

Rhetorically Constructed Africana Mothering in the Antebellum: The Racial Uplift Tradition of Mary Ann Shadd Cary

by

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Abstract

Mary Ann Shadd Cary's rhetoric on Africana mothering is expressed in her writings on racial uplift. Her discourse on mothering resembles what Patricia Hill Collins calls "othermothering," i.e., actively caring for black children of blood mothers who are unable to parent. I argue in this critical analysis of her editorials that Shadd Cary's rhetorically constructed othermothering is a dimension of activist othermothering, the goal of which was to secure the welfare of black children and the entire black community in its quest for the rights and responsibilities of Canadian citizenship between 1853 and 1860. By transgressing the boundaries of socially acceptable behavior for a black, middle-class woman, Shadd Cary published editorials written in what Campbell defines as "feminine" or "masculine" rhetorical styles, depending on her intended audience. By publishing her editorials in her newspaper, the Provincial Freeman, she sought to guarantee the welfare of the new black collective led by black elite's intent on learning the requirements of middle-class family life and citizenship.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary's rhetoric on mothering is expressed in her writings on racial uplift. Her discourse on mothering (and fathering) resembles a type of Africana mothering that Patricia Hill Collins has termed "othermothering" (178). In the following case study, I argue that Shadd Cary's othermothering is rhetorically constructed, rather than the hands-on experience that Collins describes. Typical othermothers care for children whose blood mothers are not in a position to parent properly. However, I contend that Shadd Cary's rhetorical othermothering is designed not only to assist black parents with raising their children in a literal sense, but also to othermother adult elites (parents) on how to be citizens of the newly integrated Canadian society in the figurative sense. The advice Shadd Cary gives to black elites on how to be citizens can be extrapolated from the advice she gives on mothering and fathering. These arguments—both literal and figurative—run parallel. How are "you" going to parent? How are "we" going to be new citizens? A critical response to these questions is what Waters would call a new narrative "based on primary sources and new scholarship about old events" (365).

Critical theory scholarship has been very useful in examining nineteenth century black rhetoric and practice. Gordon asserts that discursive studies on abolishing slavery, confronting racism, and effecting black liberation have been very valuable in this regard, although some of the early studies tended to be more descriptive than critical (10-11). Campbell notes that, until recently, there has been a dearth of scholarship on the rhetoric of marginalized groups. However, the new trend in rhetorical scholarship is the analyses of the role of rhetoric in the black struggle (Gordon 11; Condit and Lucaites 1993). For example, Gordon's analysis of the rhetoric of nineteenth century Black nationalism is "critical rhetorical scholarship [that demands a] deepening of its social analysis, a more reflexive posture in its critique, and a broadening of its scope" (11). Critical analyses of nineteenth century women's discourse, such as Marilyn Richardson's study of the discourse of Maria W. Stewart, Shirley Logan's studies of persuasive nineteenth century African American women, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's analysis of the rhetoric of early black women such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and Mary Church Terrell, and Carla Peterson's analysis of African American women's speeches and writings, have served as illuminating studies of black women's rhetoric. Thus, contemporary critical analysis of Shadd Cary's nineteenth century rhetoric on motherhood is as powerful a means of understanding her othermothering as critical analysis of parenting in the analogous case of the eighteenth century metaphor "the Founding Fathers." I maintain that the metaphor of motherhood applies to black leaders as effectively as the metaphor of "fatherhood" applies to white leaders.

After defining typical othermothering and noting that the present literature on othermothering does not mention the resemblance between what is typically described as othermothering and rhetorically constructed othermothering, I argue that the similarities are such that rhetorically constructed Africana othermothering does represent a different type of othermothering than that described by Collins (178). I contend that just as typically defined othermothers nurture, protect, and educate children to ensure their survival in the black community, Shadd Cary's editorials, articles, and published correspondence in the newspaper she founded and edited enhance the welfare of black elites in the newly integrated society of Canada.

