‘You Can’t Flow Over This’: Ursula Rucker’s Acoustic Illusion
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Introduction

... the colors of an earthquake are black, brown, and beige, on the Ellington scale, such sweet thunder, there is a silent beat in between the drums.

-- Bob Kaufman, “Letter to the Editor”

To be made apparent, sound requires amplitude and therefore, by necessity, the silencing of other elements in any given field. This does not mean that silence is the opposite of sound, for moments we might experience or conceptualize as silent in fact signify our unawareness of other kinds of sound. As the musician and essayist John Cage discovered in his well-known anechoic chamber experience, our very acts of living produce sounds of which we spend a lifetime unaware: in a space of absolute silence, one would hear the circulation of fluids and the passing of electrical currents through one’s own body. Much as “invisible” does not mean “absent,” “silence” at worst names a failure on the part of an observer to fully apprehend a presence, even as that presence gives texture to, makes possible, the apparent and audible. Never an absence, silence is the rest and the interval. Filling the space around every recognizable sound, it is powerful and generative; it is. Without it, as the Beat poet Bob Kaufman tells us, “there is no drum, no beat” (Kaufman 97).¹

Yet even as we know that in music theory silence is easily conceptualized as sound’s constitutive obversion, we also know that, vis-à-vis the social, “silence” almost always denotes oppression and suppression. In this essay, I bring together two texts, a letter to the editor written by the avant-garde Beat poet, Bob Kaufman, and “The Unlocking,” a
poem written and performed by Ursula Rucker. By using the aural to disrupt expectations set up for us by the visual, their texts shatter the visual, and reveal something important about the kinds of silence identification in the visual requires. In Kaufman’s letter this disruption occurs between the written text, literally the words on the page, and its sound, the transformation of the written in the act of reading. Nothing is what it at first seems, and Kaufman uses this disruption to move his letter past the mimetic and into the performative – making his words do what they say rather than say what they do. Rucker, meanwhile, uses sound to decouple a spoken narrative from the images that it creates for its listener. By doing so, Rucker allows for the emergence of a figure not only excluded from the dominant discourse in which she appears, but who may not exist outside of that discourse, simultaneously absent and at the center of the narrative. Though radically different in form, each text turns to the ear to subvert the eye, using sound to disrupt fantasies about race, gender and power.

I. Beats

In a recent interview, the artist Michael Bowen offers some insight into how Kaufman’s “beat” also connotes a rhythmic violence:

Beat was a police term for the route that the patrolmen were assigned to walk everyday they worked. It is ironic that beat patrolmen and beat artists existed in a horrible opposition to each other [...] The cop on the beat and the beat on the street, that’s one way of describing the world I lived in with [...] Kaufman in 1955’s San Francisco. (Bowen)

As a black street performer and rights activist who was often the target of police violence and state oppression, Kaufman – supposedly the original beatnik, and named so for his frequent run-ins with police – was absolutely familiar with the kinds of violences through which one might be silenced. Indeed, the passage in the epigraph above is quoted from a “letter to the editor” Kaufman sent to the San Francisco Chronicle in 1963, after returning from jail to find he had been evicted from his home and blacklisted. There is something particularly compelling in Kaufman’s decision to post his letter to a city newspaper. As an artist, Kaufman was committed to extemporaneity; much of his poetry survives today as collected transcriptions of impromptu recordings and jots on napkins. This time, however, Kaufman made an exception. Having been served notice, Kaufman returned the favor in-kind, and in this way his “letter” finds as much meaning in its performance of itself, as a message to a public forum, as it does in its content. With his letter, Kaufman registers his mistreatment at the hands of state
authority. Making state violence visible to the masses was a critical strategy for social change during the Civil Rights movement, but it is important that even as Kaufman follows a formal process important to democratic discourse - making one’s voice heard, demanding recognition of one’s violation – he nevertheless refuses to make his notice in any language familiar to processes of registration or documentation.

