the documentary production. Such are practices which I have taken pride in to respond to my students' demands for rigor and excitement about learning.

Mualimu Collins

Teaching youth about video/film production in Oakland is the result of my dedication and passion for my field of work—independent filmmaking. I believe that youth in Oakland can change their community through empowerment, on their own and with others. The motivation is to dialogue about and critique matters of importance related to community, while actively finding ways to better them socially and politically through doing what I know best.

I believe that utilizing digital technology with careful and skillful application is one way for students to learn and tell their unique stories. Industry standard hardware and software are changing rapidly. Teaching students video/film production skills provides them the experience to become professionals and offers a critical learning space to gain confidence and become leaders in their community.

Pens on the Prize

The June Jordan Poetry Prize contest was a springboard for innovating the teaching and learning of poetry. To incite similar levels of enthusiasm from students as in past projects, we as collaborators implemented the contest in such a way that drew upon our own expertise as well as that of others. In the months of March and April of 2004, other collaborators including Poetry for the People's STPs and community guest speakers came into Burnside's classroom to provide assistance in leading thematic discussions and writing workshops. Sev-

eral college-level STPs trained to teach and workshop poetry were instrumental in shaping students' poems, particularly in adhering to the poetry writing guidelines set forth by the late June Jordan, guidelines which were central to the contest.

Jocson, a former STP, offered additional assistance in preparing student work for submission both during and after school. As we got closer to the deadline, we noticed that students hurried to polish, print, and submit entries, several on the day of. Even though a handful opted out of the contest, every single student produced two poems as part of a class assignment. Burnside required students to write regardless of their interest in the contest. The following is an excerpt from a retrospective interview:

> Part of, I guess, my integrating [the contest] was to put some level of requirement or some mandate on it, saying that, "You have to do this." And I did that because students often, it's a contest, and there's all this risk involved and they're not gonna do it. There was one young man who *had it* not been for a grade *(laughs)* would not have written a poem. I mean, his poem went all the way *to the finals*. He will tell you to this day, "I just did it because I had to, it was a grade, and I never wrote a poem before." (Burnside)

In our interest to "democratize" interpretations of poetry, Burnside and Jocson pulled together an evaluation team within City High that included two 12th grade students from an Advanced Placement English course, two teachers in the same high school "house" as Burnside, and two STPs who had been part of the writing workshops. Both of us wanted to assure that the scoring process reflected the rubric's contents and adhered to the spirit

Figure 3. Second Place Winning Poem

What Inspires Me
by Kyle

A lot of things turn my head
But nothing inspires me like a good mother
To help you smile and brighten up your day
Even if it was the worst day you ever had
You see her face
Lights up your eyes, body, and soul
It's hard to feel like this about my father
He's hardly there
Well, never to be exact
This hurts because it's hard
To have your mother teach you about sports
When she's getting her nails done
But she still inspires me
Because she takes time to try
Hey, did you hear me

of celebration and inclusion (Muller et al, 1995). The rubric we used was the same as what the district-wide evaluation team used to score student entries.

Between the submission deadline and the awards ceremony, the three of us along with several committed STPs scheduled a poetry reading called "Poetry Speaks the Truth" at a nearby YMCA teen center. We wanted students to have a reading off campus, short of an authentic kind of coffeehouse experience. Approximately a dozen students and their families attended. It was the students' first time at a poetry reading event. A week after this reading came the all-day scoring meeting of the June Jordan Poetry Prize Steering Committee members. Burnside and Jocson were present and participated in the process.

In the end, the meeting yielded 38 finalists out of 200-plus entries from various high schools in the district; these 38 poems were then sent over to Alice Walker for the final selection of prized winners. The awards ceremony followed two weeks later. Kyle from City High placed second. His poem entitled "What Inspires Me" earned him district-wide recognition, an autographed book from Alice Walker, and $500 (see Figures 3 and 4).

This poem about Kyle's mother went through several stages of revision before submission. In the end Kyle noted, "I think some people could relate to it. I don't know… some people didn't know about it, some just know that they got it good, if they *do* have a father in their life." Shortly after the awards ceremony, Kyle stood among several of his peers as they congratulated him and took several photographs including one with Alice Walker. In his hand was an autographed book, and on his face was a grand smile that was as bright as his red T-shirt.

Meanwhile, as all of these events unfolded, Collins was capturing on camera everything related to the contest and inciting interest from students to participate in the making of a documentary called "We are the Ones." Of course, there was no way of knowing that one of the students we worked with was going to place in the contest. The storyline in the documentary unknowingly became a stronger one as Kyle walked away a prized poet. To further innovate this contest-inspired project, Collins assisted several student producers to create their own video poems, two of which were inserted in the final version of the documentary. "We are the Ones" was first featured at City High in June of 2004 and later at CCTE in April of 2005.