Africana Othermothering in Literature

Typically, Africana othermothering refers to the same caring for children that black blood mothers would provide if they were able. Collins has defined Othermothering as the form of mothering that occurs when black women, who may or may not be relatives of blood mothers, assist in caring for the welfare of black children beyond their own families (178). As part of women-centered networks, black othermothers assist young blood mothers who are unprepared to parent their children, unable to care for children because they are single, or economically and socially disadvantaged (Collins 178; James 45; Ball et al 70-77; Troester 14). Othermothers, who may or may not have their own children, assume some or all of the parenting responsibilities of blood mothers. Collins contends that although blood mothers are expected to care for their children, African and African American communities have long recognized that vesting one person with the full responsibility for raising a child may not be wise or even possible (178; "Shifting" 45-65). In assuming parental responsibilities, Africana othermothers may educate blood mothers (and fathers) on appropriate parenting, socialization, values, and community (Gilkes 1980). Othermothers may assume temporary or permanent responsibility for children. Like good blood mothers, othermothers preserve children's physical well-being; teach them life skills and nurture their intellect; foster their emotional growth; and give them a strong sense of group identity and social responsibility (Tonn 2).

Othermothering was an especially crucial component of black motherhood during American antebellum slavery because mothers and their children were often separated temporarily or permanently (Sterling 48, 49; Hill 1972). Enslaved black women who were not necessarily relatives often assumed responsibility for nurturing and protecting the children of other slave women, motherless or not, and it is likely that, acting as blood mothers, othermothers socialized children, particularly young girls, and gave them a strong sense of group identity and values (Giddings 42). Although othermothering was especially important in the nineteenth century, scholars have noted that it continues to be important in many black communities.

For example, Hooks asserts that today, child care is a responsibility that can be shared with people who do not live with children and claims that “this form of parenting is revolutionary in this society because it takes place in opposition to the idea that parents, especially mothers, should be the only childrearsers” (144).

Another type of othermothering discussed in the literature is black women’s activism on behalf of the community. Othermothers as cultural workers have assisted the community in fighting cultural images, such as those of black “welfare queens,” and those that imply that blacks are not good parents—e.g., discussions in the press on black fathers’ negligence of their parental responsibilities (McDonald 775; Gilkes 1980). Peteet argues that othermothering as a practice and discourse of motherhood “can simultaneously incorporate and uphold, critique, and challenge dominant cultural images and political policies” (103). Some studies of black activist othermothering have demonstrated that it is usual for othermothers to become community activists because of their commitment to black blood mothers and their children (Gilkes 219; James 44). The actions of community activist othermothers, as well as many black educators, contribute to communal physical, emotional, and intellectual welfare.

The above definitions and descriptions are standard in literature on black othermothering. However, I argue that a kind of motherhood that is not usually defined as activist othermothering resembles typical othermothering to such an extent that it may be regarded as a form of activist othermothering. This phenomenon is what I call a rhetorically constructed type of Africana othermothering—one that I claim is a dimension of typical othermothering.

Rhetorically Constructed Othermothering: A Dimension of Typical Othermothering

I define rhetorically constructed Africana othermothering as oral or written discourse that is intended to nurture, educate, protect, socialize, and promote individual and group well-being, all of which promotes the welfare and survival of the race. Quite similar to the role of mothering and typical othermothering previously, rhetorically constructed othermothering involves selfless contributions by activists intended to elevate and preserve the welfare of the community. It is maternal responsibility—i.e., related to what Tonn describes as reflecting what mothers do for their children: ensure physical preservation; foster emotional and intellectual growth; and help them develop a sense of group identity and social responsibility. Such practices are undertaken by othermothers to advance the interests of individuals and the community as a whole (2).

I suggest that othermothering for racial uplift began with the publication of the first black newspaper in 1827. In the first issue of *Freedom's Journal*, Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm declared that blacks would no longer depend on others—meaning whites—to speak for them. Although a considerable amount of space was allocated for abolition news and declarations, what mostly concerned black antebellum editors was racial uplift (Hutton x). As black elites, newspaper editors addressed their upwardly mobile, mostly literate elite readers, a constituency intently interested in education and individual improvement as a strategy to overcome white racism and in elite accomplishments and social news (Hutton xi). Although founded twenty years after *Freedom's Journal*, Shadd Cary's newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*, addressed the same constituency that *Freedom's Journal* had addressed. Cornish and Russwurm, Shadd Cary, and most other black editors catered to the desire of upwardly mobile elites to improve themselves and the race.