There is a tension between the letter’s peripatetic interiority and its declarative participation in public discourse, a discourse courted by virtue of the text’s status as a letter and also in its references to popular contemporary texts. His letter references Duke Ellington’s masterwork, “Black, Brown, and Beige,” resonates with e.e. cummings’s imagist poem “l(a... “ and names Allan Sillitoe’s 1958 The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner. Though vastly different in form and execution, all three texts work against perceived ideas of representation, each articulating representation as only possible in representations that are performed as presentations of the self per se. Yet even though each text might be understood as generated in contradistinction to any mainstream, each text nonetheless broadened the conceptual field in which it originally appeared, through that same resistance: Ellington’s work excavates an ignored African American history; cummings’s poem creates a picture of its own meaning; and the plot of Sillitoe’s text culminates in a state-sponsored runner’s refusal to finish the race that will win him freedom from prison.

All three texts reflect what Kaufman refers to in his letter as “oneliness”:

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner is due to the oneliness of the Long Distance Runner, that uniqueness that is the Long Distance Runner’s alone, and only his. The loneliness of the Long Distance Runner is the only reason for the Long Distance Runner’s existence. (Kaufman 96)

In its use of sound, Kaufman’s letter offers a minimally penetrable interiority. In its first sentence, the heaviness of “loneliness” generates a regressive assimilation, as it seeps “loneliness” into “oneliness,” thus making it difficult not to sound oneliness as only-ness. This reinforces the graphic attachment of oneliness to loneliness, even while it sonically resonates with alone and only. “Uniqueness,” meanwhile, sonically and graphically references the previous terms in its suffix, but also snaps the tone, offering a center-point for the sentence’s chiastic structure, and thereby foregrounding the potentially mispronounced, but also now conceptually-enlarged oneliness. By leaking possible meanings across discrete words, sound accomplishes something in this paragraph that writing alone cannot. It brings a sense of the melancholy in Kaufman’s assertion, a sense that, even as the runner experiences oneliness – this unity of self – his peace is nonetheless haunted.
The running that brings the runner to oneliness can never get the runner away from loneliness, which means that there is a disjuncture between the act’s accomplishment and its inauguration, insofar as oneliness is technically the opposite of being alone or only. However, out of this disjuncture emerges a new possibility for meaning and language. His later observation that “[t]he colors of an earthquake are black, brown, and beige,” speaks to this upheaval, “sweet thunder” though it may be. Out of the chasm emerge newly recognized possibilities for recognition, reception for the silent beat:

That silent beat makes the drumbeat, it makes the drum, it makes the beat.
Without it there is no drum, no beat. It is not the beat played by who is beating the drum. His is a noisy loud one, the silent beat is beaten by who is not beating on the drum, his silent beat drowns out all the noise, it comes before and after every beat, you hear it in beatween. (Kaufman 97)

By the end of the letter, which might be read inductively, the beat emerges, infiltrating the surrounding language. Kaufman’s writing of between as “between” offers a revelation. Much as the colors of social upheaval would be brown, black, and beige, Kaufman’s ostensible neologism has not introduced anything that was not present before; he has only excavated a prior, albeit buried, reality. Kaufman’s letter displays an important ease of movement between sound and text as the graphic “between” only makes the passage’s beat, its rhythm, more apparent. The beat, as Kaufman has it, is exactly what a between is, a space of meaning. As Amor Kohli has pointed out, “The ‘silent beat’ exists in the third space between the heard and not-heard; it is the ‘guerrilla action.’ It is also a constitutive element in the repertoire of the jazz musician, part of what Robert O’Meally calls ‘games of color and space’” (Kohli 180). With his letter, Kaufman demonstrates how the silent and invisible might be understood as energizing the very systems of meaning from which they have been ostensibly (not) removed.

II. Fronts

In his lifetime, Kaufman experienced silence in the most empowering ways, in poetry and in his silent political protests, and also in its most sinister applications, from his repeated stints in solitary confinement to the relative silence surrounding his contributions to the Beat movement, jazz poetics, and as a critical ancestor to the spoken poetry movement. For the remainder of this essay, I turn to a listening of Ursula Rucker’s “The Unlocking,” a spoken-word poem that appears at the end of The Roots’ 1995 rap album, Do You Want More?!!?. Rucker has some important resonances with Kaufman, of whom she is an heir. But I particularly hear this resonance in her commitment to speaking experiences that would otherwise go unnamed, and also in
her poem’s manipulation of the graphic and sonic to create the disruptions that make possible such moments of naming.

