



UNC CHARLOTTE
College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

CHARLOTTE PAPERS

IN

AFRICANA STUDIES

NUMBER 5 (2013)



A Publication of the

Africana Studies Department

Charlotte Papers in Africana Studies is a publication series dedicated to topics that have wide appeal or timely relevance on any aspect of African and African Diaspora subjects, authored by Africana Studies faculty or by invited speakers and visiting scholars.

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ISBN: 978-0-9843449-5-6

Editor, Charlotte Papers in Africana Studies
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The Beauty I Have Seen

by

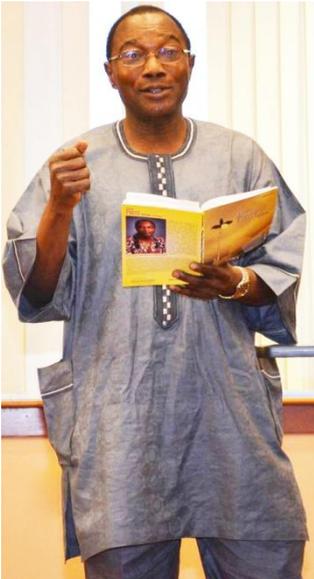
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Paper originally presented at the
**PERSONNALLY SPEAKING LECTURE
SERIES**

Sponsored by the College of Liberal Arts and
Sciences and the J. Murrey Atkins Library

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

March 26, 2013



Tanure Ojaide
“Personally Speaking” presentation, 2013
(Photo: Lynn Roberson)

Introduction

I dedicate this presentation to the memory of Chinua Achebe, a pioneer of modern African literature, who died last week (Thursday, March 21, 2013). I would like to open my presentation with two poems from the collection: “When the Muse Gives the Minstrel a Nod” (51) and “For Mbwidiffu” (30).

When the Muse Gives the Minstrel a Nod

When the muse gives the minstrel a nod,
no bead ever competes with his diamond.

The minstrel gets his share of pain and joy
that he converts into songs of the season—

with the gift, an elixir, he cures migraines of misery;
for sure a wizard he sees without strain in the dark.

He takes the impassable road to the pagoda within,
knowing the wide road without a sign runs into peril.

He matches divine favors with a record sacrifice,
carries what is light to lift but heavy on the head.

Transported into primeval rapture by zeal for song,
he knocks out others for a singular vision of beauty.

There is only one moon, the world’s munificent bride;

beside her legions of attendants in their livery of light.

Since there is only one muse in the pantheon
and music comes from the breath of her love

when the muse gives the minstrel a nod,
no bead ever competes with his diamond.

For Mbwidiffu

(after reading “Ecstasy”)

I hear the agonizing cries of girls
in flight from the flashing razor;

I hear horrific howls of daughters
against their parent-sanctioned rape.

Who wants to be held down to wear the stigma
of adult life, her ecstasy wrapped in a rag?

Who wants her yams scorched before harvest,
stripped of womanly pride for old times’ sake?

“And they have the nerves to cry out,”
the patriarchs wonder in male-only joints;

“after all, their mothers went through this
without crying or complaining of cruelty!”

These men do not count the army of divorcees—
leaking women no man wants in the neighborhood;

they look down on their children's wrinkled mothers
morose and up to the neck in forced misery; wrecked.

Of course, the contented men take no count
of the multitude of brides dying at childbirth.

The girls fleeing, the old men complain,
have turned into animals without names.

There's no laughter in the girls that fall in line—
firebrands wipe out sunshine from their faces.

I still hear the chilling wails of the fugitive girls,
the numbing silence of their ghostly presence

and now the goateed men ask the Maker why these
girls
aren't made of the same stuff as their tamed mothers.

The simple answer: "Time has changed!
Time has changed. Time has since changed!"

Long after my grandmother sang to me at home
and I constantly heard other forms of indigenous
poetry, I took a B.A. in English from the University of
Ibadan, an M.A. in Creative Writing, and a Ph.D. in
English from Syracuse University. I am also a Fellow
of the Iowa International Writing Program. I thus

straddle two poetic traditions: the African oral poetic tradition and the Western written poetic tradition.

