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### ABSTRACT

Queer possibility is an interpretive strategy that uplifts the marginalized narratives of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) historical figures and objects of queer significance. This article outlines three unspoken standards that content developers use to determine whether to include queer content in museum exhibits and tours. In a heteronormative, cisnormative society, choosing not to interpret queerness or potential queerness is not a neutral action. These limiting standards can unwittingly perpetuate a legacy of homophobia and transphobia in museum interpretation. In response to these limiting standards, the article outlines three alternative queer-positive strategies that prioritize the experience of queer visitors and the telling of queer history.

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I speak into the silence. I toss the stone of my story into a vast crevice; measure the emptiness by its small sound.

Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*, 2018

## Obscured and omitted

One snowy afternoon in Cambridge, Massachusetts, my partner and I ducked into the Fogg Museum to warm up with tea and see some art. As we shuffled through the galleries with our winter boots, one painting caught our attention: a brightly lit scene of a group of young men frolicking at a riverbank in a wooded glen (Figure 1). Two men wrestle, one helps another out of the water, another lounges in the grass. In the foreground, a curly-haired man in striped trunks leans languidly against a tree doing his best Saint Sebastian.<sup>1</sup> My partner and I exchanged raised eyebrows. From the accompanying label we learned the painting was *Summer Scene (The Bathers)* by Frédéric Bazille (1869–1870) and little else. So we whipped out our phones and stood there in the museum googling the artist in a frustrated attempt to confirm what we already knew: this painting was super gay.<sup>2</sup>

As queer people,<sup>3</sup> we are used to approaching museum visits as if we are archaeologists seeking long lost traces of our ancestors. My all-too-often accurate assumption that queerness will be missing from the interpretation means that the feeling underlying my experience in museums is one of scrutiny and skepticism. The few queer-positive museum experiences I have had are markedly more relaxing because they are not so much work. Unfortunately, these experiences have been limited to queer-specific exhibits



**Figure 1.** *Summer Scene (The Bathers)* by Frédéric Bazille (1869–1870) at the Fogg Museum, described by *Washington Post* art and architecture critic Philip Kennicott as depicting “a mythological space where homoeroticism flourishes without fear of censure.” (Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. F. Meynier de Salinelles).

and museums. What a relief it would be to visit any museum and be met with exhibition text, tours, and other methods of engagement that demonstrate the interpretation team has noticed queer connections, deemed them worthy of mention, and imagined a potential queer visitor.

It is no accident that museum workers (especially straight, cisgender museum workers) struggle to identify objects of queer significance in their collections. Homosexual behavior and gender variance have been stigmatized, pathologized, and criminalized for centuries (particularly in the colonies and former colonies of the British Empire<sup>4</sup>). Queer people have destroyed their belongings and obscured the queer meanings in their artworks and writings out of self-preservation. After their deaths, their heirs often continue the work of denying their ancestors’ queerness lest their legacies be tarnished. As the new heirs to these materials, museum interpretative staff (often inadvertently) continue the cycle of shame by obscuring and omitting the queer stories

behind them. Some museum practitioners have argued that by offering visitors evidence and allowing them make their own meaning, museums give visitors an opportunity to experience the historical process.<sup>5</sup> However, it can be predicted that the historical analysis performed by straight, cisgender visitors will be colored by their personal context of a heteronormative, cissexist society. To create an environment in which those visitors can come to queer conclusions, they need to be helped along and content developers can lead the way. Anyone who interprets content can be part of this effort: curators, exhibit developers, exhibit designers, tour script writers, tour guides, program developers, and educators.

In my role as an independent exhibit designer, I have observed three unspoken standards that content developers for tours and exhibits use to decide when to identify an historical figure as queer.

1. The content developer believes the historical figure's queer identity is relevant
2. The historical figure described themselves as such
3. There is documentation that the historical figure engaged in queer behavior

These standards are sometimes revealed in explanatory text within the exhibition to justify the naming of queer content in museum interpretation, but most often they are used as excuses for *not* naming it or excluding it altogether. In this article I will examine each of these three unspoken standards and offer alternative strategies to interpreting queer narratives in museums that embrace queerness and all its possibilities. I draw on my experience as a queer museum professional who has encountered each of these unspoken standards in my work.

