

## The Black Venus. African female bodies as objects of desire between colonial sexism and racism

*Veneri nere. Il corpo delle donne africane come oggetto di desiderio tra sessismo e razzismo coloniale*

**Alessandro Vaccarelli**

Associato di Pedagogia Generale e Sociale / Università degli Studi dell'Aquila

abstract

This article aims at analyzing, through the point of view of deconstructive pedagogy, the educational and cultural mediators (institutional devices, literary forms, songs etc.) which, during the period of Italian colonialism, contributed to the rise of feelings and ideas regarding the African female body based on exoticism, eroticism and biological racism, which led to highly hierarchic relationships between colonizers and native women – between the white man and the black woman.

**Keywords:** colonial racism, deconstructive pedagogy, postcolonial studies

*Nell'ottica della decostruzione pedagogica e in chiave postcoloniale, l'articolo si propone di analizzare alcuni mediatori educativi e culturali (dispositivi istituzionali, forme narrative, canzoni, ecc.) che hanno contribuito, nell'esperienza del colonialismo italiano, a generare intorno al corpo delle donne africane – tra esotismo, erotismo e razzismo biologico – significati e sentimenti sociali da ricondurre a rapporti fortemente gerarchici e asimmetrici tra colonizzatore e colonizzata, tra uomo bianco e donna nera.*

**Parole chiave:** razzismo coloniale, pedagogia della decostruzione, studi post-coloniali

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## 1. Naomi and the others: Racism, sexism and gender violence yesterday and today

In today's world there is an area in which remains of the sexist and racial ideologies of the eighteen and nineteen hundreds, together with forms of collective imagery and social practices leading to racial discrimination sexual exploitation and gender violence, all seem to converge (Ulivieri, 2014). We are referring to the world of prostitution, but not in its more general sense, rather in terms of the presence in Italy of African women: women primarily seen as *black bodies* to be commercialized, violated, raped, not solely because they are female bodies, but because of their ethnic origin. This aspect confers a more specific meaning to the sexualization of these female *bodies*. Racial<sup>1</sup> issues and African origin, together with gender, create a blend of sexism and racism that can be viewed as the historical inheritance left to us by Colonialism. Without digging into the many issues and questions connected to this world, it is worthwhile to consider the reasons why African prostitution is so widespread here and focus on the clients who, harboring sexist and racist feelings, choose these women, considering them not only as "simple objects of sexual desire" but also as being *naturally* available for any type of sexual act and under any type of economic or hygienic condition, with no regard for even the most basic ethic principles. Emblematic in this light is the case of Nigerian prostitution, known for being particularly violent in its dealings, but also less expensive and allowing for clients to engage with under-aged women quite easily (Zinti, 2012).

In contrast with this image of African women being swallowed by our streets we find the image of a former British-Jamaican top-model: Naomi Campbell, who in the 90s was defined by the media as the "Black Venus" becoming one of the world's most famous sex symbols. She embodied the

1 I will use the word "race" in the meaning of biologist racism, in the full awareness of its pseudoscientific value.

union between exoticism and erotic imagery on one hand, and racism and pornographic imagery on the other; we can say that these two views are not as far apart as they may seem, rather we may consider them two sides of the same coin.

The term “Black Venus” (Sharpley, Whiting, 1999) is charged, and not by chance, as we shall see, with ambiguity and images rooted in Italy’s and Europe’s colonial pasts, which need to be dealt with in the sphere of post colonial research, including studies having pedagogic and historical-pedagogic matrices. It is, in fact, in the past that we may trace attitudes, social customs and collective imagery in which the African female body sparks sexist and racist ideas, the results of which are still visible in current-day phenomena and which need to be tackled through a process of deconstructionism (Vaccarelli, 2013). In this scenario, as Zoletto underlined (2012), it is necessary to conduct a postcolonial pedagogic study, including the Italian context, confronting the specific events linked to colonization and decolonization.

At this point we may ask – Is it possible to give this period of history a voice? And how may we go about giving a voice to the other different stories?

According to Ulivieri, women’s history flows side by side with the history of those who are “different”. Therefore to rewrite these pages of history we must broaden our concept of the “narrating voice” in order to include, alongside traditional sources, other sources such as archives, oral history, iconographies, literature etc. (Ulivieri, 1995, p. 68).