The Writer Is Not an Air-plant

I have been quoted as saying that the writer is not an air-plant but someone deeply rooted in time and place. I am not sure this idea is originally mine but I first expressed it in the late 1980s. Original or not, I stand by the opinion that a writer is strongly influenced by or attached to his or her time and place. The writer's time involves having a sense of history with its society and politics, literary tradition, and prevailing aesthetics. When T. S. Eliot wrote about tradition and the individual talent, he was very much aware that a writer always writes from a sense of the time, the *Zeitgeist*, and gives a personal stamp or uniqueness to the experiences he or she chooses to express.

By place, in the context of a writer's work, I mean the environment, geography, nationality, society, and culture. These aspects of place, like those of time, condition the writer to produce his or her own type of writing by responding to current realities. Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" comes to mind here. An awareness of one's literary precursors and their time and place could lead to new types of writing, which might involve a different literary form or strategy. In most cases, one generation attempts to go counter in form, style, or some other way to the preceding generation: a phenomenon compared to the son killing his father to be a man! Oftentimes the

writer, especially the poet, responds to reality through the prisms of time and place and consequently fashions a viewpoint or philosophy in the writings that promote the virtues or values that the time and place hold dear.

The experiences the writer articulates are individual perceptions of reality as it relates to time and place. I am not saying that the writer/poet is imprisoned and so cannot write outside of the phenomena conditioned by time and place. Human nature is so varied that it provides ample experiences for the writer to explore. Also, there are local and universal/global experiences that the poet can express as individual/personal or public experiences. There is so much out there to attract the poet's attention in human nature and the world—human desires, foibles, virtues, travels, daily happenings, sociopolitical events, and climate change, to name a few subjects. Thus, one can define poetry as a personal or individual meditation on or exploration of the multifarious aspects of life through special use of language. The poet does not take the ordinary or the typical for granted but continues to reassess truths, behaviors, and ways of being, seeing, and knowing. My writing can be seen in the contexts of time and place and my experiences relate to my Niger Delta background, Urhobo/Pan-Edo folklore, Nigerian, African, global, and human issues.

Time and History

My having grown up in a period of history from colonization through independence to post-independence rule (from my elementary school days of the later 1950s to the present, 2013) has influenced my poetry. Though Janheinz Jahn had for long said that modern African literature is a reflection of history and politics, a point that postcolonial theorists (Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, etc.) have affirmed, as one cannot live outside history in Africa, so too one cannot write outside of history.

For me, the periods of the failed nascent democracy in Nigeria, civil unrests, military takeovers, civil wars, and postcolonial misrule have their presence in the human experience that I express in my poems. In *The Beauty I Have Seen*, many poems in the “Flow & Other Poems” section, such as “I Sing Out of Silence,” “Contribution to the National Debate,” “Testimony to the Nation’s Wealth,” and “After the Riots, in Jos,” among others, deal with sociopolitical issues that are related to Nigeria’s history. The writer in Africa is political out of historical necessity.

My Background

Similarly, my background is very significant in the poetry I write. I was raised by my maternal grandmother in a closely knit village community with certain moral imperatives. Everybody was the other person’s keeper so that when as a small boy I went with my age-mates, Godwin and Iboyi, to fish, and there was a thunderstorm that disoriented us with a

flash flood, all the adults of the village went to seek and rescue us from drowning! As I went to elementary and then secondary school and later the university, my two uncles and their multiple wives and others in the village contributed to my education by giving me pennies and shillings whenever I was going back to school.

In our compound my uncles so cared for me that I received more gifts at festivals than their own biological children and my wise grandma often gave back some of the things I got to their children to avoid jealousy and malice. I thus grew up to know that I belong to an interdependent community in which the advantaged in wealth, strength, or other blessings had to assist others with their talents, since “I am because we are.” I believe that whatever advantage of language I have as a writer I should use to give voice to the voiceless, use my words as a shield for the weak or helpless, and do whatever I can to uplift the common folks of the increasingly growing “community” of which I have become a member.