## Relevance

After a visit to a small, temporary exhibition about Frida Kahlo and her relationship with Mexican folk art, I followed up with the curator to ask why she had chosen not to mention Kahlo's bisexuality. The curator told me that she did not think it was relevant to the narrative of the exhibition, citing the way Kahlo's romantic relationships and disabilities often dominate her story. This is a common justification for omitting an historical figure's sexual orientation from a museum exhibition. It sounds feminist: why would one let sexuality overshadow the work of a woman artist? And it sounds polite: why would one need to know about a historical figure's *personal life*?

It is clear that content developers do find relationships relevant to an historical figure's story because museum exhibits and tours almost always include (at times exhaustive) biographical information detailing family trees, marriage histories, and number and names of children. Not only did this exhibition include a photo of Kahlo with her husband, it also featured a love note from Kahlo to a male lover signed with pink lipstick kisses. The inclusion of these two items betrayed a bias that a heterosexual "personal life" is relevant, but a queer one is not; or perhaps that a heterosexual life is not personal, but a queer one is. The very fact that museum professionals are expected to justify their decision to interpret queerness (or that it is an option to not interpret it in the first place) exposes the assumption that heterosexuality is considered a neutral default. Choosing to frame an issue as "too much information" is a well-worn tactic, aimed to

activate a person's own self-consciousness and shame them into silence. In the 1970s, American feminists resisted this silencing tactic with the phrase, "the personal is political."<sup>6</sup> The sentiment remains relevant today.

Beyond the double standard for relevance, the way this exhibition presented Kahlo suggested to visitors that she was straight. In western society, in which straight and cisgender people are considered the norm and queer people are deviations from that norm,<sup>7</sup> people are assumed straight and cisgender until proven otherwise. Even if the exhibition did not include a photo of her husband or a love note to a man, she would still be effectively labeled straight because the interpretation did not explicitly name her queerness. In other words, a lack of active inclusion amounts to exclusion. In this environment, choosing not to interpret queerness or potential queerness is not a neutral action. Even if a content developer does not feel an artist or historical figure's gender identity or sexuality is relevant to the exhibition narrative or associated programming, that information is relevant to the historical figure as well as the visitor.

But queer visitors are often overlooked, even as diversity and inclusion initiatives gain popularity.<sup>8</sup> Hesitance to interpret queer content in museums for fear of alienating other visitors prioritizes the interests of homophobes over the interests of queer people and concerns that queer content might clash with efforts to diversify visitorship are often rooted in racism.<sup>9</sup> Research shows that LGB erasure has a significant negative effect on lesbian, gay, and bisexual museum visitors.<sup>10</sup> Bisexuals make up 52% of the LGBTQ community,<sup>11</sup> and the fastest growing population of self-identified bisexuals in the United States are millennial Latinas. Queerness always matters, but at an American museum that has identified millennials of color as a key target audience, not interpreting a Chicana artist's bisexuality stands out as a missed opportunity.

Queer narratives are relevant to non-queer people too. Visitors of all identities report enjoying learning about people outside the dominant narrative and even cite it as a top motivation for visiting museums. One in 5 regular museum-goers (described as those who visit museums three or more times a year) share that visiting museums has given them a greater awareness of others.<sup>12</sup>

## Language

Naming queerness is an essential component to interpreting queer content, yet language is a frequent point of contention. Museum practitioners are often concerned about the words an historical figure used to describe their own gender identity and sexuality, but the vast majority of queer people in history predate the coining of contemporary queer identity words like lesbian and transgender, and others were forced to avoid using those words lest they be implicated in criminalized behavior.