In the extracts and accounts contained in the following paragraphs the narrating voices are for the most part male ones, thus these voices and points of view involuntarily denounce women’s conditions in colonies – through a mixture of “exoticism-eroticism and violence of gender mixed with racism. These “voices” carry the responsibility of having created, through various educational mediators (institutional devices, photographs, songs, colonial literature) a collective imagery that is still at work today in certain male dominated cultures.

## **2. Racial hatred and sensorial attraction: science, common sense, collective imagination**

Between 1800 and 1900, racist ideology (Mosse, 1985) considered the human body as a central element on which many of its argumentations, explanations and exemplifications were based. This resulted in the creation of a nucleus of (pseudo)scientific ideas and theories with significant con-

sequences on individual, collective and institutional behavior towards other “races”. Significant similarities can be found in the development of male chauvinism where the female body takes on a central meaning in reference to norms, sexual and socio-cultural practices etc., but also takes on a (pseudo)scientific relevance recognized through anatomic and physiologic studies directed towards the discovery of women’s “natural” weakness and submissiveness (Babini, Minuz, Tavaglini, 1989). From a Foucauldian point of view, we could say that “power” and “knowledge” are mutually determined, they are not seen as independent entities, rather inextricably related – therefore knowledge is always an exercise of power and power always a function of knowledge; in fact no form of power can exist without a corresponding field of knowledge; *vice versa*, to every field of knowledge corresponds a specific form of power (Foucault, 1976). If taken separately, nineteenth century sexism and racism were both sustained by formalized knowledge pertaining to distinct (pseudo)scientific frameworks. In our collective imagination such frameworks may at times create informal and fluctuating ideologies, in other instances however they may be structured into well-defined norms and social practices. In both situations we find the same logic: both sexism and racism support relationships based on dominance, founded upon a biological matrix that develops through the “naturalization” of social relationships.

Race may be considered the “ghost” of a collective body (Le Breton, 2002), in which we find the biology of human beings rather than their history, and determinism rather than their complex dynamism; in other words NATURE over CULTURE. Women, but also the insane, the criminals, and primitive populations (Babini, Minuz, Travaglini, 1986) represent the subjects studied by Positivist anthropology and medicine, which not only studied but weighed up and dissected human physical features with the aim of establishing links to mental characteristics.

In this way, naturalization processes were perfected especially as regards certain social subjects, namely women, who although embracing new roles within the growing industrialization process, were promptly belittled through pseudoscientific “elucidations” regarding their “natural” diversity and inferiority.

Inferior races were at times held at a distance, in accordance with “separatist” ideology, other times they were exploited (both economically and sexually), or worse yet, they underwent a process of “liquidation” resulting in annihilation and a loss of humanity which led to them being seen as just “bodies”.

If we consider racism and the female body, in particular the African female body, it is evident how the merging of gender and race leads to a dual

and powerful process of naturalization of differences: to traits such as instinctiveness, and in some cases savagery, attributed to certain “races” we can add others (weakness, limited intelligence, inclination towards domestic roles) all charged with eroticism, pornography, sexual submission.

Emblematic is the story of the African woman – Saartjie Sarah Baartman (1789-1815) – well-known in nineteenth century Europe as the “Hottentot Venus” who was forced into prostitution by her white Master and paraded around freak shows in England and France. She was put on display so that artists and anatomists, fascinated by her very protruding buttocks and large labia could observe and examine her (Goodwin, 2009). After her death Saartjie’s remains (brain and genital organs) were held in the Musee de l’Homme in Paris where the anatomist Georges Curvier, through the study of her remains, formulated his theory of racial inequality. In 2010 Saartjie’s story was brought to the big screen in the film *Black Venus (Venus Noire)* directed by Abedallatif Kechiche. The film portrays the historical events and social beliefs of the time, capturing the nuances and the complexity of nineteenth century racism, including the sexual derive. It also focuses on the relationship between common sense and collective imagination on one hand, and scientific discourse on the other. In a Europe intent on building empires, attracted to exoticism, endeavoring to make the concept of “nation” strong and vigorous, we find an array of symbolic elements including that of the “Black Venus”. Although the African woman was seen with disdain and ridicule, her body sparked sexual arousal within the male universe, this was embedded with the darkest forms of sexism and racism combined. The African woman was therefore reduced to being only a “black body” thus completely reified through a gender-race dualism which justified any type of thought or behavior.