Born and raised in Nigeria’s Niger Delta area, the tropical rainforest of rubber trees, palm trees, lush plants, greenery, and copious water forms the backdrop of my poetry, especially in the images I employ to express my experiences. My geographical background provides me a repository of images, including the iroko, rivers, eagle, sunbird, tortoise, antelope, porcupine, vulture, and other fauna and flora of the area, from which I draw to express my feelings and ideas. In my writing, these images assume a

symbolic connotation deriving from the oral tradition. “Doors of the Forest” and “I hoped to Climb a Ladder to the Sky” express my nostalgia for the pristine natural environment of the Niger Delta of my youth.

As if the vegetation of the Niger Delta were not enough, the presence of oil and natural gas has compounded the sense of place of the region. The discovery of oil there in 1958 and the subsequent environmental pollution of the area through oil spills, blowouts, sabotage, and equipment failure of the multinational oil corporations such as Shell, Chevron, and Agip-Total have made life extremely difficult for the indigenes of the area who traditionally rely on farming and fishing for sustenance.

The irony of being among the poorest people in the world despite the vast oil and gas resources that net the federal government and the multinational oil companies hundreds of billions of dollars annually showcases exploitation, marginalization, and unfairness. Since the Niger Delta people are minorities in the Nigerian federation, their resources have been taken to develop Lagos and now Abuja while their area remains highly undeveloped. Also the massive environmental degradation and pollution have given an activist and protest edge to the literature of the area, including mine. As I told *World Literature Today*:

My Delta years have become the touchstone with which I measure the rest of my life. Even when I wander outside to the many places I have experienced, that land remains indelible in my memory and imprinted in my thought. Home remains for me the

Delta, where I continue to anchor myself. (*WLT*, 15, 1994)

Also, as I wrote in an earlier work:

The Niger Delta is not just physical space but a spiritual, mystical, and psychological setting. It evokes ideas of public and private space in me: the physical and the psychic Delta are fused in my individual being. I foreground the Delta both consciously and unconsciously because it is the place I know best and I am most familiar with and consciously because I have so imbibed its spirit that it speaks in me even when I am not aware of it. It is the backcloth, so to say, of my experience as a writer. It is the driving spirit of the Delta that shapes the vision and provides the images in my writing. (*Ordering the African Imagination*, 2007, 36–7)

Literature as a Cultural Production

I have expressed this so often but still need to state it in this crucial presentation: literature is a cultural production. In other words, literature is part of a people's culture. Thus, the literature, whether oral or written, has a tradition, canon, aesthetics, and other aspects that are conditioned by the people's culture, experience, and sense of reality. One cannot separate a people's literature from their culture even in the postcolonial context of the African experience.

Africans may use a European language (English, French, or Portuguese) but that foreign language is informed by the writer's indigenous African language, culture, worldview, sensibility, experience, and reality. *The Beauty I Have Seen* is thus a contemporary African cultural production despite being written in English.

The Language of the Postcolonial Poet

Part of the influence of time and place is the postcolonial nature of the modern or contemporary African writer, especially in the area of language. I am Urhobo and most members of my ethnic group live in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. I speak Urhobo and have a smattering of several other Nigerian languages as well as French and German which I studied at school. Of course, there is "the extra-territorial" English (after Abiola Irele) of which my variant of many Englishes is the West African/Nigerian English. I write in English and sometimes in Urhobo. Urhobo and English, two different languages, involve two different ways of looking at reality, what Ania Spyra calls "two pairs of glasses, each offering a different focus" (*WLT*, January/February, 2012, vol. 86, no. 1, p. 21).

When I write in English, I do not translate from Urhobo and while writing in Urhobo I do not translate from English. However, I am highly influenced by Urhobo oral traditions, which give not only poetic profundity but also a cultural identity to my writing in English. My assumption of the persona of the minstrel

in *The Beauty I Have Seen* derives from the minstrelsy tradition in Urhobo orature. The minstrel tells not just his own tale but the collective tale of his people. The first part of the book explores this tradition to talk about sociocultural, political, and other issues that affect the minstrel's community. The poet I represent, the contemporary minstrel, is thus a public figure, a traveler and observer of humanity, and one grounded in the landscape and fate of his native land and people.

