

Indigenous Education for All? A Metaphorical Counterstory

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Overview

Over the past several years, the United States has seen a proliferation of indigenous education programs designed to reverse the negative effects of colonization and protect the sovereignty, self-determination and culture of America's aboriginal people. However, just as these indigenous education programs are beginning to gain ground, they are facing legal challenges from non-indigenous individuals backed by anti-affirmative action organizations who are mobilizing civil rights legislation and appropriating language consistent with the "Education for All" discourse (World Conference on Education for All, 1990; World Education Forum, 2000) to demand equal access to indigenous education programs and ultimately dismantle them. Drawing upon Native Hawaiian examples, this paper applies critical race theory and counterstorytelling to question the dominant narrative of "Education for All" as it has been applied in challenges to open indigenous education programs to all students, and urges readers to think differently about such cases.

Introduction

In Hawai'i, each fall, newspapers across the state capture the Back to School excitement by featuring articles with photos of children spruced up in their new clothes and school bags, and heading back to school, or going to school for the first time. I open this paper with a Back to School news article that appeared in one of Hawai'i's local newspapers a few years back. The article, entitled "*Student's anticipated first day arrives*" (Barayuga, 2003), features a student at the Kamehameha Schools, a private school that was established by Princess Pauahi in 1887 and is heavily subsidized by her trust. In accordance with the Princess' will, the school's admissions policy provides preference for Native Hawaiians, the indigenous people of Hawaii, in an effort to remedy the socioeconomic and educational disadvantages resulting from American colonization and the influx of western civilization.¹

The article begins with a photo of a smiling, twelve-year-old boy sporting a new haircut and a yellow aloha print shirt, along with an accompanying caption: "Brayden Mohica-Cummings: His mom says the move into his dorm went smoothly." It reads:

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Student's Anticipated First Day Arrives

Brayden Mohica-Cummings has been looking forward to this day for a long time. Today is his first day of seventh grade at Kamehameha Schools. But a few days ago, the 12-year-old wasn't sure he was even going to be there.

Yesterday, Mohica-Cummings became the second non-Hawaiian to be admitted to a Kamehameha Schools campus in the last 40 years. He wouldn't be there had it not been for a federal judge's ruling yesterday, forcing Kamehameha Schools to readmit him after rescinding his admission a week ago.

Yesterday, Mohica-Cummings couldn't wipe the smile off his face after hearing the court's decision. "I was happy I finally got what I wanted, and just happy I get to go to a new adventure and a great school," he said . . .

He said he is not worried about the extensive publicity his admission has garnered. If anyone is worried, it's his mother, Kalena Santos. But despite the controversy surrounding her son's admission, she said she is confident, based on the court's statements, that the school will treat him like any other student and that he will do fine.

"He is a well-rounded boy, very happy, makes friends easily," she said. "I think he'll do good." She is especially pleased for him "because this is what he's looked forward to for a long time," Santos said.

Mohica-Cummings' move into his dorm room . . . went smoothly, she said. Although it was a little uncomfortable meeting others for the first time, students and staff welcomed him, she said. He . . . was introduced to his "big brother"—an older student assigned to help a new student—who gave him a big hug.

"He's going to adjust real well," Santos said. (Barayuga, 2003)

The article is a triumphant, feel-good American story of a young boy beginning on a new school adventure after winning a fight, through litigation, for his right to an education at a private Hawaiian school. It is a story of individual triumph through perseverance, where the boy finally gets what he wants, and although there is a hint of suggestion that there may have initially been some controversy over his admission to the school, readers are made to feel at ease that all is well now as the students and staff welcome this new student with open arms.

As critical race theorist Richard Delgado (1993) suggests, this is a majoritarian story, a whitewashed version of reality that picks and chooses from among the available facts to present an account that justifies the boy's forced admission to this traditionally all-Hawaiian school. By drawing on the American ideal of color-blind equality and individual civil rights, the story "comforts and soothes" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2422) as it makes the majority reader feel good about our country and the American legal system, which upholds this young man's right to pursue his education at the school of his choice.