As Sorgoni (1998) stated in reference to the colonial experience, the idea of a Black Venus has become a metaphor not only of the African woman herself but of the entire African continent: possessing one was the result of conquering the other.

### **3. “Pardon, but in Africa things are different”: Colonizers and “Madamas” in the Italian Colonies**

Colonization during the eighteen and nineteen hundreds not only disseminated new ideas within the racist imagination but created certain relationships and bonds between the colonizer and the colonized. “Concubinage in colonial Eritrea was called madamato. The “madama” was a native

woman temporarily living with an Italian man, performing domestic and sexual services, and being rewarded with kindness (food, clothing) and/or with money” (Sorgoni, 1997, p. 7). This system was established in the Italian colonies of Eastern Africa from the onset of the colonial experience, particularly after the conquest of Eritrea. Initially this system was promoted in order to discourage male behavior that could lead to venereal diseases or to frequenting bordellos (Barrera, 2005). After the defeat of Adua, this system was no longer encouraged, although it was tolerated at least until the Ethiopian war (1935-36) when the Fascist Regime, concerned about maintaining the racial integrity of the Italian population, passed laws forbidding it. Fascists decided, not by chance, that they were against colonial concubinage just before the publication of the Manifesto of racial laws in 1938. Naturally the reason for this sudden disapproval of the “madamato” system was not based on any sort of ethical principle but rather on purely eugenic reasons – another result of biological racism (i.e. RDL n. 880 of 1937, Law 2004 of 1939).

A classic example is offered by Indro Montanelli, who in “Civiltà Fascista” January 1936, had written:

We will never be dominators without a strong sense of our predestined superiority. We do not fraternize with negroes. We cannot, we must not. At least not until we have civilized them<sup>2</sup>.

During a television show – L’Ora della Verità – that aired on Italian T.V. in 1969 (Merlo, 2016), Montanelli spoke about his relationship with a twelve-year-old girl he had bought in Eritrea back in 1935.

It seemed as if I had made a good choice, she was a beautiful twelve-year-old girl named Milena. Pardon, but in Africa things are different. I had legally married her, in the sense that I had bought her from her father [...]. She accompanied me as did the wives of my askaris ... that is, askari wives did not actually follow our troops... but every fortnight they would reach us. I never figured out how they managed to find us in the infinite spaces of Abyssinia [...] and my wife would arrive as well, with a basket on her head, bringing me clean linens<sup>3</sup>.

2 Tr. it.: “Non si sarà mai dei dominatori, se non avremo la coscienza esatta di una nostra fatale superiorità. Coi negri non si fraternizza. Non si può, non si deve. Almeno finché non si sia data loro una civiltà”.

3 Tr. it.: “Pare che avessi scelto bene, era una bellissima ragazza, Milena, di dodici anni.

At this point of the program Elvira Banotti, a young well-known feminist of Eritrean origin who was sitting in the audience stepped in accusing Montanelli of rape and child molesting:

You have just admitted that you married a twelve-year-old girl and at twenty-five that means you raped her, but all you say is: 'but these things are done in Africa'. I would like to ask you, after these statements, what your "normal" relationships with women are like?<sup>4</sup>.

Montanelli defended himself saying: "No, listen, Miss, as for rape... there was no rape, girls in Abyssinia get married at twelve"<sup>5</sup>.

This "relativist" way of justifying certain behavior is similar to the ways sexual tourism linked to child prostitution is justified today, but Elvira Banotti continued to bash Montanelli's explanations during the program.

Again in 1982, Montanelli, interviewed by journalist Enzo Biagi, declared that he had bought a little Eritrean girl of twelve, "a sweet little animal" as he called her, for 500 Lira (including a horse and a gun) who then accompanied him on his campaign in Africa.

Thus, Italian concubinage represented a historical event that caused a great deal of suffering and the birth of thousands of illegitimate children. In 1940 a Law was issued (Law 13 May n. 822 – regarding mix-raced) which forbade Italians from acknowledging children born from their liaisons with African women and also from providing them with child support.