Because language changes over time, it is often necessary for museum professionals to put a variety of historical concepts into contemporary language. This often leads content developers to describe historical figures in terms that they never used to describe themselves. This phenomenon is not specific to sexuality or gender. Take the words "renaissance artist" and "homosexual," two words that could be used to describe Leonardo Da Vinci. "Renaissance" was coined in 1858 and "homosexual" was coined 10 years later. These terms were developed 300 years after Leonardo da Vinci's death: he did not have access to either word. Yet which descriptor is contested because he did not use it

to describe himself? It is only when describing an historical figure's sexuality or gender identity that mirroring a person's self-descriptive language is demanded. Imagine a museum interpreter making the case that Harriet Tubman should be referred to as a Negro instead of as Black because that is how she referred to herself.<sup>13</sup> As language and popular understanding has changed over time, content developers adjust their language for contemporary audiences. For example, to better capture the reality of slavery, educators have developed best practices for interpreting historical constructions with anachronistic terms, such as replacing the term "plantation" with "slave labor camp."<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, queer scholars and artists have developed their own best practices for writing and speaking about queer history. Founder of the Museum of Trans Hirstory and Art, artist Chris Vargas uses contemporary language to express the nonconforming, transgressive nature of queerness and explains his approach to naming historical transness this way:

I'm looking back at history and doing research in established LGBT archives, I have to do it in an expansive and inclusive way because of the ways language has, and continues to, shift over time. I'm not exactly interested in deciding and policing the parameters of "trans." I think that would actually do my project a disservice. In fact, in just a couple of decades the term transgender has evolved and today means something different than it did decades before. So in order to think about the history of gender transgressive, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, I'm looking at history in an open, inclusive way.<sup>15</sup>

Though Vargas's approach is broad, the result is not vague. He purposely names his subject "trans" and visitors to a Museum of Trans Hirstory and Art installation experience an interpretation of a trans past that is at once expansive and specific.

## Burden of proof

Of the three unspoken standards that I outline, this is the most challenging to confront. It is true there is less material to work from because of the aforementioned destruction and obstruction of materials of queer significance, however there is also an outsized requirement of proof of queerness that other identities are not subject to. Historian Jen Manion writes, "the fact that historians continue to argue that the absence of such evidence constitutes [queerness's] nonexistence reveals the limits of historical method and the lie of objectivity."<sup>16</sup>

And when there is evidence, the question is how much is enough and what constitutes evidence? This is where queer expertise is key. What a queer person sees as definitive evidence may not even register to a non-queer person. In *Museums, Morality, and Human Rights*, Museum studies professor Richard Sandell details the reinterpretation process of the Walt Whitman Birthplace, specifically the disagreements between stakeholders on how to interpret Whitman's sexuality, if at all.<sup>17</sup> Much of the conflict in the process stemmed from disagreement over whether there was enough evidence to support Whitman's queerness. To queer people involved in the exhibition development process, a photograph of Whitman with Peter Doyle was clearly a portrait of a couple in love, yet this picture was described on the final label text as the poet with a "pal." It is entirely possible that the person who wrote that label truly only saw two friends, but that blind

spot could have been corrected by valuing the queer expertise of the people whose lived experience informed what they saw in front of them.

The fear of erroneously describing a straight, cisgender historical figure as queer looms large behind the demand for evidence. If queerness were not seen as shameful, there would be no reason for this fear; this fear is rooted in queerphobia. “Outing” describes a nonconsensual disclosure of a person’s queer identity. The dead however do not have the same expectation of privacy as the living. Interpreters of history rarely have qualms about disclosing stories that their subjects might have preferred were kept secret. I have enjoyed many an historic house tour in which my tour guide leaned in with a gleam in their eye to disclose (heterosexual) affairs, children born out of wedlock, and dalliances with the law; only when queerness is present does the notion of consent arise. The interpretation of history is not for the benefit of the historical figure, it is for the contemporary audience – which includes queer people.

Additionally, a closeted life is not necessarily an indication of a desire to remain closeted. Just because it was not safe for an historical figure to be out in their public life does not mean that that person was ashamed of their sexuality or gender identity. Further, outness is not a binary. A person can be out to their partner, to their family, or to their community. And just because their straight and cisgender relatives were not aware of or refused to acknowledge their queerness does not mean that that person was truly closeted. It is still common for trans people to be misgendered after their deaths in their own obituaries.<sup>18</sup> This erasure is an indignity and a violence. When weighing the risk of accidental queering against queer erasure, it is more just to err on the side of queerness.