At its release, Do You Want More??!? met with immense critical and a fair amount of commercial success, becoming a mainstay on college and independent station playlists. Its status then as an underground alternative project, and its status today as a rap classic, is mainly due to two innovations that blurred boundaries between rap music and other kinds of black performance – The Roots’ use of live instrumentation and Ursula Rucker’s spoken-word contribution to the album, and each of these choices made important cultural interventions. Rucker’s poems appear on several of The Roots’ albums. They are invariably about barely speakable acts – gang bangs, child sex abuse, incest – and her representations of such acts are graphic, some might even say excessive or pornographic, for instance her portrayal of an infant being raped. Cinematic, each poem tells a story in graphic detail, often through a strangely distant, yet also deeply intimate third-person narration. The eeriness of the narration comes out of a primary contrast between the formal cool of Rucker’s even and smooth delivery and the explicit and often gruesome details that make up the content of each poem. This explicitness also works to signal the listener away from the pornographic. As Suzanne Bost has argued, Rucker’s focus on the material details of exploitation removes “any pleasure out of the spectacle by rendering it hyper-real, disturbing audiences by forcing them to witness these shocking images in vivid detail” (Bost 15).

“The Unlocking” begins with a skit, a telephone conversation between two men, on whom we are eavesdropping. Skits are common to rap albums, and by beginning her poem this way, Rucker lures her listeners into a certain mode of listening, asking them to expect business as usual: maybe a joke, maybe a rant, maybe a scene from a movie. And indeed, the skit that sets the scene for “The Unlocking” is made to sound like any other. Its diction and pacing are intentionally unremarkable; it’s just some dudes talking. Their voices are tired, if not vaguely bored, until the opportunity for sex – which here seems nothing more than something to do – revitalizes them. This vitalization is particularly striking in light of the absolute vagueness in which the subject of their conversation is cloaked:

[phone dialed and rings]
Friend: Hello?
Caller: Yo who dis?
Friend: Yo this [edited out]
Caller: Yo what supp man?
Friend: Yo whassup dude?
Caller: This the Black Ill [muttering] you know what I’m sayin’
Like a black barred face on a newscast, the editing out of the friend’s name contributes to the skit’s reality-effect. The muttering around the Caller’s name, which is not edited out, elicits suspicion. The conversation continues:

**Friend:** Oh whassup G?
**Caller:** Y’know, yo
**Friend:** What?
**Caller:** We down in the studio yo
**Friend:** Word?
**Caller:** Yo we got a jawn
**Friend:** Yo, is she live?
**Caller:** Yeah she’s live
**Friend:** Sup wit her?
**Caller:** Some jawn I use to talk to ... Sometimes I used to knock off
**Friend:** Word? how she be swingin’?
**Caller:** Oh yeah she’s swingin’ like that? y’know it’s on! [laughter]
**Friend:** Oh WORD?
**Caller:** I called a couple other heads and shit y’know
**Friend:** Aight, who else who else – who else widdit?
**Caller:** [laughing]
**Friend:** I mean she widdit LIKE THAT?
**Caller:** Yeah you know!
**Friend:** Ain’t no bullshit?
**Caller:** The whole Reservoir Dog squad n shit, we gon’ be eight deep [...]

It has become common for groups of friends or colleagues to refer to themselves with names taken from popular culture, in this instance Quentin Tarantino’s ultra-violent 1995 *Reservoir Dogs*, which is revered in some hip-hop communities as sort of an ultimate film about men living lives of violence. Here, Rucker’s use of the film citation situates the recording studio, which is where the men in Rucker’s skit are meeting, as a homosocial space – a space referenced toward men and used to consolidate relationships between them. In *Reservoir Dogs*, the character’s homosociality is mediated by violence, and it is therefore not unfair to imagine that this violence will make an appearance in this text as well, despite the jocularity with which the skit begins. Again, it is important that this conversation sound patently normal, that it be no different than one you might hear in a skit common to any rap album. Such skits often skirt boundaries of playfulness and excess, but ultimately end in joke or *non sequitur*. In hindsight, I imagine that in my first hearing of this segment, being jaded and familiar
with rap album conventions, I would have soldiered on, at best bemused, very likely annoyed, and, probably, barely listening.