Scusate, ma in Africa è un'altra cosa. Così l'avevo regolarmente sposata, nel senso che l'avevo comprata dal padre. [...] Mi ha accompagnato assieme alle mogli dei miei ascari... cioè queste mogli degli ascari non è che seguivano la banda, ma ogni quindici giorni raggiungevano la banda. Io non ho mai capito come facessero a trovarci in questo infinito dell'Abissinia [...] e arrivava anche questa mia moglie, con la cesta in testa, che mi portava la biancheria pulita".

4 Tr. it.: "Lei ha detto tranquillamente di aver avuto una sposa, diciamo, di 12 anni e a 25 anni non si è peritato affatto di violentare una ragazza di 12 anni dicendo: ma in Africa queste cose si fanno. Io vorrei chiedere a lei, come intende normalmente i suoi rapporti con le donne date queste due affermazioni?"

5 Tr. it.: "No, guardi signorina, sulla violenza... nessuna violenza, le ragazze in Abissinia si sposano a dodici anni".

#### 4. The Female Body and collective imagination: literary mediation and the role of popular songs

The historical issues regarding the representation of African women and the behavior and attitude of colonizers lead us to focus on the pedagogical perspective and consider the existence of formal and informal educational mediators (Vaccarelli, 2010, 2012, 2013) able to imbed sexual-racist content within our collective imagination, reproducing relationship types that may vary from domestic violence to sexual submission or even rape (Poidimani, 2006). The instruments used to produce this collective imagery (cinema, photography, literature, popular music) are all aimed towards this direction. As regards photography, we shall limit our discussion to recalling studies that have proven just how this sector endeavored to portray the African woman: “inventing” an image of complete sexual availability and legitimating therefore any type of sexual crime (Campassi, Sega, 1983; Palma, 2002).

In Colonial literature, exoticism and erotic imagery focus on the “Black Venus” stereotype. In this case as well, the black body is the basic element from which the sexist-racist discourse stems. As we shall see in the examples following, which refer to different historical moments of Italian colonialism, the African woman is represented through language pervaded by “zoological” hues (lustful kitten, faithful dog). This served to represent her as purely corporeal and instinctive; provoking male instincts through her sensual movements, eliciting unknown violent sensations.

With the onset of the colonial experience in 1898 we immediately find the overlapping of exoticism and eroticism in colonial literature:

[...] I was offered the pleasure of observing so many beautiful and attractive women with refined and regular features, complex bodies, so slender and elegant, moving graciously and attractively. [...] Large and soft, deep black, shiny and languid, always revealing intelligence and passionate conveyance, sending chills and eliciting unknown violent sensations<sup>6</sup> (Robetti-Bricchetti, 1986, p. 47).

The erotic charge of these bodies eliminates any reference to their feminine spirit: black women are gracious little “animals”, provocative beasts,

6 Tr. it.: “[...] mi si offriva spettacolo così gradito di donne graziose e belle, dai lineamenti fini e regolari, dal corpo complesso, snello ed elegante e dalle movenze aggraziate ed attraenti. [...] Larghi, morbidi, di un nero profondo, scintillanti, languidi talvolta e che sempre rivelano l’intelligenza e trasporti passionati, *mettono i brividi suscitando ignote e violente sensazioni*”.

collocated in a purely natural state rather than in a cultural one. As Rossotti, at the end of the liberal era wrote in reference to Bedouine women:

Almost all Arab women have tall slender long-limbed bodies [...] they stride naturally and lithely like lustful kittens. Their hips swaying lightly and rhythmically [...] <sup>7</sup> (Rossotti, 1920, p. 122).

Memoires of colonial voyages and sojourns, which were meant to enhance imperialistic intentions, often ended up falling into the exoticism-eroticism *mélange*. Fernando Gori, in describing the Ulad bu Sef tribe, focused instead on the women's bodies (1930):

They boast about having the most beautiful women in Libya, magnificent statues of throbbing voluptuous flesh and deep shiny eyes that cannot be looked into without feeling a burning desire<sup>8</sup> (in Del Boca, 1994, p. 168).