Let me expatiate on diction and connotations in Urhobo and English. As Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf, and other language experts have emphasized for decades, language carries the culture of a people and conditions their thought. What do I borrow from Urhobo in my writings, as in *The Beauty I Have Seen*? How does Urhobo/African folklore give depth and cultural identity to my poetry? Some specific examples will suffice to illustrate this point. As already explained, the minstrel tradition used here is that of Urhobo folklore. Aridon is the Urhobo god of memory and my muse in these poems. Also, "The Tortoise Trainer" draws from Urhobo/African folklore of the tortoise as greedy and cunning and trying to disrupt the corporate existence that ensures communal harmony.

The Imperative of Content/Experience

I try to use simple language as much as I can because I believe that what makes excellent poetry is the unusual turn given to words to generate fresh meaning and not the use of obscure words or playing

with form. In *The Beauty I Have Seen* I have tried to communicate feelings and ideas and so make the content of poems accessible. I have attempted to use a poetic style from the oral tradition, which uses repetition, proverbs, metaphor, irony, and other tropes that convey meaning in a startling manner. I endeavor to experiment with other poetic traditions of Africa and elsewhere that can strengthen my poetic articulation.

The Poet as an Activist

A writer or artist has the freedom to create what he or she likes. I have chosen to embrace the African concept of art as functional and not art for art's sake. To me the most important goal of writing is to contribute in making the world better than we met or found it; mending the world and creating an atmosphere that will nurture human virtues and values—honesty, fairness, justice, sensitivity, peace, etc. A work of literary art that fails to aim at that and only indulges in aesthetic pursuit fails in a society that needs people to be sensitized towards higher ideals to make life more tolerable and humane.

As a result of the backward nature of most African nations in the context of human development, it is incumbent on their writers to promote literacy and those virtues that will reduce, if not eliminate, the greed, corruption, social injustice, and religious fanaticism, among others, that keep them down. I range on the side of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, and other deprived and disadvantaged

groups for social and political change. To me, the poet should be a transformer of society for good. I attempt to follow this activist tradition in *The Beauty I Have Seen*.

The Scholar-Poet

I am an African writer and scholar and both aspects of me reinforce each other. I write in the African tradition even though I open myself to experiences from anywhere in the world that will help to strengthen my Africanity or artistic craft. I have thus been influenced by Latin American, Caribbean, Modern Greek, and Russian poets to hone my craft. In aspects of human nature, I borrow from others outside Africa to make my primary readers more human.

***The Beauty I Have Seen* as “Song of Myself” (Self-criticism)**

Here are three poems from the collection: “The cows of Mt. San Angelo” (86), “Traveler” (144), and “You don’t have to be” (146):

The cows of Mt. San Angelo

Groomed as royal, the cows of Mt. San Angelo have the abundant pastures of the mountain to themselves; evergreen grass all year round. Plump and healthy, no cows can be bigger than these multi-ethnic crop of Virginia cows. Black, brown and white-faced like a mask, they mow the grass gracefully; no hostile figures or irritants to worry about. Young ones

prance to their mothers when I come close,
but there's no fear of poachers in this pasture.

The cows of Mt. San Angelo cannot cover
the entire meadow green with abundance.
They know not that outside famine kills a number
and rinderpest and poachers are on the loose.
They are half-covered in lush grass without bother
of ticks—above, birds sing their hearts away
in the paradise they share. There's no Fulani
herdsman lashing at them to take the right course
in the lines they always create in the open space.
They yawn at night from the day's plentiful food.

They have the garden world to themselves—
they know not the harsh struggle or sweat
that each day brings; they are self-assured.
They share the road and their shit bothers none.
If one should be a cow, wouldn't one wish to be
one of the selected cows grazing Mt. San Angelo?
But, after all the pleasures, will the butcher
spare them the fate of other cows envious of them?
The cows of Mt. San Angelo belong to a class
of their own—treated royally for the king's table.

Traveller

In Kuala Lumpur
carry and umbrella

in Syracuse

wear snow boots

in the Sahara
tie a face swath

in Burutu
row a boat

in space
keep a life jacket

on earth
you are a traveler.