However, the article fails to mention that the Kamehameha Schools, which is funded by Princess Pauahi's private charitable trust, and its Hawaiian-preference admissions policy, was written into the will of this Hawaiian princess more than fifteen years before the 1893 illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy and Hawai'i's forced annexation to the United States, with the explicit intention to reverse the deleterious effects of centuries of discrimination and oppression that the Hawaiian people have suffered with the onset of western colonization. (In a 1993 joint resolution, Congress apologized to Native Hawaiians on behalf of the United States for the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai'i, and acknowledged the inherent sovereignty of the Native Hawaiian people.)

Gone is any mention of how western schooling in Hawai'i since the early 1800s, degenerated the Hawaiian culture, self-image and sovereignty, by banning Hawaiian students from speaking their Native language and learning their traditional cultural practices, and denying Hawaiians access to quality schools (Benham & Heck, 1998). Gone is any mention of how this institutional discrimination against Native Hawaiian students has left in its wake generations of Hawaiians mired by psycho-social and economic difficulties, or how Hawaiians have been left largely to their own accord to attempt to improve the education available to their children.

Gone is any mention of how Kamehameha Schools, along with Hawaiian charter and Hawaiian language immersion schools, stand as one of the few beacons of hope for Hawaiian students who, as a group, continue to fare poorly in our local public schools, which have a disproportionately small number of Hawaiian teachers and a long history of failing Native Hawaiian students. Gone is any mention of the roughly 70,000 Native Hawaiian school-aged children in Hawai'i who are unable to attend the Kamehameha Schools because there simply are not enough spaces, and who would jump at the chance to assume the place occupied by Mohica-Cummings.

Similar majoritarian stories are becoming more prevalent throughout the United States as non-indigenous individuals backed by anti-affirmative action organizations are mobilizing civil rights legislation to demand equal access to, and ultimately dismantle, both federally and privately funded indigenous education programs and scholarships designed to reverse the negative effects of colonization and protect the sovereignty, self-determination and culture of America's aboriginal people.

For instance, the Mountain States Legal Foundation recently challenged the constitutionality of the University of Utah's "American Indian Teacher Training Program," which is funded by the United States' Department of Education's Office of Indian Education to prepare American Indian preservice teachers to

teach in schools that serve American Indian populations. In a 2004 press release, William Pendley of the Mountain States Legal Foundation, argued that “Utah’s Department of Education is filled with fine students of all races and ethnicities, many of limited financial means, who would love the chance to compete for a scholarship to teach on an Indian reservation and to give something back to young students there.” Pendley asserted that “These educators of the future should not be told they are of the wrong race to compete for a University scholarship or to teach their fellow citizens,” and urged “any Utah student who was prevented from competing for the American Indian Teacher Training Program due to his or her race or ethnicity” to “sue the University of Utah.” The Foundation issued similar challenges to the American Indian teacher training programs at Humboldt State University, Montana State University and the University of Oregon (Catto, 2004).ⁱⁱ

Similarly, the same lawyer who represented Mohica-Cummings (Eric Grant, who is with the Center for Equal Opportunity, an organization committed to ending affirmative action programs in the United States) has also filed a civil-rights lawsuit on behalf of another unnamed non-Hawaiian twelfth grader who is seeking to overturn Kamehameha School’s practice of giving preference to Native Hawaiians in both admission to Hawaiian educational programs and in the awarding of Hawaiian higher education scholarships. (Last December, the San Francisco-based 9th Circuit of Appeals ruled 8-7 to uphold the institution’s Hawaiians-first admission policy, which reversed an earlier 2-1 panel decision that appeared to strike it down. Most recently attorneys for the teenager have petitioned that this decision be reconsidered by the U.S. Supreme Court [Pang, 2007].)