But then something might have changed, for at the end of the conversation, the “Like NOW?/Yeah come through now!” nags. The immediacy of the statement makes it suddenly more difficult, for me at least, to imagine when the joke will arrive. However, almost as soon as the suspicion sets in, I realize that I have been tricked, for what I am faced with is something altogether different. It is a poem, unexpected in its form and sound and delivered in a woman’s voice – the first female voice heard after almost two hours of rapping and talking:

\[
I \text{ the voyeur,} \\
Peer, \\
as \text{she begins her,} \\
\text{Ritual.} \\
\text{Paying sexual ties for few and untrue} \\
\text{Words of admiration,} \\
\text{Translation:} \\
\text{Sucker ass} \\
\text{lines} \\
\text{of trash}
\]

With the narrator’s referral to herself as “I, the voyeur,” Rucker immediately forefronts matters of viewing and performance in the poem. And by narrating the scene we ourselves are waiting to hear, waiting to “peer” into, the listener’s own voyeurism is also made apparent. The authority in her voice reinforces the sonic shift between the skit and the poem, drawing our attention to a silence that by necessity would have gone otherwise unamplified, and therefore unacknowledged. Once it is heard, however, we are asked to understand how such silences trace the underbelly of the kinds of power, particularly gender power, that rap often asks its audience to celebrate. As a sonic intervention, “The Unlocking” reminds the album’s audience of everything they don’t hear, on that particular album and in popular music in general.

Rucker’s introduction of narration into the scene frames the sex act at the center of the narrative. This framing in turn sets up the narrator’s description of the sex act as a ritual, as a performance. Referring to the woman’s act as a ritual, further distances us from her, and we are not alone in this distance, for the men in the scene also never see her outside of her ritualized position, can never “quite see above/her mound.” Further, her silence in the text might be understood as analogous to others’ inability to see past
her use to them: “a pound of flesh is all she was,/no name no face or even voice.”
Spoken near the end of the poem, this line reinforces her silent effacement, which was first established for us during the opening skit, in its reference to her as a “jawn.”
“Jawn,” a Philadelphia corruption of the more commonly used “joint,” is an absolutely generic and all purpose slang-term, used as easily for a pair of shoes as it would be for a random woman on the street.

Through her use of a narrator, Rucker splits her listener’s attention between that narration and the scene being narrated, and a closer consideration of this split offers some insight into the poem’s dual allegiances to sound and image. Our “watching” of the unnamed woman, locked into her ritual of sex and degradation, is both a result of Rucker’s poetic style and also of the great prevalence to the portrayal of such scenes in rap music and in American popular culture in general. Accordingly, “watching” becomes the best term for our observation of the poem’s action because the poem generates meaning via its evocation of other such episodes of watching female bodies in sexual action. What makes the scene harrowing is not the men’s bluster – their Reservoir Dog self-aggrandizement and the hyper-sexualized nature of their gang-bang party – it is that this scene is absolutely generic. (We might think back here to the boredom in the men’s conversation at the beginning of Rucker’s text.) The terms of the scene precede the scene, thus revealing alongside its material violence the possibility that women’s lives have no meaning outside of that violence:

Bend over bitch, you know this is what you were born for;
to dig those soft and lotioned knees into the floor –
and take it in
that sweetly spread ass
like a real pro whore.

There is an incongruity here between Rucker’s description of the woman’s “soft and lotioned knees,” which connotes attention to the self and care for the body, and the cruelty of the speaker’s demands on that body. Further, his command, that she take it like “a real pro whore,” might be read to suggest that she is not actually a whore. This is hinted in several ways throughout the poem, and is supported especially in the poem’s opening claim that she trades sex for words (not money); in the later revelation that she had previously been in love with one of the men; and also in the fact that the caller in the skit refers to her as a girl he “used to talk to,” “talk to” being slang for dating (and itself in juxtaposition to “knock off,” which merely suggests casual sex).