You Don't Have to Be

You don't have to be Jewish
to shiver at the nightmare of Auschwitz

you don't have to be black
to feel the agony and shame of slavery

you don't have to be native
to be hurt by the arrogance of discovery

you don't have to be foreign
to know what discrimination means

you don't have to be minority
to understand the dominion of big numbers

you don't have to be homeless
to go through the vagaries of life

you don't have to be rich
to fear the uncertainty of tomorrow

you don't have to be crippled
to suffer the pain of the handicapped

you don't have to be a star
to stare at the volatility of the weather

you just have to be human
to know the plight of others.

Tradition and modernity are combined in this collection. It is the practice in Urhobo poetry, especially the *udje* tradition, to start by laughing at your own self before venturing to laugh at others. In this collection, the poet assumes the persona of the minstrel. The minstrel persona is used as a figure familiar with the society as a means of knowing, seeing, and questioning truths. Poetry, to me, should function as a questioner of habits, actions, and happenings in the society towards a salutary ethos.

The sense of community that the minstrel represents is underscored by the title poem, "The beauty I have seen," which shows him better appreciated and received outside than in his own homeland. Singing about oneself also involves self-criticism, a role which my generation of Nigerian

poets assumed, contrary to the earlier generation that blamed outsiders, Europeans, for Africa's troubles. My generation strongly believes Africans are now responsible for their own present condition, which they should exercise their agency to ameliorate and not whine over because of the happenings of the past, however painful they were.

Many poems in the collection, especially in the second and third sections, deal with experiences outside either my primary home of the Niger Delta or my other home, the United States of America. I highlight the Akosombo Dam which "decapitated" the Volta River into the Volta Lake in Ghana; my embracing the wonderful diva, an untouchable/low caste beauty and dancer extraordinary whom I called the "pride of Bengal" in India; the ganja peddlers at the beach of Negril in Jamaica; watching fasting Muslims waiting for the call to eat dinner at a restaurant in Kuala Lumpur with mouth-watering dishes in front of them; and seeing where Shaka Zulu was buried in South Africa; among many experiences. These poems arising out of travels are meant to widen and deepen one's humanity towards a contribution to one's homeland. Above all, they are parts of "the beauty I have seen."

The poems are in three sections, the first using the minstrel persona; the second and third about travels as well as Nigerian and American experiences. I attempted to use unrhymed couplets to establish some formal discipline. The title poem, "The beauty I have seen," relates to the exhilaration the poet goes

through in the process of creativity. Here, the “beauty” of experiencing one’s homeland as well as the rest of the world is remarkable for the writer. It is a series of epiphanies, illuminations about life, society, and the world. “The beauty I have seen” is that experience that is so exhilarating that it cannot be replicated and it is only in memory that one relives it.

Three more poems before conclusion: “Durban” (58), “The Beauty I Have Seen” (67-8), and “The muse won’t let me quit” (69):

In Durban, KwaZulu-Natal

(on the occasion of Poetry Africa 2005)

Fabled land of Shaka that yields to no one,
your imbongi voice reverberates across Africa.

Your soil carries a current that fortifies my soles;
your ocean-flushed air fills me with youthful zest.

In your soil the stump grows back into a stout trunk.
Your entire landscape glows with a proud heritage.

I invoke your warrior spirit of centuries
to reinforce my ancestral vigilance.

Without guard, freedom can slip away;
without vision, fortune can fritter into nothing.

Without memory, the trail will be lost

to the life-sustaining springs of famished times.

You brandished the assegai to keep your own—
the giant's presence protects the entire neighborhood.

I invoke your warrior spirit of centuries
to reinforce my ancestral vigilance.

In the streets the beads and fabrics that costume you
into only one of a majestic kind worldwide.

The elephant only brings forth a big offspring—
sons and daughters of the lightning spear stand
upright!

Beauty garments the mountains, plains, and veldts
into one body whose spectacle takes the breath away.

I invoke your warrior spirit of centuries
to reinforce my ancestral vigilance.

You no longer tiptoe in your own land.
You stride with the majesty of the giraffe.

Ama-Zulu, who does not know that you
people not only the earth but also the heavens?

Who attempts to hold you down (and many
tried it with regret) thrusts his hands into fire.

I invoke your warrior spirit of centuries

to reinforce my ancestral vigilance.

In the kingdom of songs we share one standard:
you praise as I abuse; both necessities of life.