Figure 4. Kyle Receiving His Award from Alice Walker.

From Written to Digital Representation of Poetry

"We Are the Ones: A Short Documentary About Poetry" was then produced, to tell another part of our story. It portrays what it takes to create learning opportunities for students and emerging youth poets and to build upon the legacies of prominent writers such as June Jordan and Alice Walker. It also portrays multiple experiences of a particular group of students who participated in the inaugural June Jordan Poetry Prize Contest as described above.

Working closely with Collins, four teams of students used critical and organizational literacy skills combined with filmmaking techniques to help produce and conceptualize the documentary (Goodman, 2003). These students' efforts rendered a 30-minute professional video that is currently being used as a teaching tool for student poets, teachers, and teacher educators.

In all, "We Are the Ones" represents the different literacy learning sites of youth at work and, for the three of us, highlights the many possibilities of a youth-centered and youth-driven media production in innovating teaching practices. This long-awaited production was featured at the end-of-the-year celebration of student

work held inside City High's library. It was a packed house with parents, students, teachers, and administrators taking with them poetry and other inspiring words at the end of a festive night.

Implications and Conclusion

Poetry for the People was instrumental in the proliferation of poetry in schools like City High. Through the June Jordan Poetry Prize Contest with the continued support of the Poetry for the People program, students were provided a unique opportunity to read, interpret, discuss, write, and workshop poems that paid attention to the power of words in creating a more democratic society.

The contest inspired not only students to submit entries, but also challenged teachers like Burnside to innovate the teaching of poetry and, as argued throughout this article, to link school and community resources. The support of Poetry for the People's student-teacher-poets in the classroom was also key to providing focused attention on students' written work as well as in their preparation for a public reading. STPs' knowledge and experience with Poetry for the People's writing guidelines contributed to high school students'

understanding of poetry as a critical medium for political and artistic empowerment. For English Language Arts teachers like Burnside, these guidelines along with the reader and STPs were important resources that allowed for invigorating curriculum, innovating classroom practice, and inciting some level of excitement from students to participate in a contest that was to yield more than monetary rewards.

As Kyle put it, "I wasn't expecting to win." Meeting Alice Walker and reading her book made him realize the power of words and how one can use them to shape others' actions. These are instantiations that Poetry for the People has made manifest in schools such as City High.

For us there are several implications and lessons from doing this project. Drawing from our own unique stances, we as collaborators played an important role in making the inaugural June Jordan Poetry Prize Contest a successful one, for our own sake and for the students that we served. We linked school and community resources around literacy events and practices (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984), which included generating writing assignments, participating in a district-wide contest, revising poems with college poets, doing a public reading at the YMCA, and making a documentary about the entire process. In spite of structural changes happening within the school, we wanted to make explicit the importance of collaboration in innovating teaching and learning.

The concept of "community" in this collaboration clearly is one that is still growing, as conversations and other ideas continue to shape how we see ourselves and what we can do in support of youth in the future. Meanwhile, as this "community" expands so does our commitment to good teaching and, as we highlighted here, finding exciting and critical ways to engage poetry in the lives of ethnically diverse youth. We argue that this kind of community is significant to the preparation of pre-service teachers as well as the continued professional development of teachers in practice.

We have learned several lessons, but more importantly we have asked ourselves difficult questions to allow us to devise better and hopefully more effective ways of serving high school youth. As we struggle with these questions in our own contexts, we hope that what we have shared here will generate similar ideas and similar actions from others in similar school settings. To extend our current pedagogy, we ask and seek answers to the following:

(1) In what other ways can school-community collaborations innovate classroom practice? What can we learn from them?

(2) How do contest-inspired literacies offer newer ways of incorporating external evaluation for students' work? Why is this important?

(3) How can poetry, digital media, and other types of youth cultural production be used as a tool in critical inquiry-based learning?

We believe in praxis to mean reflection with action. It is through the doing that we have found ways to learn from our practice to be able to ask harder questions and to challenge ourselves further the next time around. That was something the three of us realized after taking questions from audience members at the CCTE spring conference.

Following our presentation was a luncheon along with Maxine Greene giving a live speech via a telecomunications hook-up from New York City. Certainly, this would not have been possible without the use of such media, allowing the 100-plus audience members (mostly teachers and teacher educators) to witness the long-time advocate of arts and innovative practice in education and then honor her with a CCTE award.

We left inspired, just as we hoped that by creating a video documentary of students' participation in the June Jordan Poetry Prize Contest our audience from the presentation also left inspired. As we drove past First Street in downtown San Jose on the way to the freeway entrance leading toward Oakland, we reflected on the day and uttered to each other without words, "Should we do this again?" The answer in our eyes was a resounding yes. The rest is still in the making.

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