The possibility that the woman performs this ritual/service for love or “admiration” changes the dynamics of consent in this scenario and thus brings into question the skit’s
insistence that she is a “swinger,” that she is down “LIKE THAT” (my emphasis). Early in the poem, then, we are introduced into violence, a violence we are made to understand is cloaked from its perpetrators:

Her subsequent screams seemed to praise  
Sent messages of pleasure and pain to his fuck-tainted brain

“Fuck-tainted” signifies the blindness and deafness of the perpetrator. It could also, however, be understood as signifying the men’s weakness and delusion – though it is vitally important to understand that this second interpretation is only made possible by the narrator’s presence. Her ability to speak about their act renders their fuck impotent because it reveals as a front the narrative frame they have built-up around that fuck. This invalidation is a function both of the content of her critique and also of the sonic impact of her female voice. In this sense, the narrator not only peers in on the scene, but, more importantly she is soon revealed as a peer to the woman at the center of her narration. Further, because our gaze is aligned with that of the men, and because that gaze has been revealed as blind – insofar as the listener knows that the men cannot hear Rucker’s voice – we must therefore join them in their unwitting role reversal. Unlike them, however, we see ourselves being watched, even as we, fuck-tainted, are powerless. Where the men only hear silence, in the sense that they are caught up in the acoustic illusion by which they only hear their own fantasies in her screams, where they have silence we, the listeners, have – hear – critique. As a condition of our growing consciousness of our role in the scene, we are allowed a new perspective on the scenario:

But her screams masked laughs at his dumb ass  
As he quicker comes,  
then Third and Fourth One  
just as dumb  
Invite themselves to join in

“Just as dumb”: by this point the listener will also come to realize that the music is specifically accompanying the narrator’s perspective, as shifts in the musical track join the narrator in her mockery of the men, at times offering shadows of movie sound effects that emphasize the narrator’s commentary. The effect of this alignment is to further invalidate any possibility for the audience to hear the scenario as being that which the men imagine it to be. As the listener is moved more fully into the aural, they are left in the visual. Again, this is not to say that the men do not hear anything, but rather that what they hear are sounds of themselves vis-à-vis their own fantasy of the
scene in which they are participating. Throughout the poem we hear echoes of the scene as the men hear it, as we would hear if we were not privy to the narration. Faint and deeply backgrounded, these sounds of moaning, groaning, and laughter are all sounds we would expect to hear, if our experience of the scene had been otherwise.

Caught up in the visual fantasy of sexual violence and its meaning, “fuck-tainted,” the men are deaf, however, to what is really happening. This ignorance also renders them effectively dumb, as Rucker recuperates her ersatz victim by making it clear that she has been released from any emotional relationship to the men’s words:

So one goes North, the other South
To sanctified places where in-house spirits
will later wash away all traces,
of their ill-spoken words and complacent faces

Much as the woman’s body will easily wash away any trace of the men’s arrival, of their “ill-spoken words,” and their “lewd, aggrandized sexual endeavors,” the narrative has clearly turned. The fact of the eight men, initially menacing in their sheer quantity, have been now reduced to a series of jokes. By the time the next man, number five, approaches, the frame has completely slipped away:

but suddenly, he, – stops mid-thrust.
[pager rings/narration pauses for a beat]
Seems she nameless to cuz,
got his stuff in a death cunt clutch
He fast falls from the force of her tight pussy punch
Just like the rest of that sorry ass bunch
Now here comes Six ready to add his inactive shit to the mix

Here, the ringing of the pager, which echoes the ringing phone at the beginning of the skit, breaks a narrative frame already giving way under the weight of the narrator’s growing sarcasm.

Having now fully enlisted the sympathies of the audience, Rucker/the narrator asks us to join in on the joke, as each man’s approach is made more comical than the last. This begins in the stanza above with the almost comic-book sensibility of the woman’s genital counterattack, and continues into the next encounter with the narrator’s continued evisceration of each man’s self-avowed sexual prowess:

So he proceeds to poke and prod
with clumsy finger and wack sex slinger
“Condoms make me last longer,”
Wrong.
‘Cause her, motions of snatch, however detached, from the situation
cause his pre pre PRE-ejaculation

Here, there is also a shift in the backing track, as we faintly hear a man coming to orgasm quickly and without control. After this last set of sounds, this track further recedes, not to re-emerge until the end of the poem. This audible marker of the narrator’s growing authority also further works to improve our vision of the woman having sex, to consolidate our sense of her power over the men. As the narration gains momentum through its doubled assonance (“snatch”/”detached;” “situation”/ “ejaculation”), the stanza’s comic energy is released in the description of the weakened man’s failure to complete his act over her.