In the house of words we speak the same lingua franca
of love but will not allow guests to seize our
inheritance.

One smears a rival, but I revere you.
One pulls down a challenger, but I raise you to the
sun.

I invoke your warrior spirit of centuries
to reinforce my ancestral vigilance.

We, scions of the same sturdy loins,
our bloods coalesce into an invincible force;

our birthrights surpass others' measures of wealth;
our thundering chants drown the roar of lions.

In Durban the dark shadow dissolves into a warm-
hearted host and all languages of the world become
one human song.

I invoke your warrior spirit of centuries
to reinforce my ancestral vigilance.

The Beauty I Have Seen

The beauty I have seen in abundance abroad
no picture however embellished can capture;

the million stars that shone their hearts for me
the same brilliance they can never replicate for the
world.

I know why Akpalu brags about the Hausa picking up
his Ewe songs; his heart beats an ecstatic drum—

the homeboy freezes the thousand witnesses
that saw his coronation as chieftain of songs.

Who will find the remains of that day and know
what spell the spectacle held for the thronging eyes?

The lucent face beaming smiles to the packed
ballroom
Salutes Aridon, the divine mentor, for the gift of
words;

nobody can be richer than the fortunate minstrel
whose every gesture of a grand masquerade receives
applause.

Not often do so many gods convene in conclave for
this spectacle they brighten with their smiles.

The cannonade has rolled over mountain and valley

and the muse has given a nod to the minstrel—

the ululations that rock the stars enter the echoes
that bridge far and near in transmuted songs.

How can the minstrel display the effervescence of
the present to outlive the very moment that blooms?

The magic pageant has won the day;
let the minstrel put the day into song—

memory nudges on with its constellations
but that beauty's hour can't relive its prime.

The beauty I have seen in its fullest radiance
no picture however embellished can capture.

The muse won't let me quit

Even if I wanted, Aridon wouldn't
leave me alone—the tasks of the caste

cannot be cast away by the minstrel at will;
minstrels I now know is a lifelong path.

Sometimes you are everybody's envy, applauded
at home and abroad; heart lifted out of the world.

At other times the tribulations too crushing,
the minstrel cries in bed from the burden he bears.

Even if I vow to lay down the costume,
Aridon won't let me quit the caste of my life.

For the shame of losing his most ardent worshiper,
the god of songs will never let me quit.

Conclusion

For me, the poet is a tailor-ant and gathers materials from different sources to build its home; also like a bird building a nest with different materials. The poem becomes an artistic refuge that is meant to provide comfort to the poet and reader/audience. *The Beauty I Have Seen* is a stage in the unending poetic journey. The more I journey and the more discoveries, the more the beauty of life I seek. The farther I travel, the more I learn that the Niger Delta is a microcosm of the universe. There are many gains of travel, whether physical or imaginative, and poetry brings that beauty to those who experience it.

As a cultural producer and critic, a scholar-poet, my scholarly side tells me to warn you not to accept everything the writer says about his or her work. I may not fully understand what I have written and so may not be the best interpreter of that work because the text is autonomous. I am not saying that you are wasting your time listening to me; rather, I am saying you have to read *The Beauty I Have Seen* and interpret it as you *feel* it. In the oral tradition of *udje* poetic performance among my Urhobo people, a

poem/song is not complete until it has been performed before an audience. Today you have made the poems of *The Beauty I Have Seen* complete and come to life. Thank you.

Acknowledgement

The poet always hungers for an audience to listen to his or her words. I am grateful to all of you who have come to listen to me talk about one of my recent publications, *The Beauty I Have Seen*. I thank Dean Nancy A. Gutierrez of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and University Librarian Stanley Wilder for conceptualizing “Personally Speaking” and I am grateful to their staff members who have worked very hard in organizing this event. I am also grateful to the *Personally Speaking* Committee for selecting my book for this occasion.

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The **Africana Studies Department** at UNC Charlotte offers interdisciplinary undergraduate programs that lead to B.A. and Minor, as well as a Graduate Certificate program. Its curriculum covers African and African Diaspora experiences, including African American life, with emphasis on culture, history, social policy, and entrepreneurship within the framework of liberal arts.



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