Shadd Cary was also part of a tradition of black women who transgressed the boundaries of acceptable behavior for a woman of any race by speaking in the public sphere since early in the nineteenth century—e.g., Phyllis Wheatley and Maria W. Stewart. Stewart's resounding exhortation for the “daughters of Africa” to awake, distinguish themselves, and show forth to the world that [they were] endowed with noble and exalted faculties” was a call for black women to receive a formal education because it led to social responsibility, collective action, and morality (Richardson 26-27). Ampadu claims that Stewart was “the rhetorical predecessor” of public orators such as Sojourner Truth, Ida Wells Barnett, Frances E. W. Harper, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary (43). Although there was no exact formula for racial uplift, elite black women became aware of the power of the pen when, among a plethora of abolitionist activities, they formed black women's literary societies (Garfield 116). The establishment of literary societies during the 1830s introduced “a new figure, the black female writer” (117). Thus, Shadd Cary was a pioneer in black women's movement from the private to the public sphere.

The Resemblance of Shadd Cary's Rhetorically Structured Othermothering to Typical Africana Othermothering

To understand the reason that Shadd Cary chose to care for black elites, a review of her background is in order.

Mary Ann Camberton Shadd Cary (1823-1893), the eldest daughter of economically comfortable black activists in Delaware, was raised to speak her mind in the public sphere by her activist father, Abraham Shadd. When she was a young adult, she accompanied him to meetings on abolitionism and several conventions on black migration. She became a formidable orator early on, although she was often the only woman present at the meetings and conventions.

As the recipient of a formal education, she became an educator and taught black children in Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York, and the Ontario province of Canada. Following a bitter public rivalry between the only other black newspaper editor in Canada, Henry Bibb, and difficulties with American missionaries due to some of her political assertions, she realized that the only way to defend herself and her racial uplift philosophy was to publish her own newspaper.

Some years before founding the *Provincial Freeman*, Shadd Cary demonstrated that she was also a prolific author. In addition to her published letters to Frederick Douglass's newspaper, *The North Star* (1849), she published her own pamphlet, *Hints to the Colored People of the North* (January 1849), publicly revealing her developing ideology on self-help and self-reliance—views that were rooted in her middle-class status, race, sex, and political socialization. As her *Provincial Freeman* editorials, articles, and correspondence indicate, she was convinced that unless blacks were educated with high standards of morality and economic self-sufficiency, whites would never hold them in high regard and the welfare and progress of the race would be threatened. In the newspaper's "Prospectus," which was published on March 24, 1854, she announced that her four-page broad sheet would be devoted to "Anti-Slavery, Temperance, General Literature, Political Opinion, and articles and editorials on all questions or projects affecting the people in a political way." She was adamant that the black press should lead the effort toward racial uplift. The black press already had the formidable tradition of serving as a forum for political discourse within the community (Conaway 218). Thus, Shadd Cary believed that the black press should be the vanguard in the struggle for racial uplift. For example, the following excerpt from an editorial dated June 23, 1855, is indicative of her position on the role of the black press (*Provincial Freeman*). She stated that "this simultaneous introduction of 'instruments' [newspapers] to promote the elevation of colored citizens, must mean something [and I] concede to them the very greatest desire for the welfare of their people."

Shadd Cary's Theory of Racial Uplift and the Role of the Black Elite

Shadd Cary's theory of racial uplift comprised three components: black emigration to Canada, racially integrated education, and equality based upon black self-reliance and independence from whites in a racially integrated society. She believed that blacks in the United States—whether free or enslaved—would never attain equality there because of institutionalized racism. She thought that they should emigrate to a country where they had been free citizens since 1833: Canada. Shadd Cary theorized that this was to be the destiny of the black elite, rather than the United States, Africa, or the Caribbean.

Based on her editorials, correspondences, and newspaper compositions, I maintain that Shadd Cary's texts advocated rhetorical othermothering stemming from her belief in the power of the press to lead the public, rather than just report newsworthy events, and from her belief that she was a community leader and activist whose overriding goal was the uplift of the race. It was usual for black male editors to discuss the importance of education to achieve self-reliance and equality and, in that respect, Shadd Cary followed suit (Hutton x-xi). However, just as an othermother would care for the welfare of black children, Shadd Cary's rhetorically constructed othermothering nurtured black elites on parenting and citizenship as a way of caring for the race.