With Fascist colonialism a new genre developed in Italy, the colonial novel (Del Boca, 1994). In 1926 the Minister of Italian Colonies, Luigi Federzoni, announced a contest for the best colonial novel which was won by a young official, Mario dei Gaslini, author of "*Piccolo Amore Beduino*". A love story that initially overcomes the obstacles of diversity but is later broken by the call of the young Italian's homeland. The works contained in this collection of colonial literature constitute true "laboratories of dominance hierarchy" (Proglío, 2015). "*Piccolo Amore Beduino*" is a novel based on the idea of civilization: first Nica is a hostage of a traditional society that revolves around Bedouine men; then she will owe her freedom to the Italian masculine action" (Ivi, p. 92). The main character, Nica, a dancer, who is described as a *sad and frightened little animal, a heap of tired flesh*, shall proclaim her total devotion and become slave to her Master, who will in turn abandon her, just as scripted in *colonial style*.

In a well-known novel "*Femina Somala*" by Mitrano Sani, written in 1933 and then taken off the market in 1938, Sani wrote:

- 7 "[...] Le arabe possiedono quasi tutte un corpo dritto, snello, slanciato [...] Il loro incedere è naturale e quasi sempre flessuoso da gattine lascive. Le loro anche ondeggiano leggermente e ritmicamente [...]".
- 8 Tr. it.: "Si vantano di possedere le donne più belle di tutta la Libia, meravigliose statue di palpitante e voluttuosa carne, occhi fulgenti e profondi, che non si possono guardare senza sentire il morso del desiderio".

What was a girl if not a body taken from a tribe to appease the volunteer soldier's abstinence? Was he not the Master and she the slave? [...] His western soul reserved tenderness for female beings and he unknowingly behaved in accordance with the innate kindness of the Italian race [...] <sup>9</sup> (Mitrano Sani, p. 29).

Like a little beast, hunching in the corner of the room that was to become someone else's [...] Elo, her face in her hands, brought to mind those faithful dogs that die on their owners' graves. [...] Andriani had done everything according to the rules for Elo [...] [...] so now he had no scruples, no regrets, he had a clean conscious knowing that he had repaid Elo for the relief from the dreadful abstinence she had sweetly provided him. He could not however bear being separated from her and he was not ashamed of this. [...] What was he to do? How could he deprive his faithful dog of his affectionate strokes?<sup>10</sup> (Ivi, pp. 163-164).

The image of the black woman is divided into various aseptic categories – ridicule, exotic appeal, erotic allure and covertly pornographic gusto. Everything happens through her body which represents the ultimate *reductio ad unum* of her lifeless subjectivity (in that her subjectivity is “de-socialized” and “de-humanized”). As we have read in the passage by Mitrano Sani: *Wasn't a girl simply a body taken from the tribe?* Thus, once again the female body represents the central element from which the colonial and fascist ideologies stem.

Moreover, the African woman becomes a metaphor of Africa, and sexual conquest a metaphor for colonial conquest, recalling Said (1978) who saw an implicit sexual metaphor in Western and Eastern relations.

Popular music is also responsible for spreading and promoting the

9 Tr. it.: “Cosa era la ragazza se non un corpo preso lì, da una tribù della sua giurisdizione, per placare l'astinenza di quell'esilio volontario? Non erano egli il padrone ed ella la schiava? [...]. L'anima occidentale di lui, usa a riversare la propria tenerezza in un essere femminile, inconsciamente agiva con la bontà innata della sua razza italiana [...]”.

10 Tr. it.: “Come una bestiola, accucciata in un angolo della camera che doveva divenire d'un altro [...] Elo, il viso nelle palme, faceva pensare a quei cani fedeli che muoiono sulla fossa del padrone. [...] Andriani aveva tutto regolato per Elo [...] ora se ne andava senza scrupoli, senza rimorsi, con la coscienza di aver ben ricambiato l'alleviamento alla dura astinenza africana che Elo docilmente gli aveva procurato. Non poteva, però, scacciare il senso penoso pel distacco dalla fanciulla, e non se ne vergognava [...] Che cosa doveva fare? Si può lasciare il proprio cane fedele senza una carezza?”.

erotic/fascinating representation of the African woman as much as photography and certain literature. Emblematic of this is the story linked to the marching song “Faccetta Nera” (Little Black Face) which is still today commonly associated to the spirit of Fascism, but which after 1938 was repudiated by the Fascist regime itself. This was due to the fact that the regime’s position towards relationships between colonizers and colonies changed with the onset of racial laws. What was once tolerated was later censored and cause of embarrassment. On one hand “Faccetta Nera” represented a call to enrollment in the colonial army, on the other hand, it caused embarrassment and concern due to the new attitudes of the regime towards relationships between Italian colonizers and their colonies. In 1935, in this scenario, Ennio Flaiano wrote “Influence of popular songs on colonial army enrollment. At the basis of every expansion, sexual desire”<sup>11</sup> (Flaiano, 2013, pp. 163-164).