As Native Hawaiian lawyer, Trisha Kehaulani Watson (2006), suggests, it is ironic that civil rights legislation that sought to remedy a violent history of discrimination against ethnic minorities, particularly in educational institutions, is being used to attack the very groups it was enacted to protect. Laws created to end slavery provided minorities a mechanism to sue schools with discriminatory practices. However, as Watson suggests, White students bringing suits against affirmative action programs have been the most successful in using these laws. Watson explains that various legal decisions and the high cost of litigation make it very difficult for ethnic minorities to use civil rights laws to successfully fight discrimination against minorities in private and public schools. Instead, Caucasian students are leading the charge, using these laws to launch numerous legal attacks against affirmative action programs attempting to redress historical discrimination.

Furthermore, Watson (2006) explains, when such constitutional violation cases come before the court, the court will require a change in policy rather than award monetary damage. Thus, she suggests, these cases, which are often

backed by anti-affirmative action organizations, are not about individuals winning monetary awards; they are about dismantling programs.

Granted, there are legal differences from case to case, and it is not my intent in this paper to argue the legality of these various cases, nor is it my intent to predict how these cases will be resolved. Instead, I will apply critical race theory (or more specifically Tribal Critical Race Theory) and counterstorytelling to provide an alternate perspective to the majoritarian story that opened the paper, and urge readers to think differently about such cases.

While the cases mentioned thus far are restricted to middle school, secondary, and post-secondary levels, these legal challenges to indigenous education programs are a crucial concern at all levels of education, particularly in indigenous early childhood programs, which lie at the foundation of indigenous cultural and language revitalization efforts. The success of indigenous cultural renewal efforts is dependent upon thriving indigenous preschools and early education programs, which serve as language and cultural “nests” by raising young, indigenous children in their native culture and “feeding” them their native language. As I will argue later in this paper, it is crucial that we keep these nests safe from aggressive intrusions that may threaten the survival of these programs or otherwise disrupt this critical, foundational step in the process of cultural transmission.

Critical Race Theory and TribalCrit

Critical Race Theory evolved in the mid-1970s as a response to Critical Legal Studies (CLS). CLS is a leftist legal movement that challenges traditional legal scholarship that focuses on doctrinal and policy analysis (Gordon, 1990) and argues instead for a form of law that speaks to the specificity of individuals and groups in social and cultural contexts. CLS scholars decipher legal doctrine to expose internal and external inconsistencies and reveal ways in which legal ideology has helped “create, support, and legitimate America’s present class structure” (Crenshaw, 1988, p. 1350). While CLS effectively critiques mainstream legal scholarship for its portrayal of the United States as a meritocracy, some scholars felt that CLS excludes the perspectives of people of color and is inattentive to the role of racism in both the US legal system and US society (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004). Critical Race Theory (CRT) developed as a result.

CRT begins with the notion that racism is endemic to American society and that “it is so enmeshed in the fabric of the U.S. social order that it appears both normal and natural to people in this society” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 264). CRT challenges Eurocentric epistemologies and dominant ideologies such as meritocracy, color-blind objectivity and equal opportunity, and aims to unmask

and expose racism in all of its various permutations (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2000). CRT was originally developed to address the Civil Rights issues of African American people. In recent years CRT has expanded to include complementary branches such as Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), Asian Critical Race Theory (Asian- Crit), and the theory that seems most applicable to the Native Hawaiian situation, Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy, 2005).

While the basic tenet of CRT is that racism is endemic to American society, TribalCrit begins with the premise that colonization is endemic to American society, while also acknowledging the role played by racism. According to Brayboy (2005), there are nine tenets of TribalCrit:

1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.
8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.
9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change. (p. 429)

TribalCrit offers a more culturally nuanced analytical lens for examining the lives and experiences of formerly colonized indigenous peoples in (post)colonial societies. It provides a theoretical lens for addressing many of the issues facing indigenous communities today, including, but not limited to, issues of language shift and language loss, natural resources management, the lack of indigenous students graduating from colleges and universities, and the overrepresentation of indigenous students in special education classes (Brayboy, 2005).