Shadd Cary as a Rhetorical Othermother: Caring for Children and Adults

Between 1854 and 1857 (the only years the *Provincial Freeman* was published somewhat regularly), Shadd Cary wrote several editorials on elite mother- and fatherhood. Although she did not become a mother until she married Thomas Cary in 1856, her editorials on black parenthood suggest that she believed that appropriate childcare was an important part of home life and a social responsibility.

One example of rhetoric that she utilized to convey the importance of black motherhood was an idealized version of the bond between mother and child. The following excerpt from her editorial "Children and Their Influences" is an example of how she conceived that relationship:

The woman who is a mother dwells in the immediate presence of her guardian angels. She bears on for her children's sake, she will toil for them, die for them, and live for them which is sometimes harder still...She has her children's love—she will strive for her children...Idiots are they who, in family quarrels, seek to punish the mother by parting her from her offspring; for in that blasphemy against nature they do violence to God's own decrees, and lift away from his heart the concentrated instrument of His power. The fact that there are careless and unnatural mothers does not destroy the argument...Nature makes exceptions to all her great unswerving rules; they will remain to the end of time and among them none more pure or unflinching, than the love of a mother for her child (Provincial Freeman July 15, 1854).

This is an example of Shadd Cary's rhetorically constructed othermothering of black children and blood mothers; she idealizes good mothers and denounces those who would deny maternal custody of children in the event of divorce. While recognizing that not all mothers are good mothers, she reminds blood parents that there is no greater bond than that of a good mother and her child, and that the bond cannot be severed. This editorial is written by a woman in the "feminine" rhetorical style described by Campbell.

Campbell defines a feminine rhetorical style as a mode of address that is consistent with the traditional norms of femininity (440). Its characteristics are that it is a mode of accommodation used by oppressed groups “to adapt to their oppressors and means of persuasion responsive to the special conditions and experiences of the oppressed” (440). A feminine rhetorical style tends to be circuitous and is usually grounded in personal experience. A “womanly” speaker pleads, directs her rhetoric to audience sentiments, and “courts” the audience. Her discourse is suitable for both male and female audiences. A feminine rhetor will attempt to find ways to reconcile femininity with the traditional “masculinity” of public discourse. “Masculine” rhetorical style, Campbell argues, approaches the audience as “inferiors to be told what is right or to be led” (440). Many times, masculine rhetoric will also employ economic analogies to describe relationships (Spitzack and Carter 412).

The above editorial on motherhood is written in the feminine rhetorical style. It is an appeal to the sentiments of Shadd Cary’s audience. Her rhetoric is from one already marginalized because of her race, gender, and class; she is a middle-class black woman who has dared to enter the world of newspaper editing. Her appeal to her feminine and masculine audiences is based on othermothering black parents on how to be effective parents, and against separating children from their mothers through divorce. As she cautions, not all mothers are good mothers, and those that are bad mothers violate Nature. Nevertheless, even with bad mothers, the bond between mother and child is unseverable. At no point in this rhetorically constructed othermothering does Shadd Cary attempt to make a logical case, such as what Campbell would call “masculine” rhetoric. The “feminine” rhetoric used in the above editorial is empowering because it speaks for a constituency that is largely ignored by traditional rhetors—i.e., black women. The metaphors Shadd Cary uses evoke empathy and her nurturing rhetoric almost implies that she has had the experience of being a mother engaged in raising children (which she had not done at the time of writing this editorial). Collins emphasizes that the most important component of a mother work’s is to secure both the physical and psychological survival of children in impoverished, racist, and embattled conditions (“Shifting” 172).

It is important to realize, however, that Shadd Cary’s editorial discourse in the above example was addressed not only to individuals in the community of black Canada, but also to the entire black community in a broader sense. Respecting the role of mothers in nurturing the next generation of young black children also implied the survival of the entire black community. Shadd Cary well understood that, without respect for women and their extremely important role in raising children, blacks as a race were in peril.

Urging the community to respect certain givens and standards applicable to what it meant to be a good mother in an individual family also meant understanding the goals of black citizenship, for Shadd Cary's vision of black citizenship in the new Canadian society meant not only the preservation of the individual, but the nurturing and preservation of citizenship in a racially integrated Canada.