## Strategies

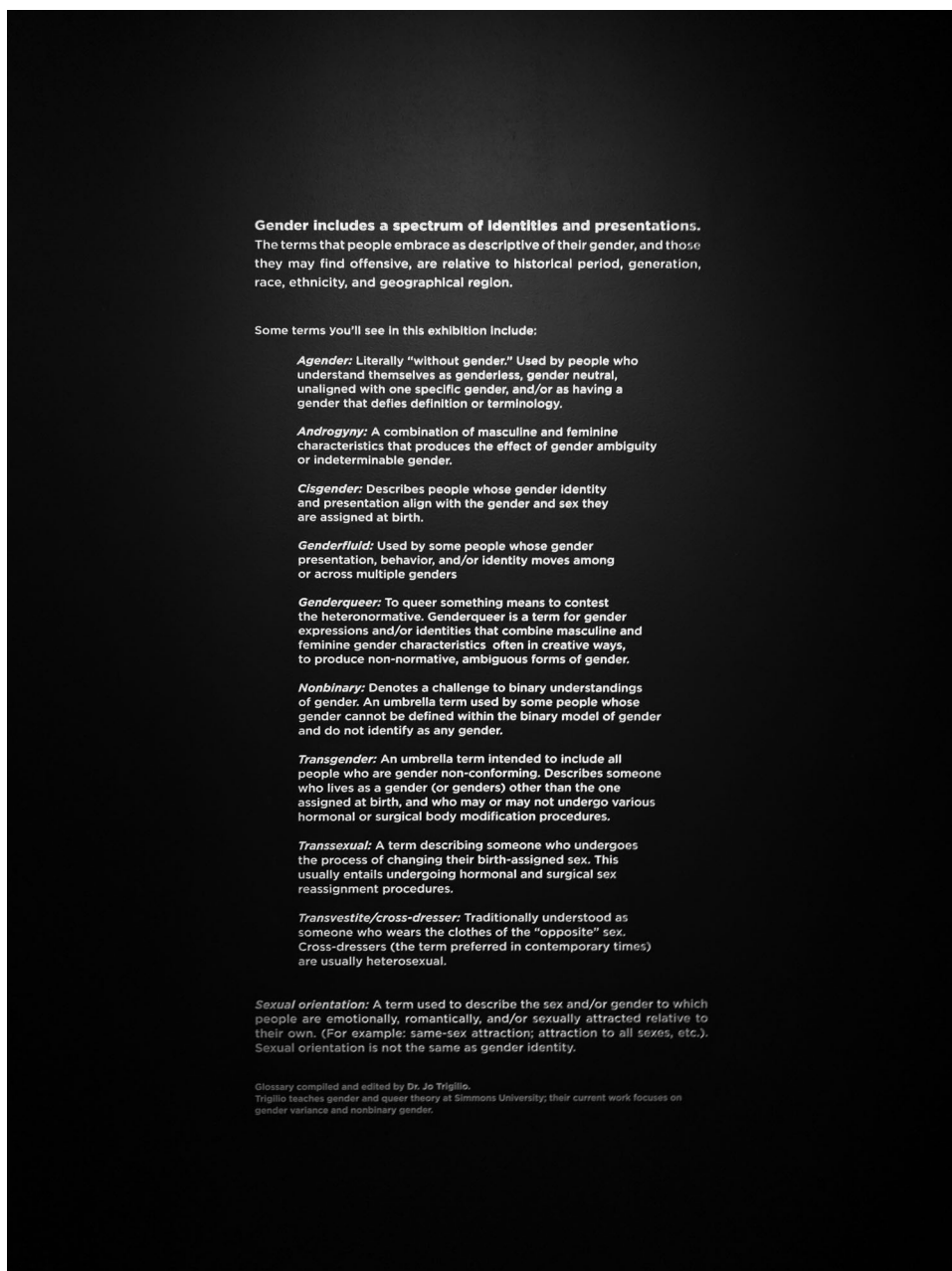
Here I offer three methods of expressing queer possibility in museum interpretation: inferential, descriptive, and imaginative.