TribalCrit, as a theoretical lens, allows us to bring into focus U.S policies that naturalize and legitimize White supremacy. For instance, TribalCrit enables

scholars to look critically at recent attacks on affirmative action, urging us to question why affirmative action that “benefits” indigenous people is attacked, while that which benefits White women (the group that has benefited most from affirmative action), the children of alumni, athletes who raise large sums of money for institutions but fail to graduate in record numbers, and veterans of the United States Armed Services, is “either naturalized and made invisible or celebrated” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 432).

TribalCrit argues that in order to be successful as academics and as indigenous people, individuals must maintain a strong sense of their cultural identity. It argues that while experiences in school will certainly affect a person, they should not do so at the expense of one’s native culture (Brayboy, 2005). Finally, TribalCrit, like CRT, departs from mainstream scholarship by emphasizing the importance of story and/or counterstory as a methodological and pedagogical tool (Brayboy, 2005; Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004).

Counterstorytelling

In contrast to recent federal education policies (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002) that espouse a narrow definition of “scientifically based” educational research, TribalCrit honors stories and oral knowledge as “real and legitimate forms of data and ways of being” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 439). TribalCrit acknowledges that stories are the foundations on which indigenous communities are built. They are vehicles for the transmission of our culture and knowledge. Oral stories remind us of our origins and serve as lessons for the younger members of our communities. They serve as guideposts for our elders and other policymakers in our indigenous communities, and they can serve as powerful data in indigenous educational research (Brayboy, 2005).

Critical race theorists distinguish between two types of stories: majoritarian stories, or stories of those in power, which are a natural part of the dominant discourse, and counterstories, or stories of those experiences that are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society), which can serve as a tool for analyzing and challenging the majoritarian story (Delgado, 1993). While a narrative may support the majoritarian story, a counter-narrative or counterstory, by its very nature, challenges the majoritarian story and the “bundle of presuppositions, perceived wisdoms, and shared cultural understandings” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993, p. 462) that are embedded within it to “probe, mock, displace, jar, or reconstruct the dominant tale or narrative” (Delgado, 1995, p. xviii). Counterstories challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center, and provide a context to understand and transform established belief systems (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Counterstories are abundant in marginalized communities as oppressed groups have long known instinctively that stories can shatter complacency and challenge the status quo, and thus are an essential tool to our survival and liberation. Black slaves told, in song, letters, and verse, about the pain and oppression they had experienced at the hands of Whites. Mexican-Americans in the Southwest composed *corridos* (ballads) and stories, passed on from generation to generation, of abuse at the hands of ruthless lawyers and developers who cheated them out of their lands (Delgado, 1989). Similarly, indigenous groups used counterstories to speak back against the oppressive forces of colonialism (e.g., Silva, 2004).

Over the past several years, I have experimented with various forms of counterstorytelling in my own work, and have learned that a skillful storyteller may need to adjust his or her story in order to be heard by a particular audience. For instance, in previous conference presentations of this paper, I have tried to alert audiences to the unintended effects of opening up indigenous learning programs to all groups by relating a series of cautionary tales that drew upon my two years of observation and participation as a Native Hawaiian parent and educational researcher in a Hawaiian language immersion parent participation preschool during a period when it was experiencing a sudden influx of non-Hawaiian participants.

Consciously privileging the perspectives of the Native Hawaiian parents and young children enrolled in this program, I recounted vivid stories with strongly drawn characters to demonstrate how even well-intended, non-indigenous newcomers to indigenous education programs, who are not cognizant of and empathetic to the indigenous language, learning and interactional styles that the group aims to promote, can unwittingly alter an indigenous educational environment with their presence. For instance, I told the story of a well-intended, gregarious and inquisitive non-Hawaiian mother and former English teacher who, as a newcomer to a Hawaiian immersion parent-participation preschool, so frequently interrupted the Hawaiian immersion teacher's instruction with (English language) comments and questions, that shortly after her arrival, English began to dominate the parents', the children's, and eventually the *kumu's* (teacher's) interactions, as he politely reverted to English throughout his lessons to respond to the mother's many questions about tenses, vocabulary and grammatical structures.