Shadd Cary was equally adept at using feminine and masculine rhetoric simultaneously in an editorial. For example, one aspect of her philosophy on racial uplift was education. She believed that girls and women should receive the same education that boys and men received because of their importance for the welfare of the race. This belief was apparent in her discourse "Female Education," which serves as an example of her rhetorically constructed othermothering of women, the primary teachers of children, who represented the future of racial elevation:

Our young women want a more vigorous, practical, and useful Education, one that shall develop strength, character, and resolution; one that shall give growth to the mind, power to the will, and efficiency to life; one that shall enable any woman to be independent, true to herself, to entertain and maintain her own opinions, to get her own living, to mark out her own course in life, to count one in any position she may choose to occupy, to be all that may belong to a free, independent, accountable, intelligent creature (Provincial Freeman June 7, 1856).

This editorial could have been written by Susan B. Anthony or Elizabeth Cady Stanton. It clearly resembles other feminist rhetoric of the 1850s calling for women's education and other rights. Shadd Cary was a committed black feminist for her entire adult life, having been the victim of sexist discrimination in Delaware when she was a child. However, rarely did she go so far as to advocate women's rights in her editorials and other texts. She was vulnerable in her position as a woman editor. Many men, and some women, in the black community thought that her outspokenness and feistiness transgressed the boundaries of respectability permitted women of the nineteenth century—especially black women. While she often published articles from other newspapers, or letters from readers that espoused women's rights, she did not espouse black feminism until she returned to residing in the United States after the Civil War.

Thus, the following editorial is unusual. In this editorial, she notes the importance of an educated woman to the home and race:

She sits on a throne of power at the very fountain of life. She is a goddess of all that springs and little rivulets of humanity. She makes men and trains them. As mother, wife, and friend she wields a scepter of vast power. How can the woman-mind, undeveloped, untrained, uninspired with guest aims, grand and brave resolutions and actions, impress the minds of the generation to come with strength, power, activity intellectual and moral vigor? It cannot. Oh, it is a burning shame that our women are not educated to a greater vigor of body and mind! Give me a nation of noble women, and I will give you a noble nation. Cultivate the woman-mind if you would cultivate the race.

In the above text, Shadd Cary's rhetorically constructed othermothering is not limited to noting the importance of educating children in one's household; it stresses the importance of women's education to the entire race and its potential to comprise "a noble nation." I contend that the noble nation was also to be the new nation of educated elites in a racially integrated Canadian society. While not a nationalist in the same sense as Martin R. Delany and other black emigrationists of the mid-1850s, Shadd Cary's nationalism primarily focused on blacks in their new homeland as part of Canadian society, not separate from it.

The above excerpt on women's education not only appeals to sentiment, but also is well argued and presents a carefully constructed case appealing to rationality. Accordingly, this discourse is written in both the feminine and masculine styles because it is meant to rally women to action and empowerment, and to make a rational, structurally deductive, authoritative case for men. Her rhetoric is impersonal and uses the pronoun "I" only at the end when she asserts her claims. Frankly, this editorial could have been written by a man sympathetic to the cause of women's education. In the second half of the editorial, there are no indications that the rhetor was a woman, and this makes the discourse remarkable. This rhetorically constructed othermothering of black parents also serves as recognition that the importance of education begins in the home, which is framed as the salvation of the race. It posits a strong argument for the importance of black women and enlightened, progressive men to racial survival. However, black motherhood was Shadd Cary's only concern. Black fathers were equally important to children and the larger effort toward the full realization of citizenship.

Shadd Cary rhetorically othermothered black fathers on the emotional needs of children. For example, in her editorial “An Affectionate Spirit,” she advises fathers to do as follows:

We sometimes meet with men who seem to think that any indulgence in an affectionate feeling is weakness. They will return from a journey, and greet their families, with a distant dignity, and move among their children with the cold and lofty splendor of an iceberg, surrounded by its broken fragments. There is hardly a more unnatural sound on earth than one on earth than one of the families without a heart... Cherish, then, your heart's best affections. Indulge in the warm and gushing emotions of filial, parental, and faithful love... Bind your whole families together with [love] (Provincial Freeman September 16, 1854).