The acceleration brought on by this rhythm, and the humor it reinforces, also breaks down some of the distance between the narrator and the scene she is narrating, which is particularly interesting in relation to the narrator’s insistence on the detachment of the woman having sex. Speaking of this detachment is a dangerous move, for much of the narrative hinges on the woman not in fact being a whore. But Rucker is careful to signal other ways of understanding this moment. The most likely alternative is made audible in the lessening formality of her narrator’s diction: in the stanza above we hear it in the “‘Cause her motions,” and in the following one we hear it in the “she just wastin’” (my emphases). These moments briefly bring the narration closer to gossip or shit-talking – a woman’s blues remedy to the men’s self-aggrandizement:

It seems she just wastin’
good pussy and time on dudes like Number Seven
who ain’t learned their lesson

By giving the woman agency over a part of her, along with her mouth, that has otherwise been taken over in the narrative as a space of sexual domination, the reference here to “good pussy” begins the work of recuperating any suspicion about the previously noted detachment. Like her time, there is a sense here that her sex is hers to give. Rucker further develops this sensibility in the next lines, which articulate the woman as divine, powerful, and self-possessed:

He wants to enter the flesh, divine,
by dropping a kind of semi-sweet line
“Your honey hole so fine and mile deep; I’m gonna leap
into you like an ocean do you right and make your head spin”
So he jumped in and then,
he drowned
Got lost and found in her tart canal

The poem approaches surreality in its graphic and ribald humor, made more striking in its contrast to the scenes of degradation with which the poem begins.

By the end of Reservoir Dogs, each of the men is revealed as fundamentally inept, and it is their ineptitude that seals their violent deaths. One cannot help but wonder if this crossed Rucker’s mind as she wrote the violent end to her poem, when the woman, now armed, makes literal the power her narrator has been exercising over the men the entire time. The previously silent and potentially defiled lips part, and the power of her speech act is as much figured in the cool and style of her violence as it is in the gun itself:

So poised, she rises  
Phoenix from the flame  
Finally bored with their feeble fuck games  
She smooth reaches behind her and takes straight aim  
at eight shriveled up cocks with a fully loaded glock  
Parts lips, not expressly made for milking dicks  
and then, she speaks:  
“Your shrieks of horror bring me bliss I must admit  
The thought that I could shred your tips with eight quick flips  
excites me,  
see y’all fuck with the pussy, but I fuck with your minds  
Lack of soul and respect is the crime  
This ... was a set up ...  
now tell me what – what’s my name?”
[gun cocks]

An exercise in cool, Rucker’s poem ends with two references, one visual and one sonic. The reach behind visually references Pam Grier at the end of the movie Foxy Brown, when Foxy returns to avenge her boyfriend’s death. In the film, Foxy poses as a prostitute to infiltrate the villain’s stronghold. At the end, she enters their domain, seemingly unarmed. When a fight erupts, she reaches back into her Afro and pulls out a hidden gun, persevering over the pimp and drug lord. The poem’s second reference is in the woman’s final line, “now tell me what – what’s my name?” The line references
one of hip-hop’s most common and well-known strategies for self-assertion over narratives and the listeners thereof. The question brings its speaker to the center of any narrative, and as well dares anyone to speak in the same narrative. The question is always rhetorical; if one were unsure about answering, the cocking of the gun would confirm silence as a choice.

Notes

1. In “‘A Hard Rain,’ Looking to Bob Kaufman,” Aldon Lynn Nielsen has a nice piece that reads Kaufman’s “silent beat” against Miles Davis’ “In a Silent Way,” noting how the “occasional silences” of Davis’ drummer, Tony Williams, on “It’s about That Time,” “set the stage for the fuller use of his drum set that comes later in the piece, while at the same time providing a jazz musician’s rhetorical underscoring of the composition’s title; the piece is about that time. Kaufman’s silent beat that comes before and after every beat asserts itself in the spaces between the words of his letter, as his periods of silence and speaking presence punctuated the life of San Francisco through the decades, as the silence surrounding him punctuates Beat histories even now” (Nielsen 137–38).

2. Sillitoe’s text was also released as a Free Cinema movement film in 1962. It is unclear which is being referenced in Kaufman’s letter.

3. Lines are my transcription. “Friend” and “Caller” are my designations. Brackets throughout mark my editorial comments on the aural text.

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