While the stories resonated with many of the indigenous audience members, they were sometimes difficult for various non-indigenous audience members to hear. As I reflected on the reactions that my stories elicited, I was reminded of a famous paper by postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak (1988), in which she asks, "Can the subaltern (or individuals from historically marginalized groups) speak," and if they do speak, can the majority hear them?

I was speaking, but perhaps too pointedly or too directly. For many of the audience members were not able to hear my message. Instead they seemed to search for ways to distance themselves from the characters and situations I described, and dismissed my stories as essentializing, overgeneralizing and unfair. (I am grateful for the thoughtful and perceptive feedback of the journal's anonymous reviewers, which has helped me to better understand the alienating effect that my explicit counterstories may have had upon various non-indigenous audience members.)

After the experience, I returned to Spivak's (1988) writing, in which she relates a story to illustrate the various forms of covert communication that female subalterns are sometimes forced to engage in. She tells of a young woman who participated in the armed struggle for India's independence. The woman committed suicide but waited until she was menstruating to do so, so that her suicide could not be misinterpreted as brought on by an illegitimate pregnancy. While the young, subaltern woman was unable to speak overtly, her message was clear, and scholars like Spivak continue to recount and interpret the details of her death. I was reminded that my Hawaiians ancestors engaged in veiled communications of other sorts. For instance, in active resistance to the political, economic, linguistic and cultural domination of American colonialism, Hawaiians composed and published eloquent poems, songs and *mo'olelo* (stories) in Hawaiian language newspapers, many of which expressed anticolonial sentiments through concealed references and double meanings (Silva, 2004).

In contemporary times, Hawaiian composers and performers continue to demonstrate a keen sense of audience and frequently make sensitive communications more palatable through the tactful use of *kaona* or figurative language, metaphorical references, euphemisms and verbal indirection or circumlocution (Pukui, 1972). For instance, Hawaiian musician, Israel "IZ" Kamakawiwo'ole's seemingly light-hearted medley "Somewhere Over the Rainbow/What a Wonderful World," which has become a favorite among the mainstream movie, television and advertising industries, for Hawaiians is deep in *kaona* or subtext, and conveys a strong sovereignty message as it alludes to America's still-unfulfilled promise to restore Hawai'i's political sovereignty, which was stripped away by the United States government.

I was also reminded of Richard Delgado's (1989) caution that counterstories, to be effective, should be "insinuating, not frontal," and should "offer a respite from the linear, coercive discourse that characterizes much legal writing" (p. 2415). Delgado suggests that counterstories should invite readers to "suspend judgment, listen for [the stories'] point or message, and then decide what measure of truth they contain" (1989, p. 2415).

Drawing upon the wisdom of these historical and contemporary storytellers, I will make another attempt to be heard, this time with a more metaphorical counterstory. Because racial and class-based isolation prevents the hearing of diverse stories and counterstories, the genre of this story may seem unusual to an academic audience. However, Delgado (1989) contends if we truly aim to deepen and humanize ourselves, we should listen to stories of all sorts, to enrich our own reality. If we seek out storytellers different from ourselves and afford them the audience they deserve, the benefit, Delgado (1989) explains, will be reciprocal. With this in mind, I invite readers to listen to the following counterstory, and then consider how it might inform their own perspective on reality.

A Metaphorical Counterstory

Kilauea is an active volcano on Hawai'i island. She has been erupting and sending rivers of molten lava to the sea continually for over 20 years. In the earlier years of her eruption, Kilauea caused extensive damage and destruction to the surrounding native forests and wildlife.

However, over time it has become apparent that as she has claimed her fiery path to the sea, she did not cover everything as a heavy rainfall might sheet a window. Within the areas of destruction, burned and scarred by the unrelenting lava, there are pockets of land which were spared. Native trees and grasses continue to grow there, and while some of the more fragile native plants may have succumbed to the surrounding heat, because the ground itself was untouched, the soil remains fertile and new growth is beginning to take hold once again. Native birds have returned to take refuge in the trees of these older land pockets, and their songs fill the air. In the midst of barren destruction, these spared sections of land are once again teeming with life.