The “Faccetta Nera” song was first written in Roman dialect, the first version of the song was rewritten but was not well received by the public. A rapid analysis of the song will allow us to grasp some main points.

If you look at the sea from the hills / Young brunette, a slave among slaves / Like in a dream you will see many ships / And a tricolour waving for you / Pretty black face, beautiful Abyssinian / Wait and see, for the hour is coming! / When we are with you / We shall give you another law and another king (...) Refrain: Pretty black face, you will be Roman / Your only flag will be the Italian one! / We will march together with you / and parade in front of the Duce and the king!<sup>12</sup>.

Between exoticism, implicit eroticism, civilizing missions, the African woman becomes the symbol of Africa itself, her corporeal “space” a metaphor for geographic space. In the song she is even offered the chance to become “Roman”.

This song therefore gave life to that blending of eroticism and exoti-

11 Tr. it.: “Influenza delle canzonette sull’arruolamento coloniale. Alla base di ogni espansione, il desiderio sessuale”.

12 Tr. it.: “Se tu dall’altipiano guardi il mare, / Moretta che sei schiava fra gli schiavi, / Vedrai come in un sogno tante navi / E un tricolore sventolar per te. / *Ritornello*: Faccetta nera, / Bell’abissina / Aspetta e spera che già l’ora si avvicina! / quando saremo / Insieme a te, / noi ti daremo / Un’altra legge e un altro Re. / (...) / *Ritornello* / Faccetta nera, / Sarai Romana / La tua bandiera/Sarà sol quella italiana! / Noi marceremo / Insieme a te / E sfilaremo avanti / al Duce e avanti al Re”.

cism characterizing Italy's colonial history up to that moment, although soon after it became a source of embarrassment for the regime. Moreover, it created the image of colonizers who were too kind (this did not mean they were not racists or sexists) in light of the new standards being set by the racial laws. In fact when the song was rewritten, in the new version, 'becoming a Roman' was eliminated from the lyrics.

The song "Faccetta Bianca" (Carcangiu, Negash, 2007) was the regime's answer to Faccetta Nera, although it never became popular, it did expose the will to defend racial prestige behind sentimental and ideological rhetoric and racial hatred (softened by the tone used to refer to Italian women):

Little white face the kisses you gave me/ in the trenches come back  
to my mind/in the midst of the blackened faces around me/your  
face shines brighter than the sun/ as if contrasting those black  
faces/the flaming light of your legionnaire!<sup>13</sup>.

The regime's shift towards racism attempted to break with the previous colonial experience which had, through a primarily exotic vision, created an erotic/pornographic image of the African woman. The same images were used afterwards but with different aims: total racial segregation and prevention of mixed-race offspring.

## Conclusions

The African woman, or better, the African woman seen as a "black body", as social and educational media portrayed her, attracted the attention of the collective imagery and of the regime within an atmosphere of ambiguity that shifted from uncontainable sexual desire to a sense of alarm and concern. The concise historical-educational study we have conducted opens new doors for further pedagogical (intercultural and gender) analysis and action. In a relationship of continuity between past and present, in fact, the term *Black Venus* is still used today. Within this scenario pervaded by obscurity and unanswered questions, profound elements of racist and sexist imagery, we can see "black venuses" walking the streets toady: African prostitutes, often young girls, victims of sexual tourism. They are

13 Tr. it.: "Faccetta bianca i baci che m'hai dati/nella trincea mi tornano alla mente / in mezzo a tanti visi affumicati / è il tuo visino più del sol splendente, / quasi in contrasto a quelle facce nere / è fiamma e luce pel tuo bersagliere!".

“the damned”, the outcasts, the victims of the terrible world of prostitution (Ulivieri 1997); their bodies represent an outlet for male instincts, a form of transgression, which as such, is contemplated through a strict relationship with the past, that of racist disdain and sensorial attraction.

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