### 1. Inferential

This technique employs contemporary terms to refer to an historical figure who did not have access to that word, but whose life has many similarities to people who do use that word today. This may involve an explanation of who is doing the inferring. Eastern State Penitentiary has added the following verbiage to its audio tours: “A few years ago, we started documenting prisoners who, if alive today, may have identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer.” This stop is narrated by researcher Annie Anderson, who lobbied for the content to be included in the audio tour and developed the script. In the audio tour Anderson describes an inmate known as “Lady Washington” who was imprisoned for sodomy. Anderson does not use gendered pronouns to refer to this person and concludes her description of Lady Washington with this provocation of queer possibility: “As I review these documents, I find myself wondering, ‘was Lady Washington a gay man or a transgender woman?’”<sup>19</sup>

One concern often raised in response to this strategy is that visitors may not be familiar with contemporary queer terminology. If museum staff are concerned that the terms in the interpretation will be unfamiliar to visitors, the exhibition or tour may require a

glossary (Figure 2) or explanation in the same way that museums introduce visitors to new terminology like abstract expressionism or concepts like triangular trade. Museum visitors come to museums expecting to learn new things.



**Figure 2.** A glossary of queer vocabulary displayed prominently on the wall in *Gender Bending Fashion* at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 2018. To make sure the glossary was as accurate and respectful as possible, the museum consulted with Simmons University professor of gender and queer theory Dr. Jo Trigglio. (Adam Tessier).



## 2. Descriptive

An alternative to using the words lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer as identity terms, which is a more recent development in queer lexicon, this technique uses the same terms in a descriptive manner. Historian Lilian Faderman writes,

As the postmodernists claim, it is impossible – especially when dealing with historical figures – to make safe statements about identities, which are so slippery in their subjectivity and mutability. However, if enough material that reveals what people *do* and *say* is available, we can surely make apt observations about their behavior ... I use the term ‘lesbian’ as an *adjective* that describes intense woman-to-woman relating and commitment.<sup>20</sup>

The word “queer” encompasses both sexuality and gender identity and therefore is inclusive in its ambiguity.<sup>21</sup> Barbara Callahan, curatorial assistant at the Gibson House Museum, uses the term queer to describe the museum’s founder Charlie Gibson as a way of acknowledging his relationships with men and to leave room for bisexual possibility.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, if a historical figure’s gender is not clear, using the pronoun “they” can acknowledge the possibility of a queer gender. “The use of ‘they,’ to me, when this ambiguity is present,” says curator Claire Mead, “is out of respect not only for the figure being discussed but for trans audiences accessing this content. Out of respect for the way people can relate to these figures now.”<sup>23</sup> Mead’s decision to inject queer possibility into her interpretation centers queer audiences by putting their interests and needs before the comfort or familiarity of non-queer audiences.

## 3. Imaginative

This strategy aims to build queer canon by connecting an object or historical figure’s significance to historical and/or contemporary queer culture. Of the three, this strategy offers the most opportunity for institutional transformation because it asks museum interpreters to question who is considered an expert and what is considered evidence. Scholar José Esteban Muñoz introduced the idea of “queering evidence” by looking to ephemera and gesture as indicators of queerness.<sup>24</sup> Imaginative queer possibility values queer experience as expertise and gaydar as epistemology.

For example, the notoriously nebulous nature of camp could not have been as successfully interpreted in the eponymous Met exhibition had it been curated by a non-queer person. *Camp: Notes on Fashion* views camp through the eyes of gay curator Andrew Bolton who included what he called “whisper galleries” that introduced the exhibition’s topic through gay voices, suggesting the queer origins of camp fashion.

Though the exhibition was praised for being queer-positive, it was also critiqued for presenting a whitewashed, cis-centric view of its subject. Filmmaker Lena Waithe spoke back to the erasure committed by the exhibition by wearing a custom suit to the Met Gala emblazoned with the words “Black Drag Queens Invented Camp.” Had the Met’s interpretive team prioritized the vision of Black and trans content developers, perhaps the exhibition would have encompassed the gendered and raced aspects of queerness, resulting in a more accurate, relevant history of camp in fashion.