While addressed to men, this editorial appeals to sentiment, rather than rational argument, in making a case for emotional expression in home life. Its feminine style is one that Shadd Cary often adopted in her discussions of nurturing children. It is also a style she used after being accused of not being rhetorically “womanly.” Although this editorial on how to be a good father is addressed primarily to men, it pertains to the important role that fathers have in ensuring the welfare of the race, as families are a vital part of a healthy community. Shadd Cary’s paternal othermothering sought to assure domestic harmony as well as the communal harmony necessary for the healthy functioning of a democratic society.

Conclusion

Although the editorials excerpted here comprise a limited sample, they illustrate that community activist Shadd Cary othermothered black elites regarding their roles as parents and citizens through the use of newspaper discourses intended to inform and educate, as well as to shape the new, racially integrated Canadian society. As an activist, her discourses indicate that she sought to transform black elite parenting and citizenship. Her othermothering stances were radical simply because they were written by a black woman marginalized due to her race, sex, and class at a time when all women—black and white—were relegated to the private sphere. Shadd Cary transgressed the matrices of oppression to speak and write in the public sphere, following in the footsteps of Wheatley, Stewart, and Truth.

One reason that Shadd Cary's rhetorical Africana othermothering is analyzed critically is because of the history of black people in mid-nineteenth century Canada, an era full of debate between blacks regarding the future of those who remained in the institutionally racist United States versus those who emigrated to a more institutionally egalitarian Canada. In the United States, Frederick Douglass ardently argued that blacks should remain in the country they had helped build because someday they would be eligible for citizenship. In opposition to Douglass, Martin Delaney argued for an altogether separate black nation in Latin America or the Caribbean, and Henry Bibb proposed racially segregated black settlements in Canada. But Shadd Cary argued that blacks should emigrate from the United States to Canada and create a newly integrated society—that they should be part of, rather than segregated from, that society. An analysis of her *Provincial Freeman* editorials pertaining to parenting black children—rhetoric that I have argued might be deemed another form or dimension of othermothering—suggests that they are intended to influence not only the welfare of children, but also the new black, communal Canada. Shadd Cary, privileged by her light skin color, education, and economic status, held a vision of a future characterized by an elevated black citizenry. That vision was influenced greatly by her background, upbringing, exposure to radical ideas (e.g., black emigration), and profession as a teacher.

Shadd Cary's new black collective stance as parent and citizen “[did] not exist in nature as a collective being, but [was] constructed in a narrative...Collectives are constructed by activists” (McGee 240). As McGee explains,

‘The people’ are not objectively real in the sense that they exist as a collective entity in nature; rather, they are a fiction dreamed by an advocate and infused with an artificial, rhetorical reality by the agreement of an audience to participate in a collective fantasy (240).

Shadd Cary's rhetorically structured othermothering is what Gordon would classify as a constitutive rhetoric, one that is “a critical rhetorical practice that proceeds on the notion that the audience and their identity are fixed by the speeches, pamphlets, letters et cetera by which they are persuaded to act” (31). Her rhetorical othermothering of black children and parents/citizens suggests that she well understood her role as a leader among black people—one who was both compassionate and pragmatic. Accordingly, she championed the black press in its role as the creator of the new black collective, a role that closely paralleled that of the European-American press in constituting the imaginary community of whites in the United States. In her editorial, “Newspapers by Colored People in the United States,” she stated that “if there is anything [black journalists for black newspapers] should appropriate to themselves from proximity with the Yankees, it's the philosophy of their progress, made up as they are in part of oppressed people who have emigrated from other despotisms” (*Provincial Freeman* June 23, 1855).

Shadd Cary's literal and figurative othermothering affirmed her optimism regarding black acceptance by a predominantly white, racist Canadian society. Black acculturation and socialization for that great era would be the sacred task of blood mothers, othermothers, fathers, and the black press. The analysis here suggests that Shadd Cary was adept at employing both feminine and masculine rhetorical styles—depending on the subject matter and the intended audience—and, at times, in deference to the boundaries for “womanly” behavior. As an activist, she believed that the new black elite needed mothering to guide its social and political transition from slavery to citizenship. Critical scholars should find intellectual riches within these and other articulations of Shadd Cary's visionary othermothering.

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