Hawaiians call these oases of vegetation *kīpuka*. In geologic and geographical terms, a *kīpuka* is an area of land encircled by a volcanic lava flow. *Kīpuka* contain a diverse and highly stratified mix of Native Hawaiian plants, birds, insects, and other animals, serving as a natural seed bank to repropagate the surrounding lava flow with native vegetation.

Much of the vegetation found on *kīpuka* is considered rare, endangered, and native. There are also various species of native wildlife that feed on the plants found on the *kīpuka*, which cannot be found anywhere else. From these natural *kīpuka* come seeds and spores for the eventual regeneration of the native flora upon the fresh lava.

At the same time, the small ecosystems inside these *kīpuka* face many threats from the outside world. Fires can greatly damage a *kīpuka*, as can alien invaders

brought in by trade winds and visiting hikers. Hiking trails leading into kīpuka usually have signs advising hikers to clean off their shoes and other belongings that might carry alien invaders, to help preserve the natural vegetation and wildlife of the kīpuka.

For many Hawaiians, Hawaiian education programs are our cultural kīpuka—oases from which traditional Native Hawaiian culture can be regenerated and revitalized after over two centuries of colonial domination and oppression. Programs like the Kamehameha schools, Hawaiian immersion and charter schools, and Hawaiian early childhood programs funded by the Native Hawaiian Education Act are safe havens where we can re-learn our Native language, and our native ways of knowing and interacting, and recuperate our native cultural practices, which many Hawaiian families have lost through generations of colonization and assimilation.

These kīpuka beckon our people to return to their nourishment so that our culture can thrive again. They are our havens and our safe harbors, and where we can be our most resilient selves. They are places of preserved histories which hold the seeds for renewed beginnings. They are places of hope, of promise, and of survival. Moreover, these cultural kīpuka, like their geological counterparts, can serve to repropagate other areas of the Hawaiian community that have lost or are devoid of their Hawaiian culture (McGregor, 2007).

I end this counterstory with a few words of advice to outsiders to Indigenous education kīpuka who, in the name of civil rights or Education for All, may be inclined to support the dismantling of these fragile oases: Please think closely before setting fire to these kīpuka. And if you are personally inclined to enter, scrub your shoes before entering, and tread lightly, taking care to fit into and learn from the environment rather than changing it with your presence.

Conclusion

Legal scholar Richard Williams (1997) suggests that an important component of using counterstories includes not simply telling non-majoritarian stories, but also “finding ways to make those stories matter in the legal system” (p. 765). Thus I conclude this piece by returning to the legal case that opened this article.

Mohica-Cummings, the protagonist in the majoritarian story that opened this paper, is, admittedly, a sympathetic character. In a society that strives for colorblindness, indigenous education programs with indigenous-preference admissions policies might at first jar one’s belief in equal (meaning same) treatment. However, the very real challenges facing indigenous students and their communities, due in large part to centuries of oppression and discrimination under U.S. colonialism, should also jar the American faith in

justice (Ninth circuit holds, 2005). Instead of quickly finding the predicament of Mohica-Cummings and others like him to be the greater wrong, I am hopeful that this metaphorical counterstory will give readers pause and encourage them to factor in the historical context and dire need facing indigenous communities and education programs to reach a more considered and equitable conclusion.

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ⁱ Throughout this article I use the terms *Native Hawaiian* and *Hawaiian* interchangeably to refer to the indigenous people of Hawai'i: the descendants of the aboriginal people who inhabited and exercised sovereignty in the Hawaiian islands for more than 1,500 years prior to the 1778 arrival of Hawai'i's first European explorers.

ⁱⁱ For a compelling American Indian counter-narrative, see Brayboy, 2006.

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