“Queer in the Gilded Age,”<sup>25</sup> an artistic intervention at Staatsburg State Historic Site, is an example of the use of gesture and performance to interpret queer

possibility in an imaginative way. The speculative fiction tour developed by Twisted Preservation used Gilded Age architecture as a metaphor for the façade/interior duality of queer life in that time period. Instead of traditional evidence like letters or newspaper articles, the project relied on queer expertise and imagination to illuminate queer possibility. By looking beyond object evidence, museum content developers can interpret more fully the lives of people, queer or not, whose histories have been obscured and omitted.

## Conclusion

Queerness is not shameful. Queerness is relevant. Queer-positive interpretation calls for museum practice to extend beyond an attitude toward queerness in history that is agnostic at best and homophobic at worst. Museums exist in a cis- and heteronormative environment so it is incumbent on all museum interpreters to counter the dominant narrative that works to erase queerness. Undoing this erasure challenges museums to prioritize the interests of queer visitors, value queer expertise, and explicitly posit potential queerness in museum interpretation. The result will be a queer-positive visitor experience that will give straight and cisgender visitors a new lens through which to look at the world and at the very least will not force queer visitors to spend their museum visit on their phones, furiously googling the objects in the museum to uncover the histories of their queer ancestors.

## Notes

1. Saint Sebastian has been used as a symbol of male homoeroticism in art and literature for several hundred years (Hammill, *Sexuality and Form*; Sontag, *Against Interpretation*; Mishima and Weatherby, *Confessions of a Mask*).
2. *Washington Post* art and architecture critic Phillip Kennicott interprets the group of men as the artist's "chosen family" and references the borrowed classical poses of the men as evidence of a queer aesthetic (*Washington Post*, 2017).
3. I use "queer" in this article as a catch-all term to describe non-straight and non-cisgender individuals including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.
4. Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*.
5. Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites*, 26.
6. The phrase was popularized by Carol Hanisch in her 1969 essay "The Personal is Political".
7. Ingraham, "Thinking Straight, Acting Bent," 307.
8. Middleton, "The Queer-Inclusive Museum".
9. Jones et al., "Anxiety, Nostalgia, and Mistrust".
10. Heimlich and Koke, "Gay and Lesbian Visitors and Cultural Institutions," 93–104.
11. Gates, *How Many People are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender?*.
12. Susie Wilkening (Researcher, Wilkening Consulting), interview with the author, 2017.
13. Tubman, "Harriet Tubman Warns "Kill the Snake Before It Kills You."
14. Kinsley, Middleton, and Moore, "(Re)Frame," 56–63.
15. Hernandez, "Resisting the Museum," 374.
16. Manion, *Female Husbands*, 10.
17. Sandell, *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*, 27–56.
18. Riley Snorton and Haritawarn, *Trans Necropolitics*, 68–71.
19. Annie Anderson (Manager of research and public programming, Eastern State Penitentiary), interview with the author, 2020.
20. Faderman, *To Believe in Women*, 3.

21. Though some have argued that the word's former life as a slur should preclude its use from museum settings, when used as an adjective with a respectful tone, queer is acceptable, even academic. In the professional development training sessions I lead, I recommend that staff who are new to the term practice pronouncing it confidently in the mirror to ensure it sounds natural and respectful.
22. Barbara Callahan (Museum and curatorial assistant, Gibson House Museum), interview with the author, 2020.
23. Claire Mead (Curator, independent), interview with the author, 2020.
24. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 65.
25. Danielle Bennett, *Dwelling in Possibility: Queering Historic House Museums*, 112–14.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## About the author

*Margaret Middleton* is an independent exhibit designer working at the intersection of design and social justice. Middleton has a degree in industrial design from the Rhode Island School of Design and 15 years of experience in the museum field. Middleton developed the Family Inclusive Language Chart in 2014 and consults with museums on implementing family inclusive practice. Their writing has been published in the *Journal of Museum Education, Exhibition* (National Association for Museum Exhibition), *Dimensions* (Association of Science and Technology Centers), and *Museum Magazine* (American Alliance of Museums).

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